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# Tenants of Unhousement

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## Tenants of Unhousement · *Clark Blaise*

SOCIOLOGICALLY, I am an American. Psychologically, a Canadian. Sentimentally, a Québécois. My passport says Canadian, my legal status says immigrant. Resident Alien. Everywhere I see dualities. The continent of gringos is sliced in half, and I occupy both, uneasily. My parents quartered that northern half between them: English and French, and all the silence that entails. They are my sub-conscious, my libido, my un-lived life. In Canada I am forever their child, forever banging on nailed-over doors. The United States of America is my land of answers, land of relative simplicities.

My mother was the progressive; more adventurous and more independent than the cautious Manitoba family that formed her. Perhaps again I am lying. I will leave open the possibility that she was not more adventurous and independent. Rather, that she was only more restless and more lost. She'd left the village of Wawanesa where her father was the town doctor, to take a sensible teaching degree in Winnipeg, then to please her father she'd taught village school in Saskatchewan and Manitoba for three Depression years at a thousand dollars a year, saving it all. She left for Europe in 1931. Design was her passion. She went to the Bauhaus. She studied in Weimar, Dresden, and Leipzig. Her journals and letters report briefly on the Masters' lectures, but pay lavish attention to medieval doors, cornices, rococo ceilings and above all, Dresden porcelains. There they were, the masters of functional modernism lecturing all around her, and she was mad for Dresden ceramics and Meissen ware. At one time I might have snickered. How dare she ignore The Revolution she'd travelled so far, and sacrificed so much for?

I'm more interested, now, as she was perhaps, in the peripheries of upheaval. She was a bourgeoisie, a commuter, keeping a *pied-à-terre* in the Bauhaus, but spending her hours with the underlying, sentimental, ornamental culture.

When it all collapsed in 1933 she left first for Prague where again her journals tell of delicacies stalked, advances thwarted. The record of virtue preserved makes a grown son wonder: she was almost thirty, attractive, and Canadian, and in the turmoil of central Europe in the early Thirties, she must have been a golden ticket for anyone seeking exit or information.

Her Prague was a German city, preserving all the qualities she

admired. She used to tell me stories of Prague (pronouncing it, back in my Florida childhood, in that harsh Canadian way, like the first syllable in *pragmatism*), and I have preserved a vanished central Europe from those stories—those cities of stone and brick without much neon; hand-hewn cities of cobblestones, narrow sidewalks and low skylines bowed before their steeples. Cities of narrow vistas through wavy glass, courtyards and horse-carts and streetcars and meticulous parks no larger than apartments. Cities of fogs and the narrow, ancient rivers like wider thoroughfares of a more viscous material, still pumping through the city centers. Prague, Budapest, Paris, Cologne: she liked cities that still had their uses for fresh water, cities that treated their rivers like retired dignitaries, still capable of light official duties.

One story stands out, even now. My mother on a night in Prague in the early fall of 1933. She has received a letter from home wishing her a happy Thanksgiving. And for some reason she started thinking of corn on the cob, dripping with butter. How to explain such a hunger? (In cornless Florida, in hot October that belied the notion of Thanksgiving, she could make my mouth water for something I'd never tasted. How I hated the oranges and watermelon and the resinous mangoes we Floridians were forced to eat!) The story of my mother finding corn was one of my earliest favorites. Before she got her corn (under a hand-painted sign, a stubby half ear of corn glistening in its puddle of butter) I would learn the streets of Prague, the after-dark gangs of Nazi sympathizers (always so courteous to "English" visitors; the most charming men in Prague), the Czech-speaking constabulary who wouldn't answer her German questions. They all seemed to say, "*Nickfer Station*," our equivalent of *nicht verstehe*. Taxies, trolleys, strange men following her and taking their places behind her on trolleys, sharing her table and arrogantly reading their newspapers while she sipped her coffee. Well, my mother was a storyteller; she could make me ache with anticipation, she knew all the tricks of repetition and of compounding incidents and tripling examples, making me sense at five or six that nothing ever happened the first or second time we tried it. The first or second strangers never had the answers.

She moved to London in 1934. She became a freelancer for the Canadian giant, Eaton's (according to her calling cards at the time, "the world's largest retailer"). She took a flat on Gloucester Terrace with a "girl" whom she'd met on the boat going over three years before. She never lost track of friends, until her memory forced forgetfulness on

her. This “girl” had been going to Denmark from her home in Saskatchewan to satisfy a marriage contract: it’s a Danish immigrant story. Now, the girl is back from Denmark, seduced, abandoned, divorced or widowed—my mother is silent, from shame, discretion or indifference—and claiming London as her home. It’s like a dingy, lending-library novel of its time: loose shopgirls, prim colonial girls, falling softly down the social ladder. I think of the Thirties as a fluid time; a great stage filling with motley extras gathering for imperial Europe’s final act. “Girls” must be an innocent spillage from Edwardian times. My mother had probably gone from Edwardian girl to Thirties sophisticate without a transition. Her friends have always been “girls.” Even now, at nearly eighty.

Her diaries speak of dinners out, the recurrence of a man named Bill whose country house she visits. Is she keeping surprises from me? I read these diaries more like a father than a son. She went to plays and operas, the handbills have all been preserved—no small feat in the dozens of moves that were still to plague her—some with the signatures of the female leads. “To Anne, a grand girl—Bea Lillie.” The Depression did not enter her life.

She reminds me so much of myself. I did not read these journals until this year, when I was forty-one. I must remember this as I read: in these ledger books my mother is younger than I. I’m one of the disconcerting “older men” to the still-avid provincial girl she was. Europe stands briefly sane, the authority for all our feelings. Europe is still a unitary concept, except perhaps for Spain and Russia who are barbarian. Prague and Budapest and Warsaw are as Western in her travels as Paris and London and Berlin. These young people she describes—heedless, madcap and gay, gay, gay—I’ve met before, in Waugh, in Powell and Isherwood. They’d all be in their 80’s now.

She was such a good storyteller, which means she was so good at quieting my questions, distracting me with details, at removing herself from the center of things, that I never discussed Europe with her at all. I listened. I was always an audience. And now it’s too late. She doesn’t remember much of Europe at all, now.

She returned to Canada in 1935 to become head decorator of Eaton’s model home in their largest store—Ste. Catherine Street in Montreal. I always liked to think that choosing Montreal showed spunk and sass and a bit of Europe in her soul. She had a lifelong aversion to Toronto, that fair and wretched city, which I interpreted in later years as perfectly

commendable. I thought of it as a touch of gypsism, a capitulation to the most concentrated and unreconstructed pool of Catholics in North America. Montreal up until the 60's had been a kind of glaciated Alexandria, with its docile majority of French-Canadians selling their votes for corrupt absolution.

Toronto should have been her city. Ambitious Manitobans went to Toronto and prospered. Actually, Manitobans go anywhere and prosper. I always thought I could interpret my mother's life like some obvious text: she'd avoided Toronto out of boredom. What could be simpler, knowing Toronto, and Montreal, in the Thirties? Grim, WASP Hogtown, Blue Law Puritan Anglo Ontario—what kind of life was that for a sophisticated woman? That interpretation is self-seeking—*literally* a seeking after myself, a failure to understand her at all. I went to Montreal myself thirty years later for the same reasons. Canada meant Montreal to me, never Toronto. But she had avoided Toronto for reasons of passion.

I'll never know the full story now, although the outline is clear enough. I, or the shadow-I that Canada unleashes in me, missed the blessing of a Toronto birth and establishment upbringing by a matter of a few months. Toronto is the city whose phone book my mother obsessively checked, right down to a very few years ago. She is capable of that constancy, that denial.

In 1977 as we were preparing for our move from Montreal to Toronto, and for her return to Winnipeg, I realized my mother was telling me a story, maybe the last story she could tell me, in a new, curiously off-hand, breathless manner. As though she were refreshing my memory of some central event in my life, and not relating the central event of hers. As though the names and dates meant anything to me at the time. We were reaching back forty years. She was thirty-two, still in London. If I'd been a daughter, I probably would have learned it all that day. But how does a son prompt his mother? A son who was then thirty-seven, to a mother who was then seventy-five but in her mind, that day, only thirty-seven or so herself. She had met a man, the right man finally. Canadian, educated, handsome, a gentleman. But he was married. Just married. And he was an honorable—now honored—Torontonian. They never met again, never talked. She never doubted that she would end her days with him.

And so, my mother then thirty-two, allowed herself to be courted by a younger man, a Catholic twice-divorced (though she'd be married

before she learned it) and worse—a French-Canadian furniture salesman down at the bottom of Eaton’s ladder.

They married in 1937 and lived in a second-floor apartment on Shuter Street in what is now the McGill student ghetto. My grandmother Blais (as the name was then spelled) came in from the village of Lac Mégantic to meet her “giant” daughter-in-law. My mother was five-feet-eight and wore size ten shoes; she belonged to a generation more ashamed of a foot-size than of any other affliction. Visits to shoe stores were an agony. “My father always said I had good understanding,” she said in later years, a little pun that might be seventy years old. Grandmother Blais had never seen a woman quite so tall. She was only four-feet-nine, and my surviving aunt in Manchester, New Hampshire, is even less than that. My father, the eighteenth child in his family, was also the tallest, at about five-seven.

She spoke some English, my grandmother—her name had been Gerlaise Boucher—and she was something of a tease. A tiny, bright, olive-dark woman with a face precisely like her son’s. My father apparently was deeply attached to her, she was a person he feared like no other on earth. In the summer of 1938 all three Blais rented a cabin in Ste. Rose du Lac, just north of Montreal, on a river that still had trout. Ste. Rose today is a cluster of tract houses at the first exit on the Laurentian Auto-route, fifteen minutes from downtown. No picture of my father earlier than that summer exists, at least not in the repertoire of my family. There may be shadow selves in Québec, ten years my senior, who’ve inherited other pictures of a younger, darker man, without the bar of premature white at the temples, their mysterious progenitor. It is inconceivable to me that there may not be others. I did not learn of the other wives until after my parents’ divorce. By then, like everything else, it was too late to ask. The only picture of my grandmother is of a tiny lady all in black, pinned with brooches and a cross; it too dates from that summer. My mother retired from Eaton’s, as was the custom, and stayed out in the cabin with her mother-in-law while my father stayed in town working. The barbarous Canadian custom of stashing the family in the bush while the summer city teems with men and a few over-patronized working girls established itself early in their marriage, and would have persisted.

Ah, to have been a fly on those walls that summer! It was then that my mother learned of Leo’s earlier marriages, of his early career as a professional boxer, of the “troubles” he’d gotten into working for the

whisky distillers during the American Prohibition, his lack of any formal education. He'd told her he'd gone to Harvard and the Sorbonne. Studied medicine briefly at Tufts. But in truth he'd been given to the Church, a *donné*, after the custom of rural Québec: the last son becomes a priest. He'd walked out of the seminary school at the age of eight, never to return. The horror she must have gone through, knowing that for her, all decisions were irreversible. You cannot alter your fate. You deserve what you get. You made your bed, now lie in it. It was as though his mother, cheerful throughout, had been brought in for the purpose of softening her up. My father was incapable of confession or confidence; in later years he'd pay lawyers and accountants to do his dirty work. She learned that of the eighteen births, only five had lived to maturity. The father, Achille, long dead, had worked on the wharves of Lac Mégantic, down where the lake narrowed and Stern's Lumber collected its logs. My grandfather, apparently, could walk the logs with his pole and cleated boots, unjam the logs, break up the ice packs, keep his balance in the gales of mountain summers and the bone-crushing cold of a now-vanished Québec. No wonder my father had been a boxer.

He'd been born in 1905 when his mother was nearly fifty. Achille was in his mid-sixties. Gervaise had been giving birth steadily for over thirty years. In the Influenza Epidemic of 1919, they had lost six children in one week, plus *père* Achille. Of the survivors, there was Oliver, called Bilou at home and shortened to Bill by the Americans, living somewhere in France. He had gone to war for the Canadians in 1914, then gotten assigned to the Americans in 1917—to your Eisenhower himself, Bill once told me in Paris in 1962. No one had heard from Bill in over twenty years.

The family had done a considerable amount of bouncing around between Québec and New Hampshire between 1895 and 1920—they were part of that immigrant wave that practically emptied rural Québec. Many of the kids had different nationalities. My father was to spend his last forty years in the United States as an illegal alien, afraid always of detection for the various lies he'd told on hunting and fishing licenses, not to mention to dozens of employers. I sometimes realized, through him, the porousness of the continent, its youth, its unjelled quality. Just as I realize through my mother the permanence and settledness of society. From her—values. From him—masks and improvisation. Around 1912 they'd moved semi-permanently to Manchester, where two older daughters, Lena and Bella, got married to Americans (an Irish

Walsh and a downhome Lessard) and where Bella began her family. Those cousins of mine I've never met. Widowed Gervaise returned to Canada in the late Twenties, perhaps to die in her native Ste. Anne parish of Lac Mégantic.

Achille had built his house by hand. This was typical—skill as a builder and carpenter and cabinet maker could be assumed of French-Canadians, or so the story went. Carpenters' unions in New England were all French-speaking. French to wood, Jews to money. Achille and the boys were adepts at wood, from sawing the trees as *bûcherons* to unjamming the logs and eventually overseeing the entire dockside operation. Achille made all the furniture—that pine furniture that costs like the devil now in Montreal antique stores—and the family remained *émmerdé* in wood. My father, after the early careers as boxer, rum-runner, bouncer and singer in Montreal's *Chez Son Pere*, dedicated his life to furniture. Salesman in Montreal. Buyer for Sears in Fargo and Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. Showroom owner in Atlanta. Factory owner in North Florida. Travelling salesman throughout the South. Buyer again in Missouri, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Store-owner and small-time tycoon in Pittsburgh by 1959, when he let it all collapse. Every separate chapter of his life ended in shambles and catastrophe.

For the last twenty years of his life to practically the day of his death on the last day of 1978 in Manchester, he was the "old guy" on the selling floor, working the way he'd started forty years earlier at Eaton's, as a commission salesman in *borax*. *He*, who'd been buyer, manufacturer, and owner! The indignity killed him. The cemetery in Manchester is known to the local Canadian-born inhabitants as *le p'tzee kwang dzu Canodo*.

The only confidence he ever shared with me about his childhood came on a day in the mid-70's when he and his last wife were visiting us in Montreal. We took the long drive out to Lac Mégantic, now a pleasant-enough summer village on a long lake in the folded hills of Eastern Québec, just over the border from Maine. Stern's Lumber was still in operation. The house and the parish church had all burned down—another wooden fate. He remembered, as we sat in benches looking over that now-tamed body of water, great thrashing breakers that lashed that marshy shore. He'd given me, in Florida and quite by accident, the same kind of watery childhood he'd had in Québec. The same thrills, the same terror. But he did me one better. In the winter, he said, he would watch his father, an old man of seventy, put on his



skates, extend his arms, and let the wind catch his buffalo robe, pushing him like an ice-boat so far out he couldn't be seen from land.

It's an epic memory, that and the deaths of six children in one week, five wives, eighteen births, prize-fighting, brawling, some convictions; the singing and dreaming, building and losing empires of furniture, then hemorrhaging to death one day in bed because his anti-coagulant medicine had made his blood too thin.

He forces me to contemplate the conjunction between congenital lying and a magnificent memory. Not just that liars *have* to have good memories, but something older. Something about outstanding memories falsifying experience. My father's memory was rare—my own, and my mother's were merely outstanding, and now are feeble. He had an illiterate's memory, a tribal memory—he used it to serve in the place of the things he'd missed. Weeks before his death he rattled off for me the names of my high school friends in Pittsburgh, their addresses, the kinds of furniture their parents had bought from us. Twenty years later, and he remembered factory order numbers, highway routes, telephone numbers. Everything stuck. His responses were selective, but he kept it all inside.

He'd first learned English by mimicking songs off the radio—that's the reason why, whenever he sang, his accent became most pronounced, he became most vulnerable. He picked up more on the streets of Manchester, where English in those days was occasionally heard. His relationship to English was as a performer. In some undefinable way, he was performing his life. His French life had been one of beatings: his father who had a murderous temper, his brother, then the Brothers in the seminary whom he hated with the ferocity of a Castro or a Picasso—that hatred from deep inside the system, no death-bed confessions for him—to the poundings in the boxing ring as "Kid Leo" and from the would-be hijackers he mixed it up with during American Prohibition. But his English life was a dream. He modelled himself on actors. In English he dreamed of wealth, his Harvard degree; he headed himself for Florida and California and dreamed of an early retirement to San Miguel de Allende, the village of artists and retired gringo colonels, suggested by an article he'd practically memorized in *Travel* magazine in the middle Fifties. There, his money would last. There, he would have servants and respect from worshipful villagers. He never answered my mother's question, "Whatever would we *do* there? Whatever would *I* do?"

When he finally got there, however briefly, it was with a different wife anyway. I suspect now that remarriage had always been part of the plan; San Miguel with a jazzy new woman. He was never without a Plan. Minor league Thomas Sutpens, these alien hustlers.

The most generous sense of vengeance that I know is the writer's assault on silence, on avenging the blighted, choked-back lives in his immediate, personal past. It's virtually the definition of a writer's honor: did he get his big story told?

My father was a singer who had no voice. He could croon in French and English, and he could curse. And he could sell nearly anything. Yet my own children remember him only as the old man who didn't talk. They remember his visits to Montreal or their visits to New Hampshire, and they remember him vaguely as the man who sat in a chair, occasionally giving orders to his wife but otherwise not talking unless he could get us all out to a restaurant. My sons cannot understand the effect of silence, punctuated with bursts of song and of impacted swearing. Their father, after all, is an English professor, a babler. But their grandfather was a man lacking in reason, alien to balance and harmony. I remember days of avoiding him, taking my food upstairs, keeping my questions in the range of probable one-word answers. My father's contribution to the story-making art. In Ste. Rose that summer of 1938 my grandmother lit candles and sat in a sanctified circle during thunderstorms. During one of those spells she asked my mother, "You are such a good woman. Why did you marry my son?"

In later life, after their divorce when another woman (the last Other Woman in his life, the one who finally closed him down) took him for the cash from two furniture stores and the sale of the only house we ever owned, then deserted him in Mexico, he came back to Pittsburgh, took a room in a South Hills rooming house and started calling me, asking where my mother was. She was in Pittsburgh too, less than a mile away, working as a saleslady and renting a room with a shared kitchen and bath. I was in Boston, having finished a summer writing course at Harvard, working in a bookstore in Harvard Square, dreaming giant dreams of a writing life, while failing utterly in the simplest gestures of love and art.

My father called later, begging for information about my mother, asking what kind of son was I, keeping his parents apart? Conveniently, he forgot he'd been out of my life for three years. That his last appear-

ance had been before a judge, pleading that my mother was crushing the life from him. Presenting documents to show his poverty and to prove that the total proceeds from the sale of two furniture stores and a brand new country house, two cars and two trucks and twenty-two years of accumulated holdings, split evenly, came to a generous twelve thousand dollars. My mother had wept and accepted the judgment, along with a tongue-lashing from my father's lawyer and accountant.

*She wants me, I know it:* he could not imagine life in any other way. It was a variation on his best selling-line—I know you want it, what'll it take to sign you up? Don't fight it, I know you want it. How can I make it easier for you?

Later, I hitched to Pittsburgh, disgusted by Boston and the people I'd met on the fringes of Harvard. I stayed in my mother's room, sleeping on her sofa. She'd become a snorer. She'd become a talker, too, telling me more than I wanted to hear. A young woman, recently divorced, who shared the kitchen, invited me to her room, entertained me with stories of how they were Doing It these days in my old high school, with Saran Wrap and Rubber Bands, how her niece had gotten pregnant, how she'd done it that way all through high school, what a nice lady but sad my mother was and what a fucking bore it was, this life, this house, this city. . . .

It was as though Life Itself—that raw, crude thing I'd been waiting for all through four years of college—had suddenly come breaking through. Sex was everywhere, just as it had been in Boston, spongy underfoot. Every door should have a sign, knock before entering.

I got my parents together in my father's room. His place was roughly the same as hers, but all-male instead of female. Five men between thirty and sixty, all down on their luck and money, heavy drinkers, two still on parole, while my father, "Frenchie," did their cooking. There were open bottles of scotch in his room, beer cans lining the hall, the clothes stank, there were a thousand places in that room and kitchen and shared bathroom where various cheeses and fungi were ripening. The air was blue; the men smoked like the down-and-outers they were, and they kept the heat up and the windows shut. They were men who sought enclosures. A prop-room of despair. I credited my father with nothing sincere.

My mother, at sixty, looked ten years younger. My father, who'd been the handsome one, the "perfect specimen" in the words of doctors and admiring women, showed all his years now, and the battering of

his plans. He'd been bested in mortal combat. His gray hair was now white. His ears seemed larger. He'd grown a moustache: a bar of white bristles. He met us in his pajamas and bathrobe. He had only two wardrobes: silk suits, white shirts, gold (lots of gold) accessories, polished black shoes. Or slippers, pajamas, and a silk robe. In his mind, if I understand it, there were only forward speeds and no reverse. It was all sales or seduction, an elaborate formality, or a contrived intimacy. The real man, my father, I never met. I never talked to him, I never heard him speak to me except, I think, in one sentence.

He poured himself a drink. He poured me a drink. He assumed—properly, I suppose—that sometime and somehow in the three years since we'd last seen one another, I'd grown up. Twenty to twenty-two: a fair assumption. He didn't ask how, nor was he shocked by anything that didn't affect him personally. He was the sort of dapper man who lit his cigarettes immediately before leaving the house, before meeting a customer; to be seen in public without a fresh cigarette, to shake hands without first having to transfer the cigarette to the left hand, was to be seen unguarded, unprepared. He was a salesman, and he needed a product, or a prop, or else he was silent.

In a way, it's impossible to write this in any way but memoir; fiction would pull me into faint postures of amazement, even of admiration for the savage decisiveness of his life, the jaunty, breezy indifference to the consequences of his lost, vain lust. And if you fill in the gaps, fictionally, with his public charm, and his hard-scrabble youth and the undeniable romantic edginess to his life in America, then sympathy will flow like credit.

My real feelings are smaller, less forgiving. For two years, my father had been playing games around the house and around the stores, timing his visits for late at night, taking my mother's car, sending our delivery men out to pick up his laundry. It's dangerous for life-time renters, squashed-together duplex-people, to build a luxury home. We had no skill in domestic maintenance. We had a Home of the Future decorated in my mother's taste, and no one but my mother to stay there, twenty miles out of town, a prisoner. Phone calls came from the Other Woman. Taunting, nasty, filthy calls—she was a slutty charm-school graduate in her well-preserved forties and she knew how to hurt and how to carry on in the great tradition of Hollywood villains. She was the first woman I'd ever met who dealt exclusively in lewdness, whose every gesture, every word, was insulting and provocative, the first woman who played

the game of sex and violence in my life and made one unthinkable without the other. In later years, my mother turned paranoid. These two years could have been the source—waiting all night for a husband she knew was out, getting vicious calls from the woman he was with.

For those two years he claimed to be alone, to be driving in the country, to be sitting in bars in Charleroi needing time to be alone, to think. My father could not tolerate a minute of solitude. He could plan, and scheme, but could not think. He ran his affairs the way Hitler ran Germany, picking on neutrals and on friends until they were forced to defend themselves, provoking a defense in order to turn aggressive. One vacation in my junior year when I had gone back to Pittsburgh to offer support to my mother, I happened to catch him in the store with his woman, and I confronted him as the liar he was. “You’ve never been proud of me!” he screamed back, “you’ve always denied me!” That wasn’t true, but it hurt; it wasn’t the response I’d expected. But it fit, and he carried it further. “You hate furniture. You think it’s too good for you. You’ve never done a day’s work in your life. You’re lazy. You’re no good, no goddamn good to anyone!”

It’s easy to endow him with higher motives, with *élan*, with some mysterious, potent life-force. The opposite, I think, is true.

I respond as well as any man to the vision, the racial memory, of a grandfather, sire of eighteen, buffalo billows on logbound ice, on a lake in Québec. For years, I wanted to claim that part of my legacy alone. It was the baggage my father had left behind.

I respond as well to a memory of my mother, one of those nights in my junior year, pressing a *Readers’ Digest* article on me. The title, more or less, was “Are You Living with a Sociopath?” And in her secretive way, she’d ticked off all seven danger signs. She’d underlined the operative descriptions. “Yes!” she’d written, and “Lee!” and “To a ‘T’!”

She was right, it could have been a portrait of my father. Is he charming to strangers? *Yes!* Does he easily gain their confidence? Good God, *Digest*, what do you think a salesman *is*? Have you caught him in fabrications? She’d never detected him in an unguarded truth. She was forever hearing from customers and friends of his French birth, and of his arrival as a child with wealthy, dying parents, his subsequent abandonment at their death, his Boston upbringing, the two years at Harvard before the Depression threw him out on the streets. Ah, the crash of ’29 . . . well. His eyes would mist. A burden to shoulder—he was supporting a large family of enormously talented brothers and

sisters. He gave up his dreams of medical school and took over the management of a chain of furniture all over the East Coast. He put his many brothers through medical and law schools, saw his sisters through music schools. His work even took him all the way up to Montreal, if you can believe it, where his ability to speak French came in handy. They speak a little French up there, or try to. Then he'd sing—*La Vie en Rose*, often, or "Around the World" and towards the end, to great effect on my mother, "Are You Lonesome Tonight?"

Does he have a temper?

A violent temper?

Is he subject to moods, to violent shifts of mood for inexplicable reasons?

Does he retain friendships? Does he have a sense of loyalty? Does he have any friends he can count on?

My father had cronies, no friends. In fact even his cronies would come to my mother and say, "Lee's very lucky he has you. He'd be a bum without you." Once our store was started, he asked me to spread the word among my high school friends to come to us for any furniture. The parents faithfully responded and my father immediately jumped the price. Once borax, always borax. Our banker told my mother even before their divorce, "Your husband frightens me." Our doctor said, "I treat him for arthritis. but that's not his problem. For that he needs a different kind of doctor, understand?"

For the twenty-odd years of her marriage, she lived with thirty moves, insecurity, lies, rude, surly and unfaithful behavior. The quiet companionship of marriage—shared interests, conversation, confidences, understanding—these things were outside his competence. He worked obsessively hard; he paid bills, he fantasized enormous private dreams of wealth. He died a week after talking to me of again starting a little store, something he could handle without having to walk. (He'd had vascular surgery at Dartmouth's medical facility, so if he did not graduate from Dartmouth he at least died on the way there.)

The only time he ever visited France was in the summer of 1977. He'd gotten his first passport from the Canadian Consulate in Boston. We had been in India for the year; he'd had his heart attack and his surgery while we were away. He was seventy-two, and only a keen mind and a set of eyes. He was an old, dying colonial in imperial Paris, a city he knew surprising things about, just as my mother had in London forty-five years before. He arrived in a wheelchair, ready (if I did the

pushing) for weeks of sight-seeing. He had to leave after five days, in pain so deep it made him cry, his feet dead and frosty. As cold as his face when I touched it in Manchester a year later. I pushed him around our Paris apartment, then down the Vaugirard and onto the Metro, to the Tour-Montparnasse, so he could see the Paris he'd talked so much about, and that was it, the culmination. He'd forgotten to bring the names and addresses of his numerous nieces and nephews—more of my unmet, unknown cousins, his dead brother Bill's Québec-style brood of Parisian proletarians.

(I had visited Bill myself, when *he* was seventy-two, back on my first visit to Paris in 1962. I had seen him once before, for a few months in 1947, when we'd sponsored him for immigration and brought him to our Florida trailer park. He was a tiny, rotund man, under five feet tall, with a face so like my father's (and his mother's, and his sisters') that it was disconcerting. He was living on three pensions in 1962—French, Canadian, and American—and his apartment came free for serving as a watchman. The apartment stands out to me as something permanently squalid in the soul of France, something worthy of Celine at his most splenetic. In a small exclusive glass tower of architects' offices just off Place Wagram in sight of the Arc de Triomphe, behind a stucco wall and door opening onto a landscaped brick courtyard full of gleaming Citroëns and Renault 3000s, my uncle and aunt had their basement space. A gas burner, a wooden ice-box, and dirt floors, permanently puddled. That was the summer I got to meet one of my cousins, recently expelled from Algeria, where he'd settled after service in Indo-China. That was the summer all of France was ready to go to war against itself. That was the summer my aged cousin Gérard, a right-winger, a proud jungle-fighter and *colon*, was pushing a fruit cart on the streets of Paris and fearing for his life.)

My father had mentioned to me the visit of "Gerry's" grandson in Manchester the summer before. Eighteen years old, and the very soul of Paris chic, just graduated as a radio repairman from some technical high school. He was travelling though America and Canada. He was going to marry a Vietnamese girl, and his family was giving him hell.

I pushed my father back to the plane. We returned to Montreal a month later and I spent my weekends that fall and winter visiting him in Hanover and Manchester, in the duplex built for him by one of his very competent stepsons. Better sons than I; the right ones for him. And at the beginning of 1979 I visited him that final time in a French funeral

home, meeting more cousins for the first time, Lessards from all over New Hampshire and Massachusetts. I tried talking to the last Blais, my aunt Lena, but she is deaf and a disinclined lipreader of French or English. And I touched his transformed face. (The ears, it seemed, had stretched out Spock-like, the lips had pulled thinner and the nose, God, the nose had receded from its full Roman arc, leaving enormous nostrils, like disfigurements from whatever angle I viewed them. The holes would all widen, air would claim him.) It was a gray, icy day. Firemen were hired by the parish to carry the coffin. A niece had donated something, and he'd been admitted to the Society of the Precious Blood, and so the Church *had* gotten him in the end, in that *petit coin du Canada*. Afterwards, I went out drinking with his wife's sons, the contractor and the truck driver and the truck driver's wife who'd taken a practical nursing course in order to help him in that final year. I haven't been back.

And yet, and yet, I want to say, I have cried rarely in these past twenty years. Once was on December 30, 1978 in Toronto when I got the news he had died. Another time was that night in Pittsburgh in his boarding house, the hall of coughs, when my father appeared, fresh cigarette lit, dressing gown pleated over pajamas, when he opened the door to his room, took in the vision of my mother, and collapsed on her coat, clawing the Persian lamb, body arched with sobbing. "I'm so lost, Anne, it's awful!" he said, and for the first and maybe only time, I believed him.

My parents had been back together for nearly a year, when they headed for California. "Lee's Interiors" was my father's idea this time: Marin County his destination. A small decorating studio to be run by my mother, accessories to be selected by my father. "Personal follow-up," that was the key. A small, high-class operation; all sales by appointment only. Low overhead, no inventory, everything from catalogues and arty pictures.

When I next heard from my mother, it was in a phone call from Winnipeg. They had returned to Pittsburgh, and she had given my father the slip. He was still waiting for her and she was not going back. She was with her family—my grandmother, gradually losing her faculties, and her sisters. They had found her an apartment. They had reactivated her Manitoba teaching license. She'd be teaching in the fall.

I made the trip to Pittsburgh to pick up her car, to load up her goods



from that strange boarding house, and to meet her in Chicago with them. I would have to tell my father he was on his own—she was not going to be fooled again. What I couldn't say was the other half of the truth: around him, she was helpless and always had been. Something had happened in California to make her realize it.

When I returned, it was to that same boarding house where now my father had an inkling there'd be no resettlement in Marin County, no "Lee's Interiors." The moment he opened the door and saw me standing there, his face collapsed, he fell to his knees and grabbed my legs. He wasn't in his bathrobe; just his pajamas. He had not shaved, and he smelled of all his years.

"I'm not a dog. You can't throw me out on the streets. I'm not something you beat and beat. . . ." I was crying with him, toppled next to him on the floor, wanting to be away from all this, to be a man free and out on my own. "She's gone back to Canada," I said, and each word was like a separate stabbing, the way he flinched and shook his head as though to deny it.