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THE RED MEMORY OF MY HAND

by

Kendall McCulloch

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2006

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## ABSTRACT

This Creative Writing Project, *The Red Memory of My Hand*, is Part One of my autobiography and it explores the narrator's developing subjectivity in the context of a dysfunctional matriarchal family. I wrote this autobiography to seize my own power from my existing family structure. In breaking the taboo of silence around my family history and risking rejection by both my family and readers, I claim the right to my history and identity. I am declaring my own agency, my right to tell my story, in the transgressive act of writing *The Red Memory of My Hand*. As the title implies, given the incident it alludes to, this is a text that is mingled with both pride and shame about where I have come from; *The Red Memory of My Hand* is a literal slap in the face that comes, strangely, out of love.

For my Sweetheart

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I am refractions of light. My skeleton key to Father is his photographs, not those of his face, but of mine. There are more albums full of my first three years than of the rest of my life combined. Myself through his eyes, the angles of his love.

Mother complains that Father spent more on photography equipment every month than on rent, on lenses and bulbs and filters. And that his dark room took up too much space in their meagre apartment. But I get the feeling that she's more upset that he blocked out the world there, and her. She clings to his photographs still, though, has them hanging throughout her home. Slices of his eye.

Mother will not give me any of the albums full of me, any of the photographs of my tiny fists on my first day. Will not give me any black or white or colour. I have one 8" by 10" framed picture of me when I was two and a half or so that Nana gave me. I'm looking down, crouched down in a forest against a mossy boulder that's five times my size, wearing those pants that button up the insides of the legs and a Strawberry Shortcake hoodie, my hair still curly. Looking at this picture in Nana's bedroom growing up, I always thought it looked magical. I believed that I could see faeries and goblins' faces blinking out from the brush, but they'd vanish if I looked for them too hard.

My face changes in my third year, after Father abandoned us, keeping its chub, but aging somehow. Smiles become rare and forced, my hair loses Father's curl. There is no

commemoration of every day any more, only holidays and birthdays. The painful glare of Sears or Jostens' flashbulbs, hands folded awkwardly. The exactly positioned tilt. There are photographs and photographs of all the presents Little Sister and I received each Christmas and birthday with nobody in them, just the piles of on-sale, marked-down toys, insisting Mother's love. We usually didn't get what we asked for, no Hungry Hungry Hippos because Candyland was half the price, no Wedding Barbie when Swimsuit Barbie was three dollars less. I still want Hungry Hungry Hippos. I wouldn't remember anything I got that year if it wasn't for all the pictures, the undeniable heap of things I did not want. Mother does this still, tries to prove herself with quantity every Christmas, fifty dollars buys so much more at the dollar store, so it must be better. Every year an excess of things we don't want, a denial of the rest of the year's stinginess.

And photographs of the semi-annual hugs Mother gave me. Easter. Christmas. My birthday. New Year's Eve. Having my birthday nestled in between Christmas and New Year's Eve has always been overwhelming. The mountains of disposable plastic trinkets, the three hugs all in a row. All the year's love crammed into a week. This was worth the patient counting down, twenty-four nights of chocolate popped out of an Advent calendar, melting the sweet shapes of stockings or snowmen on my tongue. Waiting for Mother to become Santa, to bring me the miracles of touch.

Sometimes there would be more hugs when we visited Father's family, the M's, Mother gushing with affection for us. Proving she was the perfect Mother, look what he had given up. Father's family would hug and kiss us constantly, would hold my hand as we walked down the street, would ruffle my hair. They were closer than teachers, without their boundaries. And the sublime, sporadic times we would go visit Grandma M or Aunt M or Uncle M, my skin was

electric, buzzing with the press of others.

Mother would sometimes talk to me about their “touchiness” when we were waiting for sleep in Grandma M’s guest room, she and Little Sister sharing the huge four-poster, I on a cot at their feet. She says the M’s are needy, that they have to do that for comfort. Not like us. And I would say I didn’t mind such closeness, that I even liked it. That would always make Mother angry, make her voice darken and lower. Mother says she isn’t a touchy person because her mother, Nana, was never a touchy person because her mother, Granny, wasn’t one. And Mother does not trust such touchiness, she says the M’s and touchy people like them only want something from us. But I would still round my shoulders under their hands like my cat does now, reaching into their palms.

Nana rarely hugs, even on holidays. She will only offer the flashing pursed tightness of her lipstick, that red smudge the only way you know she’s visited your cheek, your lips. Since the cancer I have tried hugging her a couple times, whether to comfort her or myself, I’m not sure. She tries to reciprocate, but her arms only mimic what she sees others doing. The unnatural bend of her elbows is stinging.

Lately, Nana seems to be trying to give me lessons on our family, so that when she’s gone someone will remember, will keep her version of our history straight. Nana pulls out the photographs she keeps finding in dusty boxes as soon as I hang up my coat, when I come visit on holidays or other rare occasions. Manilla envelopes full of faces, some I recognize from life or stories, some even she can only ponder at, like the tintype little boy smirking out at us in a sailor’s hat, sly about something we can never know. She shows me many of the same ones over and over each time, but is disappointed if I let on that I’ve seen them before, that I recognize the

jut of this chin, those arms akimbo.

I always watch for Father's work, the slant gives it away. Some of the pictures he took are of Nana, caked in the make-up of the early eighties, giving the camera flirty, crafty looks, sitting backwards on a chair with fancy felt hats askew on her head. She is obviously pleased at how she looks there. She certainly was more lovely, the thin arches of her brows said more than. The last time Nana showed me these photographs, she vainly tried to say she must've been about 55 or so then, but Mother told her she was wrong and they argued. I told Nana that her math doesn't work, Father was gone by the time she was 53. Nana finally agreed that she was 50, reluctantly. And for the first time, looking at this sequence of photographs, I was disturbed by her thinner, charming self. By how sexy she looked through Father's gaze. Mother has told me before that she thought Father would have been happier with Nana, that he was more attracted to her, but I thought she was just being ridiculous. Another ludicrous lie. But looking at those photographs made me uneasy. There are no glamorous spreads of Mother like these, barely a handful of photos of her at all in the hundreds she has that her ex-husband took. A mother-in-law is a dubious subject. But there aren't many photographs of Mother at all, even when she was young, and supposedly thin and cute. She is never smiling. She always avoids cameras, she doesn't like what they show her. Mother says that photographs aren't real.

In the mass of pictures, there was a new one last time, and it's now my favourite: Granny sitting on the doorstep of her little settler's cabin, slouching and grumpy. She's holding two strings, each attached to a chubby groundhog's neck, her only solace on that prairie. There are pets in many of the deteriorating photos, but no other ones like these. For Granny's children they become dogs, fancier, but still small. I realize from these photographs that my family has always

kept one or two little yipping dogs around, much to my Sweetheart's dismay. They head right for him, aware of his difference. His uncomfortable distaste. He wants a big one if we get a dog, a German Shepherd or a Husky, but I have that desire for smallness still, imprinted on me from before my birth. Perhaps because we are so small, not thin or fine-boned, just short.

When the women of my family stand together in photographs, there is a generational evolution, the younger gaining an inch or two on their elders. I am taller than Mother who is taller than Nana who is taller than Granny. Even Little Sister has a couple inches on me, her subtle overtaking has made me feel like I am shrivelling, losing millimetres daily. I towered over Granny, all four feet something of her, something I can rarely accomplish outside the limits of my family's miniatures. Nana always says that by the time I knew Granny she was diminishing, that she had always been small but more imposing. That I adored Granny because I had only known her in her best years, that she had mellowed. How angry my Great-Grandfather was when Granny beat the backs of Nana's calves black and blue with a ruler. How if Granny had done the things she did now, she'd have Children's Aid locking her up. Mother and my uncles corroborate this, tell of how they lived in fear of flyswatters. How Granny would wield one in each hand like a Texas ranger, so quick with her flicking wrists that she could get four of them at once, sticking a swatter between two of them, then the side-to-side flashing of orange or pink or green plastic. You'd know you'd been really bad if she got you so good that pale little circles poked through the redness on your thigh. Sometimes the bruises would be decorated with the remains of a fly or two that had suffered her wrath earlier. Granny kept six or seven swatters hanging on nails around the cottage they say, so she would always be ready. And if you hid them she would know right away and it would be worse. My uncles called her the dragon lady.

When I knew her, Granny had shrunk into spending summers teaching me card games and reading Harlequins prone on the couch, to dinner at exactly 4 p.m. and Lawrence Welk at 7. Granny stole flowers from our cottage neighbours' gardens, stealthy with her flashlight at night. She said if anyone noticed that their marigolds had migrated to her soil, they'd just think she was senile or something so they wouldn't say anything, and she didn't mind using her age as an excuse. When I was little I thought that "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" on Lawrence Welk was about this kind of nocturnal thieving.

I think I was her favourite, or at least I so wanted to be, and when she was dying and I couldn't bear to be at her bedside she asked Little Sister "where's the other one? I want the other one." I failed her when her crisp white wit began to crackle into nonsense. I couldn't be there for her in that vile, undignified "home," in the stench of senility, the hunched elderly filling the halls with their chairs, couldn't keep brushing past that one man who always asked me why he couldn't walk any more. I wasn't there for her rare lucid moments, for her devastation at what she had become, this woman who had finished crosswords in seven minutes. This lovely, gentle, glimmer of a woman whom I know so little about, whom I fell in love with at eighty when she had already almost lost her sparks.

I'm told Nana has mellowed too. She has never threatened Little Sister and me with her much quoted "I'm gonna brain you." But she slips back into hyperbole sometimes, tells my toddler cousin not to touch the dirty hospital walls when they visit Mother "or I'll cut off your hands." And I remember Nana telling me not to change the channel from her cherished golf or curling or else she'd stab me.

Mother showed me the photo only after I was at least sixteen. Mother and Father appear out of nowhere at the end of the upstairs hallway, in a beam of yellow sunlight, flecks of dust dancing before them. Mother hides behind a veil and the oversized glasses popular in the late 1970s, even then only a forced little smile, the only kind I can find on her in pictures and in life. Father is in a pale blue suit with extra wide lapels, probably looking like any dad from one of my friends' parents' wedding photos. Except to me. The spectre of him has always been lurking, tugging at my shoulder, a weight on my shadow. The horror of lips that curl in exact duplicate to mine, and open to refuse that my name ever be spoken.

Mother has extended her flirtation with the altered facts about everything to her marriage, subtly insinuating to strangers that Father was killed, or that something worse happened to him. Thus began a new marriage, their young faces greeting me morning and night. I had to pass them every time I entered or left my bedroom. The eyes that burned me. A warning.

They say a wedding is wonderful for letting you know how much you are loved. It lets you know where you stand with people. The cliché liminality of a threshold. My wedding, three days ago, was lovely and bone white. It is amazing how obvious some love can be, filling you with the scent of lilacs, such sweetness on the tongue. Such unmistakable love is new to me, it began dancing around me over the last five years, crescendoing in its accumulation three days ago. Dizzy with it, these faces swirling around me and my anchor, my Sweetheart, I still could

not forget the love I had lacked. I suppose I am ungrateful. It shouldn't matter when or who has given it to me. But it does.

I do not know what love Nana's been given. She speaks of her father as of a saint, so he must've meant something. A professional photograph of her father, taken to commemorate his retirement from the line at Ford, hung in a place of honour in her bedroom for years. There is a faded actor, I'm not sure he was ever famous and I never remember his name, that reminds Nana so much of her father that she cries as soon as he comes on TV in one of his ads for diabetes. Nana derided her mother, Granny, whom I adored, for lying on the couch all day and night while Great grandfather did everything. That may be true, but when Nana retired, she retired to the chesterfield to command her minions. She was just as terrifying supine.

Nana met her husband, the Captain, in the hospital where she nursed. He had fallen off a fire truck. This no doubt seemed romantic, I suppose. I hope Nana was unaware that he fell because he was so drunk. This was only the first of the four brain surgeries he has had over his lifetime, none of which contributed in any beneficial way to his personality. I don't know why he needed so many brain surgeries, what caused his neurological problems, what is wrong with him. My family will not speak of these things, they hate facts, they avoid contemplating causes. From what little I know of the Captain's history, he has always been a drunk, and Nana should've divorced him twenty years or so earlier. He beat his children often in drunken rages, and Mother and my oldest uncle claim to have taken the most brutal of these in protecting their younger siblings. I don't know how badly they were beaten, but I suspect it was far beyond most of the slaps and hair pullings I received from Mother, because she and my uncles don't talk about it much. They don't seem as eager to exaggerate about this part of their lives, and I have taken this



reticence for sorrow.

I know that the Captain had terribly glamorous jobs, or at least I thought so when I was little. He was the Windsor Harbour Master, in charge of all the boats docking on the Canadian side of our part of the Detroit river in some important way. I know he had the Captain of the Edmund Fitzgerald over for supper on Christmas Eve, something Mother remembers with a boastful awe, but I don't know why he lost that job. Mother says there is no Harbour Master now, perhaps because trucks do more of the cross-border hauling now. And the Captain was a fireman, but I haven't heard much about that except that he found it hard to stay on the truck. I think he may have been just a volunteer, but again, the details are sketchy, and it's unclear if anyone remembers this detail accurately anyway. In his later years, he captained the Boblo boat, bringing ferryfuls of excited kids and apprehensive parents over to the decrepit island amusement park, and returning every twenty minutes or so with exhausted families. This was a great job for us, since he could get Mother and Little Sister and me free tickets to the island every summer, something we never could've afforded. He was an extra in a movie with Harrison Ford, steering the repainted Boblo ferry across the Detroit river. I wasn't allowed to watch it because it was a grown-ups' movie, but they told me you could tell it was him. The movie people picked him over the other captain because he looked more surly. I still haven't seen the movie, because I don't want to wreck my idea of the Captain doing something special, by realizing that you couldn't really tell it was him, that there was no close-up of his weathered face. Mother tells me now that he was always wasted when he was driving that boat, and I'm thankful that it didn't end up a ferryful of drowned kids. My family couldn't handle any more mistakes. There is always a town drunk, and if you stay relatively harmless to other peoples' families, nobody minds much.

I haven't seen the Captain for years now, though he lives less than an hour away. Mother and her father haven't spoken for years, she is not one to forgive. I hear he's generally passed out by three p.m. Mostly, he seems to be an embarrassment, begging Nana to go to Hawaii with him, to give him another chance. He forgets Little Sister's and my ages, our grades, our birthdays. There were fears for a time that the Captain might attack Nana's boyfriend. The risk of another hip replacement that such an altercation might entail excused the family once and for all for shutting the Captain out for good. That is what they do best.

Even given the Captain's alcoholism and propensity towards violence, Nana has always seemed to me to be feared more by her children than he ever was. Or maybe I think that because I also grew up under her hateful glare. Nana has always told her boys, my uncles, "I should've drowned you when you were born," a family joke. They laugh to pretend she's not serious. Their nightmares are of Nana leering over the washbasin, not even a sack to cover their faces, useless infant bodies bloating under her hands. Or sometimes, all of them clawing like kittens to get out of some river. Even now, none of them can swim.

Nana's results: rubadubdub, four men in that tub. A redneck, a coke head, a dealer, a missing man. My maternal uncles. This uncle has a family, two dogs even. He even held down a decent full-time job as a mouldmaker, until last year. He was so skilled with his hands that he was in high demand even though he never bothered to finish high school. But the constant mechanic vibrations have made his hands, like those of so many of his fellow workers, useless. Factory workers make more than anyone else in this town, if you can get in with the Big Three, you're set. I know people with master's degrees in history and education that work on the line, because that mind-numbing twist of their wrist to tighten the same screw on hundreds of mini-

vans each day allows them the benefits of union membership. A four-bedroom home in a gated community with dozens of artfully-lit man-made lakes would be impossible to buy on a teacher's salary. But getting into the coveted Big Three in Windsor is impossible now without extreme acts of nepotism, and without a mother or father on the line, you can't even get an application. But there is still lots of money to be made as well in The Trade, as the mouldmakers call it, and my uncle has been working in The Trade for years. If you are lucky enough to get into the Big Three or The Trade, you don't complain, you work through the pain because there is little alternative for you in this town, even if, or perhaps, especially if, you are educated. So he can barely make a fist now, after years of intense jackhammerish jiggling of his hands and arms. Despite all the Oxycontin he takes he's in constant pain and can speak of nothing else. It drives my mother mad, because we all have our own pains, crosses to bear, she says, though she's not religious. But she insists that we're supposed to keep our various injuries to ourselves, suffering quietly, diligently. He should stick to the soothing roundness of a cup-holder brimming with golden froth conveniently to the right of the wheel. My family prefers the quietness of addiction, of self-abuse.

Yes, that one is a coke head, but nothing more could really be expected of him. He came to family BBQs in dark aviators, his arm candied by a string of different, assorted strippers. My favourite had a diamond embedded in her front tooth, the essence of glamour for a six-year-old, but Mother denied me one. They all say that things would've been different for him if that surgery would have been available then. Maybe he'd be a normal person, just like the rest of us. If he had that tube put in twenty or so years earlier he'd be a different man. I'm not so sure. I don't think that hydrocephalus was enough to make him the way he is. Sure, the disease made him slow, but his other problems seem too similar to the rest of them to be blamed on the water

that's drowned his brain. He doesn't seem so different.

My favourite uncle is a dealer, but only law makes that illegal. A minimum of fifteen joints a day, each one fat enough for fifteen grade-ten kids to share second period . But no addiction there, purely medicinal, he insists. He says he is a master at what he does. He is proud of his work, and makes many people happy, in a way. He has been an artist as long as he can remember, doodling remarkable pictures even before he could read. Someone bought a copy of his impressive drawing of the Doors that hangs in my mother's upstairs hallway, the one he sold illegally at concerts. Now the poster has been bootlegged at concerts around the world. It hangs in trailers in Ohio and rec rooms in Calgary. He should've been rich he says, if he'd gotten the money from that, if his creation hadn't been stolen. You don't tend to copyright things that you sell out of the trunk of your car at Lynrd Skynrd concerts, and even though his autograph is clearly visible in Jim Morrison's hair, my uncle tries to avoid confrontations that might bring his secret history to light. But if he finds the bastard, watch out. His scheming started in high school. His shocking artistic abilities and an intricate network of the lies he told compulsively got him total access to everything in the art department, even to the secret coloured papers the school used to print its tickets to dances and football games. The teachers could never figure out why they had more students at these events than they had sold or even made tickets for, but after my uncle's painstaking hours drawing each one they could never find a counterfeit ticket. I'm not sure when the art of growing the perfect bud, of rolling the perfect spliff, became his passion, if it was before or after Nana tossed all his stuff on the lawn and locked him out for good.

And that other one, he hasn't come around for thirteen years, nothing unlucky in his staying away, his mother thinks. Nana sends him and his half-breed daughter and red-blooded

step-daughters a box every Christmas, not their fault their mother's a squaw, Nana says. And Nana's kids are part Indian anyway, why wouldn't he be drawn to one of them, she reasons. Not real sure what he does out there in the wild west, but at least he doesn't ask for money, so it must be alright.

Then there is Mother, the only girl, Nana's only hope. The curse of the favourite: what to do with all that rancid love. Mother can't stand her mother, but she's spent more time around Nana than most angry daughters would have. Mother lived with Nana until she married at twenty, then moved back in with her after the divorce when she was twenty-six. Mother's in her forties now, but still lives in Nana's boxy three bedroom condominium. They'd still be there, all alone but together if my Nana had not moved in with her geriatric boyfriend Scottie eight years ago. So there she is, rent free in the place I paid to escape. They still talk to each other at least once a day, relaying and dissecting the minutiae of their waking hours, more like sisters than Little Sister and I have ever been. All the same, they can't stand each other, and when I see them separately, all they can do is complain about each other. Or about me.

Mother, Little Sister, and I moved in with Nana after Mother's divorce. My uncles lived with us too, until the night Nana decided she'd had enough of her second youngest and pitched all his things onto the lawn and changed the locks, a subtle hint the artist wasn't wanted. This was the end of him being my pseudo-daddy, and the beginning of his need for ever greater amounts of substances to get through. The body can take so much more abuse than the mind, and is so much easier to numb.

I never found out what happened to his tarantula, if Nana flushed it or let it loose in the neighbourhood or left it in the basement to die. The other pre-coke uncle, who remained closed

in the windowless plywood-panelling that reeked of teenage boys probably kept it alive for a time. My evicted uncle bounced from couch to couch, sometimes getting enough cash to share an apartment with my other basement uncle and a shifting myriad of animals I loved and feared. They taught their cockatiel, Fido, to swear and ask for a cigarette, but it couldn't smoke. I delighted in that bird's squawk, Fido wants a cigarette! Fido wants a cigarette! But I hated the way he shit all over everything whenever he escaped his cage, and the scrape of his claws against my fingers as I tried to catch him. I think their illegally harboured ferret escaped to fight lesser rats for scraps.

My favourite uncle had a boa constrictor that slept wrapped around his headboard. He would stuff it in a duffle bag and bring it on the bus across town to visit me. In our house, he wore the snake's nine feet as a boa. This is when I loved him most, lounging on the couch like a circus freak, daring the boa to tighten its hold, the smooth warmth of scales under my fingers. I think it got him older girls too, in that medieval re-enactment club he was in for a while before he had some sort of falling out with them. He's had so many falling outs, never his fault, he insists, but I can't think of any group of people he hasn't had drawn-out, alienating feuds with. He dressed in monks robes there and carried his snake, claiming to be some kind of sage or mystic, his long, unkempt hair and beard seeming purposeful for once. Some people said he looked like Jesus with all that hair, but I think it was his air of being a poor, wise, and persecuted man that made them think so. I don't fall for that act so much any more.

When the snake died, he kept it in his freezer for six months. When he was evicted, the third or fourth time that he had found one of those yellow or pink notices on one of his apartment doors, he brought it out to the cottage and buried it. He and one of his friends often buried dead

things under the cottage, to dig up at more opportune moments. They'd piece their skeletons back together later, like those 3D wooden dinosaur puzzles, then display them, lovingly, in their homes. His friend had the skeletons of a raccoon, a skunk, an opossum, a cat, and who knows what else. I joked to Mother that he'd do that with a human one day and she should watch out, and Mother said he'd love to get his hands on one. When my uncle dug up his partially decomposed snake, he found out that someone had made off with its precious head. I blamed the neighbour's dogs, but he wouldn't speak to his friend for weeks.

My uncle has always been adored by children, a mutual fascination that has recently become shocking. I will not ask about the girl, her age, her hair colour. I heard he admitted it, said she had wanted it, that he wasn't the first. The bile rises in my throat.

The last time Father was my Daddy, he brought me a magnetic train set. The noses and bums of the little train cars stuck together as you pulled them along the track. This was at Nana's condo, where I would live for the next eighteen years. Daddy sat in the brown corduroy chair, which was not yet tattered and did not smell of our dogs, because we had none then. This is my second good memory, him smiling from the chair, me playing with the blue and green cars, showing him it was a good present.

My first good memory was in our apartment kitchen, it must've been before I could talk. Daddy was washing the dishes and I was sitting on the counter, watching the yellow sunlight on the bubbles and his curls. The yellow is stronger than any yellow I have ever seen since, and I remember it so clearly, even now that I have grown into his face. Yellow was his favourite colour, that's why Mother doesn't let me wear it in her presence. I wonder if Father has sunk into cream or grey now, clotted and sunless. Maybe he shines a rainbow for his other children. His beloved boys.

Mother told me Father gave me the train set because he didn't want me to be too girly, because he thought she was making me too feminine, not letting me get dirty. I never thought Mother was making me anything, I just didn't play in the mud because she would yell at me if I soiled my clothes. I didn't want a repeat of that time I came home from Kindergarten with yellow paint on my blue Winnie the Pooh coveralls that she still hasn't forgiven me for. There was also



the risk of getting hurt, of being maimed into something even less loveable. I did not know then that my Daddy would never willingly see me again. I just knew I had missed him, but now he was here, so it was alright. I couldn't let him leave again. I didn't know he was going to slam the screen door and never come back, that I'd never have a Daddy again. Or even a father.

The train cars would not stick together if you turned them sideways. Dangling them in the air made them fall apart. You had to hold them gently, just so, one on each palm, making sure the right ends were touching so that they wouldn't push each other apart. I tried to show him, but he wasn't interested.

In the recurring dream I've been having since Father abandoned me, thieves grab me in the night and stuff me into a sack and drag me, drugged, in blazing daylight, from my legitimate, faceless family. Mother or Nana carry me away from my real family, disguised by cap and eye mask, capering on tiptoe. Then flashes of brainwashing, their plastic surgery to match my face, use of superior technology to manufacture photo albums, elegantly orchestrated lies that start spreading at my birth. The result: my new family, waking up to the thieves, my begging to go home, my real home. Sweat slicking my sheets and Mother and Nana's night-altered faces hovering over my bunk, desperate to staunch my tears. The nightmare in flesh.

Grandma M, Father's mother, tells me that Father is a good man despite his abandoning me. She does not believe this very much, but she must try. There are things we cannot believe, that if we let ourselves believe them, the larger part of us may die. Thus, Grandma M tells me what she can, that Father loves me and did what he could for me. She knows he is in the wrong. She has nightmares of his empty arms, that hollowness. The wrongness wakes her as it does me. I dream of a monstrous hue of red, of folding construction paper in half and cutting a half-hearted

curve.

Father won't come visit Grandma M anymore, except rarely while being watched by his wife. *Her*. I get the feeling that his mother hasn't been alone with him for longer than ten minutes at a time in almost twenty years. I ask Grandma M if my Father tells her that he loves me or Little Sister. She cannot answer this. But he does let her speak of us now. I imagine them in those precious gifts of less than ten minutes she gets suddenly every year or two when they visit and his wife runs out to buy something blissfully needed. Is it cigarettes, or bread, I wonder, does Father smoke, Du Mauriers or Players Light, or is he a health nut? Does he like white or brown or whole-wheat? Grandma M used to try short bursts of information, spitting them at Father when his wife would go to the bathroom or grab something from her car, but his wife would invariably interrupt, and hear Little Sister's or my dreaded name, and then would make him pack up the car right then, and they would make the two-hour drive home, no matter the time. These incidents, when my name or Little Sister's were mentioned, would lead to dozens of unanswered phone calls. Her son's quick deaths took months to reverse.

So Grandma M must be sure that the timing is right, she has learned to be stealthy. She hopes that Father's silence is somehow collusion in this, that he desires these moments as much as she does. He doesn't ask questions, but she says he listens. Grandma M thinks this is progress, dreams of us meeting, able to recognize each other only by the furtive glances at the photographs she sneaks discreetly into our separate views. In these years of ten minutes, someday she will break through, force this all to stop. All she can do is try to unwind what has happened, keep trying to reverse us with the hope that we will glimpse what we were twenty years ago, Father and daughter.

I do not know when it will be time for his story, the story of Father's son. We have only been in the same room once in our lives. He has the name Mother chose for her first potential son, Granny's maiden name, ruined. My half-brother is a few months younger than Little Sister, I think. That was long enough for Father to know about Little Sister, Mother says, to not care about the unborn thing inside her enough to stop. Nana and Grandma M say that slut got pregnant to make Father leave Mother. They both don't say slut, but their tongues ache to shape the word. I guess that trick wasn't good enough for Mother, even though she was his wife. Father's women hate each other so much, but they use the same snares.

Mother says Father left her because she didn't have a son, blaming me for my lack of parts. If only I would've tried to be a tomboy, at least. He didn't stay around for Little Sister's birth, so even if she would've pulled through, it wouldn't have been enough. He wouldn't even look at her when Mother brought Little Sister with her to the divorce lawyer. She says she couldn't find a babysitter, but she probably wanted to rub his face in it, as I would have done. Shame, shame.

At first, when these things happen, there is an uproar. How could he have done it, didn't she know, what kind of pogie hussie would do that? The neighbours' tongues grow strong with use. But moving just a few kilometres away can make such a difference, the freshness of a new neighbourhood, and don't they look so happy with their little bundle of joy? Soon all is forgotten, and people start wondering why she is still in town, can't she just let them be, it was bound to happen, maybe even meant to be. We became the mistakes. And after I came home from spending the day visiting Father and his new woman, and I told Mother how I saw my new mommy, Mother decided she'd had enough. Mother packed us all up and we moved in with

Nana, to a better house where she'd have help with Little Sister. She tried to bring back the semblance of love.

I have been a bane on Mother since before my birth. She says she often worried I was dead inside her. I would not kick for days. Little Sister never stopped moving, never stopped taking up too much room inside her, waking Mother up with her dancing. But I was horrible because I wouldn't move, nothing to show her I was there but her growing belly, my sporadic movements. Things got a lot worse after they took me out of her, after they ripped me out. She claims that the caesarean was the worst thing that ever happened to her, that it has caused her pain for twenty-five years. That the doctor was a butcher. Mother's hatred towards him rivals how she sometimes talks about *that woman*. They rearranged her insides when they took me out, and put everything back in the wrong order. When Mother would complain to me about this before I was old enough to know much about anatomy, I thought she meant that it was like the Operation game my friend had that I asked for at Christmas but never got. I imagined loud red buzzing when they made each mistake, and wondered how they could force Mother's hard pieces into the wrong slots.

Mother still blames me for her frequent urges to pee. The twist of her bladder. She says she is still feeling the pain of it in her hernia, as if my birth, not years of carrying around hundreds of extra pounds of baggage, is the cause of her discomfort. As if I was too lazy to be born myself, and waited stubbornly to be tugged out by incompetent hands. She claims I kept up this laziness for years. I suppose I still am that lazy to her.

Mother says that whenever I fell over as a baby, I would not bother to try to get up again, content to lie there stupidly. I didn't bother to try to pull myself up onto my legs or attempt to walk until long after my cousin, who was two weeks my senior, was already stumbling around bravely. My cousin did everything faster and better than me except talk. My disinterest or laziness or lack of attention or whatever it was that caused my inertia concerned Mother even more because of my cousin's keenness. The family's one-up-man-ship. She still tells everyone that I care about how she assumed I was mentally retarded because my progress didn't follow the doctor's weekly chart. She was sure I was a retard, though the doctor told her not to worry. Until I reached grade four or five I think she still harboured this suspicion, waiting for my simple-mindedness to reveal itself to everyone else. She continues to look for any signs of my ineptness to show. She has claimed that I'm socially retarded or emotionally retarded, grasping for some derogatory label to pin on me. She says she realizes now though that it was just laziness, a sign of things to come. I talked early, almost immediately in full sentences, and I think she misses my earlier silence. My voice diminished her hope that I wouldn't be ordinary, that she could continue to worry about and blame me for my flaws, for being less than human. Caring for a useless child.

By the time Little Sister came along when I was three, I was all caught up, though my motor skills have never been very good. I was always the worst at every sport I ever tried. I blamed my smallness for coming in last in every race and missing shots at basketball, but my height could not explain why I made such an easy target for the dodge ball, why I have never been able to catch any kind of ball that's been thrown my way. I blame it on my depth perception. I can't drive because I can never figure out how quickly objects are coming towards me or how far away they are. But Mother says it's just more laziness. Maybe I didn't move much in her

womb because I didn't want to disturb her. Mother frequently reminds me that she wishes I was never born. That I was an accident. But then she denies ever saying such things, even when witnesses like my Sweetheart tell her yes, she said that yesterday, she says she would never say something like that. She says many things that she would never say.

Mother. Mom. Mum. Mother. I cannot think of details, the parts of you protruding, the ruddy smell of the unwashed, because then all I will want is my covers over me, my pillows over my head. And to find my other family in sleep, with the tree house and the backyard, the safety of a rope ladder to climb into hiding. I don't like to think about that but there is no going back now, no forays into the safe territory, waiting for the water to warm up, the tentative big toe. It's dive in or stay on shore, burning. I have seen every part of you and I have not liked it, every crease of your flesh as you thunder down the hall. The volcano of you, never ending pink spread of flesh, waiting for you to erupt. I am not trying to hurt you with these thoughts, the things I keep hidden even from myself must surface sometime or they will just come in sleep. I want my bed to stop looming. When I wake I never know which is the dream, which is the nightmare. I crave a quiet sleep, a sleep of sweet cool blackness, a rest until waking. I will push you from my dreams.

You grow out of me like extra limbs. I am as heavy with arms as Ganesh and they are all digging of their own accord. My roots are pulling me under, I am drowning in my past. I need to sever these tangles, these choking ties. I will not be buried alive. I will not suffer the weight of your bodies, the smell of your rot. Someday I will wake limbless. This is my knife. This is the cutting off of arms, of legs. I am a willing amputee, waking in the night with the pain of phantom limbs. The tenderness of stumps where legs used to be. What is an arm, a leg? I will learn to walk again. Yes, Sweetheart, I will take your prosthetic offerings. Nobody will believe I am

partly artificial, or my incredible power for healing. At first glance I'll seem normal, there will be no giveaway smell of plastic. People won't know I was not born this way unless they see me in the pool, or I take off my socks to expose my paleness.

I remember the tortoises because they are so much like Mother: slow, fat, forgotten. On my Grade One trip to the Detroit Zoo they were nobody's favourite but mine. But I am tired of waiting for her to catch up. She has not won any races with her plodding rage. Now I love penguins, their clever slides into the freezing dark. The iciness doesn't even shock them. I want to run across the ice, to dart so quick beneath the black.

I remember that singular day Mother made my lunch, tuna on Wonderbread, a rare treat. Now I hate the taste of jam, the smack of peanut butter on my hard palate. Too many pieces of bread with smeared on toppings that I called sandwiches, fast and easy for my five-year-old fingers. I liked Cheezwhiz too, and once I tried Miracle Whip, but it smelled funny by second period. Summers were good because I didn't have to make lunches, but bad because I had no friends. Little Sister always had friends, girls and boys trailing after her who listened obediently to her bossing. She would play with me if she had none of her minions around. At the cottage, Little Sister and I used to play with the plastic tampon applicators that we found on the beach, the kind that you should never use because they'll last longer than your children. We'd strain the sand through them, add them to our castles for flare. They make excellent pillars. Nana always said "No, don't play with those, they're dirty" in those two weeks we stayed at the cottage with her each summer. They're dirty, she said, which we thought was silly, because even sand is dirt, really, so we'd play with them in secret, bury stashes of them. There are probably still little mounds of them around.



One of our cottage neighbours has a sculpture of all the things they've found washed up on the shore. There is a definite artistry to it, you can't just add anything anywhere. It must be carefully inspected, a baseball cap, a fishing lure, a comb, then placed ceremoniously, lovingly. I did not realize till a few years ago why visitors gasp and call this an eyesore. This six foot tall shrine to garbage. The incongruity of it can be shocking, the smell of washed up things is sometimes atrocious. Before, I only saw the magic of its parts, the treasures from worlds so distant from my own, what was forgotten, what was left. Taking it in as a whole can be frightening, all the things that have been tossed away, that people intended to be forgotten, buried at the lake bottom. But it is the act of cobbling together that is important, of making something different out of the refuse and claiming it as one's own.

Little Sister and I had campfires with the neighbours, so conspicuously American with their Y'all and Coors Light, they way they called us "you Kuhnaydeean" in our own country, ever attentive to any possibility we might say "eh." Sometimes they brought us White Castle or other exotic oddities, both to see our surprise and in a barely hidden attempt to convert us. We played hide and seek, careful to avoid the flames more out of fear of exposure than of burns. Little Sister could always run faster than me, I was always stuck at the willow tree, counting, hoping someone would trip and fall so I could catch them. My stupid, uncooperative legs. Only our drunken neighbours' stumbling legs were as awkward as my own.

The nights were best, darting through the darkness. The glow of Christmas lights on the willows in August, the flickering of fireflies and lighters. The dark trudge to the outhouse way way back with only the flashlight's timid circle. The calm of the sleepy lake, Little Sister rocking our bunks out of boredom, me pushing my feet under her bunk to lift and jostle her, the shush,

shush of the waves on the sand. During the daytimes we were always caught, no chance to run fast enough, to find the best hiding spot. When she tired of her thousand piece jigsaw, Nana would force us to play hours of cards, rummy and poker and canasta, and games that didn't even have names I suspected her of making up. All afternoon, after the morning of sweeping and shaking out the rugs and trying to rid the cottage of every trace of sand we had to sit there and play hand after hand, listening to the waves and the other kids going wild on the beach. I never lose at cards anymore, and I hate the feel of them in my hands, the smug grin of the jokers. When people look for a fourth for Euchre I pretend I can't play or refuse if they know better. If forced, I will not make it or go alone on perfect hands. I'm tired of winning.

Sometimes in the hour before our four'o'clock sharp dinner, I'd climb the willow, the only tree I've ever climbed. You can not climb the trees in the condominium community where Little Sister and I grew up. Nana was careful to make sure people knew we lived in a condo, not a townhouse, as people often said when they saw her place for the first time. I never told her how some classmate asked me if this was The Projects, it would have filled her with rage. But really, our place seemed nearly identical to The Projects. The only thing different was that instead of herds of children roaming the sidewalks, there were grumpy old people sitting on lawnchairs chain smoking and drinking Folgers all day on their tiny front lawns. And we had the prissy little over tended gardens that some bored, lonely old women indulge in that nobody bothered with in The Projects. In The Projects, you were free to climb trees and trample where you wished, but in our neighbourhood a swarm of crotchety old maidens would block any attempt at that kind of tomfoolery. They would attack you with broomsticks, get down you little brat, you'll fall and bleed on my Impatiens! Mother would threaten Little Sister and me, saying that if we weren't

always good, especially to Nana, that we'd have to go live in The Projects. She held this over us like moving to the projects would be like descending into hell, but I often secretly wished we would move there, away from Nana and the old people. To be surrounded by other children.

Even though the cottage was more of a lean-to than any of the others on the refuse strewn beach, it was still a respite from the city. The cottage had its own indignities: unlike all the other cottages on the beach, we had no running water, so while the other kids took showers, we had to soap ourselves up in Lake Erie, washing up in the mornings to avoid the dirtiest things that washed up in the afternoons, when the water was most clouded. This was usually an embarrassing experience, especially when Nana came out as well, because she would shamelessly drop the straps of her bathing suit top to make sure she "got a good wash." I hated this impropriety even more than I hated when the other kids mocked me for bringing out my floating Ivory soap when they swam only for pleasure. She always told me that nobody was looking, and if they were, well, she'd give them a cheap thrill, but I couldn't stand it. You could never get clean enough, which I, in my compulsive need for cleanliness, hated. Little Sister put up a fight about soap even at home and she didn't mind, but I hated the inevitability that sand would always be stuck in all my crevasses. I worried that I stank of dead fish or pollution, which I often did. Still, there is some joy in proving how far you can swim in one big breath by seeing the long bobbing line of shampoo froth that traces your path when you come up for air.

When I told kids in my class I was going to Granny's cottage, they always glared at me enviously, as if I must be rich but was hiding it from them. I tried to explain to them that it is not like one of those cottages you see on T.V. which were usually much fancier than Nana's condo. It is not a pristine wilderness with loons and canoes where you can drink the lake water without

getting sick. It is one cramped room with flimsy curtains separating the main bed from the kitchen/livingroom and Little Sister and I slept on the porch. About ten years ago, the cottage finally got running water, and Nana's boyfriend put in a real toilet and a rickety shower a few years ago which seems almost unimaginable to me. When I think of the cottage, I think of being called by Nana or Granny or Mother to fill up buckets of water at the neighbour's hose and haul them home so that the water could be used for washing dishes or faces, or for cooking, and of the trek to the ancient little white outhouse in the middle of the night. Granny used a chamber pot so she wouldn't have to go out in the dark, but I put up with the frigid wet dew on my bare feet and the suffocating darkness of the toolshed/shitter. I remember sitting there, wondering if the little shed was as old as the cottage, and deciding that it was, that someone must have chosen to bring the outhouse along when the cottage was forced to move from its original place on Point Pelee. The shitter had to be moved now and then after some amount of years, depending on how much use it got. I had the impression that the shitter was very portable, you just dug a new hole and had a few men lift it up and move it and then you covered the old hole. The migratory nature of these buildings has always fascinated me. The cottage itself was moved several times, and I longed to see it happen myself, to see it pulled by a truck to a new home, the inanimate building suddenly ambulatory. My great-grandfather built the cottage sixty-five years ago near the tip of Point Pelee because Nana's doctor said she needed fresh air. Nana always seemed annoyed that the environmentalists finally had their way and forced the cottagers to move out of Point Pelee to protect the wildlife, as it was a much prettier spot. Since the cottage has been on this beach, it has been moved several times to give the rising water room, and there are stumps of telephone poles metres out into the lake that you must be careful of. The cottage is on cinder blocks, ready to

move again, or for the water to come up underneath it with little harm.

The access to the willow tree has always been one of the main attractions of the cottage for me. The willow has many inviting arms to lie on and read or watch the lake, to pretend you're out of sight. The neighbours screwed a metal bar into one of the branches, and Little Sister would show off the "skills" she was taught at Rose City Gymnastics, twisting and flipping around the bar. Little Sister was so small she had to put a cinder block under the bar so that she could reach it to start her routine, and one day she was showing off for our cousins and she slipped. Her back hit the cinder block with a pulpy thud. I was sure she must be dead. She had a thick straight line of blood across her back and the E.R. doctor said a couple of inches either way and she would have been paralysed. Wouldn't Mother have loved that. A wheelchair to lean on. The martyrdom of pushing.

This was the second brush with disaster Little Sister had at the cottage. There used to be a large swamp out back where people park their cars now. Mother didn't like us going back there, but when she was two, my uncle was walking with us next to the swamp, and suddenly Little Sister was gone. My uncle spotted the bottoms of her fisherman's yellow rubber boots poking up out of the water, and he jumped in and pulled her out. We still don't know how it happened, but she must have jumped. After that, the cottagers decided to fill the swamp up, as it was a danger, and they could really use the parking. The only part of the swamp that has been saved is down at the end of the beach, owned by Ducks Unlimited, but I've never seen any ducks there. You can still see herons there, and red-winged blackbirds but I see no frogs or turtles anymore, only the occasional toad. My uncles would always take me for walks down there, and Mother didn't like me to go with them. It wasn't till I was older that I realized those weren't cigarettes they were

smoking, and it saddened me that they always wanted to walk there to smoke pot away from Nana's nagging, rather than just to spend time with me. My favourite uncle claims that he grows some there, in difficult to access, hidden, sunlit places that cannot be traced to him. I could never find any of it, and he said that was the point, but that sometimes people found some and stole it, but he had plenty elsewhere.

Sometimes I miss the swamp, but Mother and Nana say that's crazy. There's more parking now, and grass to cut, and less mosquitoes. But I miss trying to catch things to look at for a few hours in buckets, animals to play with that sometimes died from the torture I was putting them through that I thought was love.

My Sweetheart is moving the last of his things back into our home. Nothing too important, some tools, a filing cabinet, winter clothes. The things he hasn't used from the time he left me in February until now. It's disturbing to see these objects returning. His brother helps him carry boxes into our leaky basement. They seem so ready to leave again, the duct tape isn't even worn or peeling. My Sweetheart does not seem any more mine than he has ever been. I don't want to be one of the women who always call their mates "my husband," insisting on it, look at what I've got, desperately clinging. I suppose I will never fall into the mistake of being too comfortable, expecting him to remain as stable as an armchair, sagging comfortably around the edges. I have nightmares about him leaving again, or that I can't find him, that we are separated by oceans. I often know that I am dreaming, but I can never make myself wake, so I begin to doubt that there is anything else. I am usually surprised when he wakes me, the bristle of his chin on my forehead, his temptingly solid embrace.

I cannot depend on these boxes, a life half-packed and ready. I move them to the farthest corners of the basement, beg them to grow a heavy layer of dust. Mother's basement, because it is essentially hers now that Nana has shackled up with her boyfriend, is full of mouldy boxes. The bottoms fall out if you lift too roughly, spilling baby clothes and photographs. Most of her wedding gifts are buried down there, dishes carefully wrapped in 1984 newsprint, a vegetable steamer still in its original packaging. She still saves everything, every news clipping about me or

anyone else she knows, useless bundles declaring that, yes, we were here, and she saw us.

Mother used to promise me treasures, say she'd let me look through her boxes, let me choose the best thing for myself. She never did, but sometimes I peeked, gradually making my way into each one when I descended the stairs to do our laundry. I kept hoping for something lovely, a shiny bit of memory, but there was nothing. Just junk to anyone but her.

Mother would kill me if she knew I went through her precious boxes, read her yearbooks with only three or four distant signatures. The clothing she hasn't been able to fit into since she was a teenager, low-cut halter tops I wouldn't dare wearing. But she will never know unless she hears me say it, and then she would smite me something awful. She has only been in the basement a few times since she taught me to do laundry when I was four or five: set the temperature, set the load size, turn on the water, add one scoop of soap, let the water dissolve it, add the clothes (pre-sorted darks, whites, and colours), don't screw up! I was her basement messenger, hauling whatever she wanted up or down stairs. My uncles' old room is now full of her craft supplies, things she makes to give as gifts that I never see once they've been given. "Oh, look at that! That must've been so much work. Thanks," then shoved in a drawer or another basement, sweaters worn on visits to her house.

For the last six or seven years, Mother's been devoting all her hours in front of the T.V. to knitting mittens. When I was little, she could never manage to make me any mittens till March or April's melt, but now she donates three or five hundred pairs to churches and schools each winter so people know how much she cares. When I worked at Value Village as my second job for a year of my undergrad, I saw at least fifty of her pairs come in. Undeniably hers, given their mismatched stripes, always just two fractious colours per pair, fluorescent green and blood red,



fuschia and orange, tied together in a bow with a little piece of yarn. I never had the heart to tell her that so many of her mittens were re-donated to Value Village and that I never saw a pair go through my check-out. That these mittens often didn't even make it onto the floor, but went straight to the rag bin to be sold to Africans who could only use them to take the yarn apart to make into something more useful. Now she's branched out in her charity, she looks for sales on already bargain toys and buys them to give to Christmas toy drives. She makes sure to buy for volume, never more than \$10 a toy, just like the ones she'd get for me that I'd break or accidentally dismember by New Year's Day. Enough so that her trunk is full three times over, so smiling firemen or volunteers will have to come to her car to unload the garbage bags full of generic Barbie look-alikes and colouring books of long-cancelled cartoons.

She buys the same kinds of things rejected by the popular rich kids that found their way under the trees of charity groups that thought they were helping out a poor underprivileged kid like me. If I was ever lucky enough to get a real Barbie, she'd always be Beach Barbie or Pool Party Barbie, and it made me mad that nobody would ever shell out the extra dollar for her to have clothes. It felt like poor girls only deserve half-naked Barbies and we should be happy that we didn't have to walk around in bathing suits all year ourselves. After going to all those dinners for special kids and getting chintzy candy canes and sixty-nine cent colouring books, I just wanted to kick those Santas with their pitying looks behind their plastic beards in the shins. Here, let's rub it in, you won't be getting what you want this year, big surprise, so here's a little something extra you don't want to make it easier for you. Just to let you know, we really do have a soft spot in our hearts for all you shabby poor kids, so here's any old stupid toy that was on sale that you're too old or young for, so give us a hug and thank us for being so thoughtful and

Christian so we can go back to ignoring you for the rest of the year.

I would've preferred nothing at all to all those reminders of how underprivileged I was. When somebody brought a food basket to our house one year, I cried and didn't want any part in the ham and oranges and name-brand crackers because I couldn't bear more people knowing about us. Mother asked me why I was crying and said I should be happy to have so many foods we normally couldn't have, and I said "I'm crying cuz they think we're poor." "We are poor," Mother said, and I said "No, we're not," denying the obvious evidence of the food basket. I didn't want that embarrassing charity in the house, that undeniable proof of our impoverishment. The sweet smell of charity oranges made me feel sick. Normal families don't get food given to them, they give the cans that have been at the back of their cupboards for weeks to the "less fortunate." Grandma M told me Father was far too proud to take charity, that he wouldn't take a free bag of potatoes if his family was starving. I thought Grandma M was odd for saying this, because Father never cared if Little Sister and I had potatoes or anything else, since he never saw us or even called us once after his last visit to Nana's when I was three. Father wasn't there to send that stuff back. Sometimes it's easier to starve a little than to see people look at you like you're less than them.

Mother doesn't like people to know that she doesn't go down the stairs, that she now pays a woman from down the street to do her laundry and take out her garbage, and bring up her yarn to make more mittens with. She wouldn't want to seem lazy. I am surprised that she can even make the climb up to her bedroom. Her only exercise: down the stairs once in the morning, the walk to her car then to her office from her handicapped parking space, then everything in reverse. Every step leaves her breathless. I don't remember a time when she wasn't gasping, raggedly

sucking at the air even while sitting or sleeping. Now she calls it asthma, but she's never been able to fill her lungs, sucking on her puffer each time she went up or down a flight, and, on bad days, even when she makes the journey from her bed to the washroom. She could never carry groceries in, the weight of her massive leatherette purse as she swings it across her shoulder is as much strain as she can handle, that and her huge diaper bag full of craft supplies: knitting needles and synthetic yarn. She has finally been diagnosed with sleep apnea and has to wear a machine to do her breathing for her. Mother says it's a huge improvement, as if she's cured. The doctor said he's never seen anyone so bad before. Most people with sleep apnea stop breathing five or six times an hour, Mother stops fifty or sixty times. When she answers the phone with her machine on, she sounds part machine, like Darth Vader. She blames it on heredity because her brother has it too, refuses to admit that her "lifestyle choices" have anything to do with it. Not that hauling around an extra three or four or five hundred pounds—who can tell—might be the cause. She won't even consider changing.

When I used to bother trying to get Mother to transform herself into something more palatable, trying to convince her to try to eat healthy, exercise, anything, she would tell me "food is the only thing I have." Little Sister and I cannot compete with this. We can not fill her to the stuffing point, we are not the right flavour. Mother thinks she is entitled to her disabled license plate, she boasts about being able to take the closest spots, complains they don't do more for people in her "condition." She blames it on genetics, on hormones, on her height, as if another foot could carry hundreds of pounds gracefully.

In grade one, they told Mother I had anger issues. Tommy asked me "why's your mom so fat?" and I said, "She's not," and he said, "Yes, she is," so I slapped his face so hard it left the red

memory of my hand. Mrs. P grabbed me by my wrist, and asked me why I did it. Mrs. P, the love of my life, asking me to read to the class, passing me the chalk, looked so disappointed I could die. So I told her it was just a love pat, thought maybe she would believe me, my eager smiling. I explained this all to Mother and she said “But I am fat,” and I was so confused. “No you’re not!” I knew that being fat was the worst thing you could be, and Mother could not be fat. Fat ladies dieted and whined about their interminable fatness, the jiggle of their upper arms. They bought thighmasters and creams for their cellulite. Fat ladies were much thinner than Mother. She was not one of them. Mother says when she looks in the mirror, she sees herself as a thin, beautiful sixteen-year-old. From the pictures I have seen, she never was one, but it is the only way she can look into the mirror, as if the reflection is a distortion of reality. She is stuck in the fun house. I realized then that maybe she was fat, and gradually, over the years, the pride in my slap has turned to shame.

Being out with Mother, I learned to hate pity. People look at her and cringe, children point from their shopping cart seats and mothers try to distract them, grown men laugh. It is not the too-small chairs that do it, not the doors that brush against her. It is the people, and every day they make her bigger, as she pushes more and more food in to push them out. All of this hurts me almost as much as her. I could feel them laughing at my four dollar Boric’s haircut and the holes in my velcroed sneakers. I began to feel the drag of my own flesh, every ounce beyond the bone became a burden. I felt as fat as Mother when they turned away, or whispered things they thought we couldn’t hear. Mother and Nana picked up on this, and agreed with me. I was always fat and I will always be fat to them, obscenely. Even when I didn’t eat much of anything for years in high school, all ribs in a size five, they said it wouldn’t last, I was a fat girl. And it didn’t last, I grew

tired of fainting, of gnawing my knuckles in hunger, of people asking if I was sick. Sometimes, I still feel like the fat girl, Mother and Nana whisper about me just loud enough for me to hear, but I don't care. Food is not the only thing I have, so I will not be her. I cannot be her as long as I am still living. But still there is that fear that one day I'll wake up drowning in my own meat, suffering the unbearable press of my own skin.

Sometimes, now, I am worried that Little Sister will turn into Mother. Little Sister has lost a lot of her extra weight before, far too fast. She gained it back again, but there doesn't seem to be an obvious difference, as she uniforms herself in men's XL T-shirts and sweatshirts, baggy jeans, and a baseball cap. I've only seen her wear a dress for her prom and my wedding, but the way she hunched into her walk made her seem as if she was still wearing her oversized men's clothes. I don't mean that she will just be fat, but that she may turn out to be like Mother in worse ways.

Little Sister has always been the best liar in the world. She can say almost anything and I will believe it, often even if I know it is not true. I have always known what an unbelievably supremely excellent liar she is, and I try to doubt everything that spills out of her mouth, but it is difficult. I find myself doubting my senses and memories around her, colours and sizes fall through her looking glass, shifting tints and shapes. As a kid, she always insisted that she was older than me, that she was around first, even though I am three years older. She said she remembered a time before me. She would not listen to my proofs to the contrary, that my birth certificate says 1980, and hers 1984. She was quite sure she was born first, and that she was quite annoyed, too, when I came along.

When Little Sister was in grade two, she told Mother about an accident she had seen, the

butchered remainder of a little girl just like her that was left on the corner, the blue and red lights spinning around her. Every time she talked about it the little girl became more mutilated, more limbs were left on the pavement. Mother finally called the police for confirmation of the story, disturbed by the descriptions of the pulpy mess of child. There had been no accident, but I could have told her that. Mother asked Little Sister why she had lied, her furious veins throbbing against the thin skin of her forehead. But Little Sister insisted she had said nothing of the sort, and looked at Mother like she was crazy.

In grade three Little Sister began having mysterious pains in her limbs. Sometimes the ache was too much for her to walk. She had to take a bus to school, but they would not let me on because the school board didn't want to pay to insure one more child. So every day I would wait with her for the bus, then walk to school, and get there fifteen minutes late. Little Sister could not be expected to wait by the side of the road by herself, it was far too dangerous, although I had trudged the mile to school alone every morning when I was four.

The doctors did not know what was causing Little Sister's pain. They thought it might be lupus, junior rheumatoid arthritis, even lyme disease. We routinely searched her for ticks. The Shriner's sent her to their hospital in Montreal and fawned over her in her heartbreaking state. The doctors there said there was nothing wrong with her. But Mother has always had a mistrust of doctors, they would never diagnose Mother's own thyroid condition or her other multiple and severe ailments. The poor child had something horrifying and rare, maybe even caused by radiation or contamination from nuclear waste in the womb by Father, who works tending to and repairing nuclear reactors in Bruce County. Mother blames it on the day the geigometer was broken and Father got through the sensors without being properly decontaminated. Men in those

white hazmat suits out of the movies came to their apartment and took Father's clothes and the rug. They even took his wedding ring to bury it with the other nuclear waste, because it was so contaminated. Then one day Little Sister woke up and the pain was gone, kaboom, a miracle.

It's difficult to know what to say about her blindness. When Little Sister was in grade nine, she all of a sudden went blind. She's been to all of the best specialists in the country, and they are either confounded, or they think she is making it up. There is a rare disorder wherein the patient will truly believe that they are deaf or blind when they physically can hear and see that I read about in my first year psychology textbook. I have not mentioned this to Mother or Little Sister, because I'm sure it would make them angry. Everyone, after meeting Little Sister, is surprised to hear that she is blind. Many don't believe it. I don't know what to believe. Sometimes I think it's probably just an attention getting scam, or a symptom of a deeper disturbance. I have tried for years to believe that it is true, that Little Sister would not lie about such an important, unexplainable thing. But there is too much evidence. I have seen her reading the paper, she has complained about my Sweetheart and me kissing across the street. I could list hundreds of "miraculous moments of sight," which is what Mother calls Little Sister's lapses. Sometimes I think Little Sister wants to be found out, that she's tired of the ruse. But blindness has its benefits. People give generously to the blind to ensure that they will not end up a sightless freak like them, it is all pity and fear. Old people have walked up to her on the street and given her money, but she doesn't seem to mind. Our neighbour gave her fifty dollars a month, just for being blind, I guess, until he died of old age.

I help her as much as I can, and I have decided not to decide if she is blind or not. I try to ignore her lapses into vision. If she is blind, believes that she is blind, or if she wants to be so

badly, then she might as well be. I have felt the lure of white, I have craved blurred swathes of colour. All is not darkness for her yet.



They say my family were horse thieves in Scotland and that's why they came here, as good a place as any to run from the law. The others were just starving for potatoes, nothing novel in that. There are no Bibles, names and dates carefully scrawled inside the cover, no cracked ochre pages with trees of names remaining. There are no stories of my ancestors beyond those questionable facts, no tales of daring horse chases on the heath or sob stories about this or that one that died on the ship. Nevertheless, I am here, we are here, trailed by a spotty history.

The family likes to forget the ones who were already here who joined us. But it is convenient to blame that red blood for the Captain's inability to handle his booze. And Mother likes to call upon our meagre Native roots as proof for the psychic episodes she believes she and I and a chosen handful have. Not that I condemn all her tiresome grabbing at signs of coincidence.

I welcome my lack of a long inherited record sometimes. The relief of silence against the endless rehearsal of my uncles' memories. They repeat and repeat their stories whenever they are forced together at bedsides or for holidays. They relive them until I almost believe that I was there too, watching them spoon the peas they didn't want into their socks to be flushed down the toilet later, hiding beer bottles under bushes. My uncles always seemed to be running from the cops, though they were rarely caught. Stoned or drunk or both, they would throw rocks or eggs or snowballs at windshields on Highway 3. An unfortunate score on a cruiser led to a footrace

through a cornfield I vow I remember, outsmarting the swearing copper by lying flat in the thigh-high stalks while one of my uncles giggled so much they thought they would surely be caught. There has always been much reminiscence about that uncle, the creativity of the torments his brothers put him through, that easy target. They would tie him to his bed and gag him Sunday mornings so he wouldn't wake their parents who would force them through the agony of church. And then someone brings out the old standby, tells in that practised language how he decided to shoot an arrow straight up into the air to see where it would fall. It landed deep in his skull and he had to stick his arrowed head out of the car window all the way to the hospital. He laughs along with them because he doesn't really know better.

These stories of him sometimes have an undertone of regret, at how he could have been if doctors knew then about hydrocephalus, if the shunt to drain water from his brain had come twenty years earlier, then maybe he wouldn't be so slow. Now he lives far away, and my other uncles tell me about him locking himself in bathrooms with prostitutes and huge amounts of coke. This doesn't seem to deter their storytelling, trying to capture the swollen innocence he still, somehow, maintains. When he moved out west, my other basement uncle went to find him, to try and help take care of him he says, but Mother says he uses him. These two brothers always seemed unbearably inseparable, like invisibly conjoined twins who hate each other. Now they don't speak to each other at all.

Little Sister has this same air of sincerity as my simple uncle, and they got along well. I knew differently though, I saw her beat her dolls and speak to them horribly. It made me cry to watch her, the hatred she could have even for inanimate things that I thought must somehow feel her anger. But to adults she was golden. Precocious and beautiful. She was the chubby-cheeked

strawberry blonde of a mother's dreams, certainly of Mother's. Little Sister was entered into baby beauty pageants, and she won one of them, a fact I have never been allowed to forget. The trophy still has a place of honour on Mother's television.

When Little Sister was sick my uncle told her she had a frog in her throat and she took it literally. She talked to it: hi Mr. Frog how are you, why are you in my throat? She tried to coax him out but he would not come. He liked it in there, snuggling on her tongue, the moist cave of her soft palate. My uncles called her Licky, a distortion of her name in Pig Latin. She called me WahWah for her first years. I never knew why, it's nothing like my name, but she says it made sense to her and it was easier to say. Licky and WahWah wear matching Minnie Mouse dresses in the Sears photographs that still hang in Mother's living room.

Little Sister was precious and lovely, the adventurous tomboy that I could never manage to be. I spent my childhood crippled by fear, of getting dirty, getting hurt, of not being perfect. Of relaxing long enough to fail in some unforgivable way, so that someone else would leave me. The threat of abandonment still paralyses me sometimes, even though I'm supposed to be all grown up now. Even though Little Sister was everyone's favourite, and always took all the love so there was little left for me, and always pulled my hair, I adored her fiercely.

Little Sister was Nana's favourite, she took her for Swiss Chalet lunches and shopping trips and left me home alone. Little Sister would dust the furniture alongside her, what a helpful little princess, though now she tells me it was just for the attention, she ached for a pat on the head just like I did. But I could not get one at home. I tried to help too, but I grew weary of my inadequacies, the windows I left streaky, the bathtub that I could never make shine as much as Little Sister did. I could never measure up to her, so I hid in my room to avoid Nana's snide

remarks about my failed attempts to load the dishwasher properly, to vacuum under her beloved chesterfield without missing a spot.

Lately Little Sister has fallen out of favour. She has begun the questioning I started when I was a toddler and they leave no room for inquiries. Mother and Nana threaten to disown her, such tried and true leverage. They say this word, “disown” so often, swinging it like a scythe to cut us into submission. Little Sister says she doesn’t care if they do, the same thing I say sometimes, but we are not really brave enough. We want a swift chop, but there is only the gnaw of a rusty blade, the pain of phantom limbs. Little Sister spends more time with them than I do, she still gets invitations to dinner or weekends in Toronto that aren’t extended to me. They spend all of their time with me complaining about one another, but I wonder if they even bother to mention me in my absence.

Nana may just be the one who started it all, but there can be no true beginning, things have always come before. She just brought everyone together in their feelings of inadequacy. She perhaps was the most unloved, unmoved by anyone but her father who died, yes abandoned her so long ago, the tragedy of her young life. Tragedies line up like dominoes, one falls down and the rest follow.

The people at her work were afraid of her, just like the people at home. She was some sort of high-ranking nurse at the city-run nursing home. She was in charge of scheduling and would always complain of the other nurses’ complaining that she wouldn’t give them the days off that they wanted. I don’t know what else she did, I only remember her playing solitaire on her computer, her very own computer in her very own office. And sitting in the nursing home’s fake little restaurant drinking red pop from the Pop Shoppe through a bendy straw. And the look and

smell of old people. Mother would sometimes drop me and Little Sister off there to wait for Nana to finish her shift so Mother could go to college. The old people were pulled to us, they would orbit us like we had some kind of irresistible new gravity. We'd sit and watch Wheel of Fortune in the lounge with them, and they'd give us ancient candies and tell us what pretty hair we had. They always wanted to touch us, to leech out some of our youngness, to remember the feel of taut skin. I wasn't afraid of them, these women with their stubbly chins, their scalps shining pinkly through their thin cotton candy hair. Or of the men, who were rarer and more feeble than the women, with their slackened jaws. They'd ask us sometimes to wheel them to different rooms so they could have a change of scenery, though there never seemed to be anything they wanted to look at other than us. Little Sister was sometimes frightened by them, she would cling to my hand when they touched her braids, but I felt kinship with them. They seemed somehow like me, more than the kids my age. I felt a bond with them in their quiet despair. It wasn't until later that I feared them for this. Despite the excess of elderly in the hallways, shuffling along with their cumbersome walkers, sitting vaguely in their chairs, I remember Nana wholly apart from them. She was separate from the geriatric sea, instead bobbing among the nurses who gave her the same fearful glances that Mother did. The same dread at finding her unannounced around a corner that I felt.

But I taught myself to not be afraid of her any more one day. I was lying on the blue dog-pissed-stained carpet in front of Sunday golf on the T.V.. She was nagging nagging nagging at me, calling me a lazy slug again and other such endearments. I could not bear the razor of her voice, the same jagged cutting as always, but instead of my usual submission, this time I just looked at her without thinking and said "Oh, shut up." I couldn't have been more terrified after I

realized what I'd done. I was expecting my lips to be torn off, my back to be blue-black, but nothing happened. Shock seized her tongue and nobody said anything for so so long. This ruined my already niggling hopes to be her favourite.

Nana did not speak to me for days. Her fierce silence cowed Mother, turns her to grovelling. I, however, welcomed it. No more vocal assaults as soon as I got home from school. Her repeated dumb tactics offered me weeks of respite. When she realized the strategy that her children found most vile would not work on me, she was confused. I'm sure she even became a little afraid of me, because the nine-year-old she had condemned to being a slug was not afraid of her any longer. She tried to make things worse for me after this, calling me a lazy bitch and other evil things. She made me do even more unnecessary chores, like hauling dozens of cantaloupe-sized rocks a hundred metres down the beach at her cottage, faster, faster, for her to line her gardens of plastic flowers.

Nana tried not letting me leave the table until I had finished everything on my plate. Previously, I would try to force down peas and beans in molasses each night and just vomit them up later, but now I was not afraid. I would sit at the table for hours unmoving while she left me alone with the light off. She would come in every fifteen minutes or so and tell me "Just eat it, dammit" in increasing tones of desperation. But I would not. Long after the sun had set she would invariably come and say "Fine, be that way" and grab my plate, signalling I could go. Mother blames Nana for her fatness. Nana forced all of her children to finish every last scrap on their plates, and continued this tradition with Little Sister and I. My uncles devised numerous methods to trick her, hiding their peas in their socks or under their napkins, stowing their green beans in the dining table's pull out drawers, or wadded up in their pockets. But Mother was too

afraid of Nana to try this kind of trickery. Mother now blames this pressure for her inability to leave a plate before it is spotless, to not force every bite down.

Nana could not fathom the enormity of my will to refuse to finish my baked beans. I began to be proud for the first time at her little break downs. I knew it was absurd to sit there for so long, refusing, but it seemed so important to assert myself through my inaction. If she would not love me, I could at least be a formidable opponent.

Mother has always had a stronger hold on me. The journal open on her bed. Perhaps she didn't realize how well I could read, or how I yearned for some confirmation that my many-legged worries were unfounded. How often have I wished I did not notice it, lying there, tempting me. Mother's heart splayed bare. But I did not pass it. No, no. Although I often pretend that I have, that it was some horrible hallucination, it is burned into my mind. Mother's writing: how Little Sister is all sunshine and light, a blessing of a child, and how I am so difficult to attempt to love in comparison. How she does not really love me at all, because I am a dark reminder of Father and all she hates. How she wishes she could love me, but it seems impossible.

It is all present tense, it will not go away: the feel of her journal in my small hands, the colour of her ink.

Until I started dating my Sweetheart, I did not realize that everyone didn't get yelled at for being born, at least sometimes. I could not understand why he was so appalled when Mother told him that I was an accident. I assumed that it is just the talk of mothers. How-was-your-day was usually followed by some form of you-ruined-mine in Nana's house, and I took it as a regular sequence, followed by the I wish I had never had kids or some such thing. Nana said these things to Mother, so why wouldn't Mother say them to me?

Until he was grudgingly allowed in by my family, I think my Sweetheart thought I was telling tales, not necessarily lying, but exaggerating. They did not welcome him in and I know there are still murmurs of their mistrust of him, how he must mistreat and abuse me, how he's a snob like me. Mother has warned me that he is trying to fill my head with lies about her, about them. After a while they had to start being themselves around him because he was there so much. They became habituated to him and stopped the pretending that makes me cringe. I think now they're glad that he's taken me off their hands. He still cannot fathom the threats of suicide and accusations of murder, which can still startle even me. If Mother dies, I will no doubt be the cause of it, whether she does it quickly or it's the slow death she's already begun. So much of my life I have feared her death because I know that she will blame it on me and I will blame it on myself, although I know I shouldn't.

On our wedding video, the inexperienced cameraman's thumbs shake, colours are set to night vision: everyone is green and white. White and green as my lilies. Mother exits down the aisle, all smiles till she's past the people, then her face falls. How is it that it surprises me, her snarling lips, her "get me outta here" caught on tape? Maybe it's that she's usually so much more careful, never letting her true thoughts slip in public. She can't have seen the camera following her, a real videographer, unlike my new husband's former-Sherpa uncle, would've glided to the grandmothers walking the aisle behind her instead of trailing her, the mother of the bride. And I had thought it went so well, so shockingly without incident. How desperately I grab at her in public moments, trying to erase the monstrosity she becomes at home. We replayed the tape four times because my Sweetheart couldn't believe it, but she just kept growling "get me outta here get me outta here get me outta here."



It has been six months and I'm still not sure exactly what Mother meant. My step-father-in-law tried to smooth it over: maybe she was just hot and needed some air, or had to go to the bathroom? My mother-in-law worried that Mother didn't like her son. I assured her that Mother doesn't like anyone. I have thought about confronting Mother about this, like I've thought of confronting her about so many things, but any time I've tried, she denies everything, and tries to make me feel sorry for her, which I grudgingly do. I'm sure she would find some way to deny the tape too, and I can't take that.

My mother-in-law asked me to call her mum once we were married, a Kodak moment of her finally accepting our union. It's been months and I have rarely managed it, I practice saying it in my head, hoping that it will seem casual, but it always comes out as a squawk. I can tell she's disappointed and sometimes hurt when I call her by her name, so I try not to call her anything at all. I sometimes contemplate telling her why I can't do it, or maybe why I won't do it. It is not a label of love for me. The word "mom" just makes me think of what I lack, no fuzzy, fresh-baked feelings pop into me, the smiley warmth I see on T.V. or in my friends eyes when they talk about how they miss their moms back home. Mom to me is the terror of being unloved, the notebook open on the bed. I cannot tell her that, risk her becoming that, putting her into that category of lovelessness.

I see Father as canary, he is lemon. Perhaps it's the emanations of his liver that make me think of him in saffron. He has a rare liver disease, I'm not sure what it's called. There is nobody to ask these kinds of questions. Mother wouldn't want to answer them, Grandma M gets too excited at any slight show of my interest in him. I know that he can't drink alcohol or he'll die. Would one sip be enough to knock him flat? I also know that somehow only men can have this unusual disorder. Despite the safety my gender provides, I'm still not a big drinker. Bile rises in my throat when I try to drink anything too strong. Traces of his aversion must run through my veins. My Sweetheart is always trying to get me to drink more, but just for the flavour. His dad gave him bourbon in his bottle like some baby out of Dickens, to soothe him. He loves the taste of alcohol, but not the feel. I've seen him drunk only a few times. He drinks slow and steady, never passing a chance at cognac or scotch or those flavours that I always used to think only an alcoholic could handle.

One of the first times I succeeded in getting drunk, I woke with a throbbing head, and he told me, "No offence, but you smelled like an alcoholic when you came to bed last night." He thinks my stumblings are cute enough though, not like the proper pot haze I prefer, but that he doesn't permit any more. He knows that, try as I may, alcohol will never become my drug of choice. I didn't try pot until I was twenty-two, or drinking till I was twenty-three. Perhaps if I'd started earlier, I'd have it out of my system by now. Maybe if I had been drunk first it wouldn't

have been so difficult to give the other up, holding my breath for the buzz, the soma to kick in. And so much faster acting and stronger than tequila, with no risk of puking.

The doctor said my asthma was from the trucks, passing by my window day and night to cross the Ambassador Bridge to Detroit, smogging me up. I dusted the window ledges free from black every day in our duplex, and who knows how much of that is in my lungs now, a part of my every breath. But, for a month or two, I had a daily habit, even skipping out of work to smoke. I wanted to always be high, but haven't smoked for a long while, my Sweetheart's one condition for me. I don't think I was addicted, but addicts probably never think so either. I didn't think that I would care if I was, except for my Sweetheart's hovering over me. The threat of his absence kept the smoke from my lungs, bleaching them. For a long time I craved the slow tilt like candy, despite the aches.

Maybe he just doesn't want me to end up like he did, in rehab at 15, a year of his life or more gone to clinics and counselling, and now, a crowded row of dusty books from AA and NA. I think he fears intoxication, the pull of a buzz, the feel of slow numbing. I'm not sure about these twelve-steppers. Once an addict, always an addict they say. The threat of a slip keeps them constantly wary. He says he thinks it's boring and stupid, but I didn't know if I'd ever think so. Now I realize I don't want to be dazed like that. It's mostly when I see other people that I think that, my uncles, other burn-outs. When I think of the resumes of their lives I see places I don't want to end up. And now that I don't do it anymore, except rarely at parties, I don't really miss it. It never feels as good as I remember, and my asthma's so bad that I regret smoking for a week or so after in my racking chest, so it doesn't seem worth it. I can't even go to bars with gasping raggedly after a few minutes now. Every public place in town is going to be smoke free in a few

months given the new By-law, but I probably won't be going out that much anyway. Partying is losing its thrill compared with the quiet indulgence of domesticity.

My friends sometimes drink too much, but it's not something you talk about. Sometimes my Sweetheart says things though, and I feel being high and mighty this way is silly. I was like this in high school before I'd ever tried anything, straight edge before there was a name or a club for it, but without the violence, of course. I realize now that everyone has their little dependencies. Even my Sweetheart is not free of fixes. For some it's smoking cigarettes, that useless, sexy habit. I smoked for a few months when he left me, packed up his things in a rented truck and everything, brought the boxes back to his mother's. The house we will live in together. But he smoked then too, he got me started. Even before his father died there were problems, a pack of Djarums. For the sweet taste of clove, he said. Just like his drinking – only for the flavour.

When we started dating, he kept his seven-year habit from me, and quit before I ever knew he'd smoked. I found him out our first Christmas eve together, at his aunts, all his father's relatives with a cig between their fingers. A family of ash. Don't you smoke anymore? was the first I'd heard of it. He knew I wouldn't have stayed with him if I had known. It would be too much for my virgin singer's lungs to take. He gave it up for me, and so I did the same for him once we were back together. When he had me again, he had no need for nicotine either. Now we try not to drink too much or do anything unhealthy. We don't smoke, we don't stay out late. This seems to annoy people, they think we're snotty for not having such obvious vices. As if trying to be healthy is selfish, a sin in itself. Just a different kind of addiction.

Mother's addiction is food, is self-pity, is her nails. People tell my mother I look like her

when they want her to feel better. They don't know her secret vanity, her acrylic nails five times as long and brittle as my stubs. This is her only feminine thing and it isn't even hers, just plastic pieces glued and painted on. She took me to the nail salon with her once, two hours or more of Vietnamese ladies crouching over her tips, talking to each other across the room about I wonder what, probably about how much they hated us. That's what I would have been talking about if I worked there. It seems a bit like surgery, they have to wear a face mask to do it. Hours of sanding off Mother's bumpy ridges, nail dust and plastic getting in their eyes. These women don't have the long beautiful nails I expected coming here. Their hands are rough, cuticles uneven, polish stains their skin and their cracked nails that are shorter even than mine. After they've ground her digits to dust, there is the filling with plastic, the coatings of paint, then the hands stuck in a heater. The imagined stench of cooking flesh.

Mother complains of the time it takes, waiting in a too small chair, and before she's left she's usually chipped. She only started with the nails last year, a treat to herself. I was hopeful to think that she would start to tend to her appearance, maybe even get healthier, but it hasn't extended any further than the fake nails. Mother doesn't try to make up for her body like other full-figured ladies with their big, shiny hair and loose swinging tunics and earrings larger than my fist. No purple or gold lamé, no scarves. Just acres of her pocked skin, the expanses of stretch marks. She is pulled to bursting. When I was very young, I worried she'd explode, one sour-cream and onion chip too many.

I dream of being her. Being lost in the spread of my skin, swallowed by my flesh. I am prone to chubbiness. You can't avoid your genes my doctor says. I eat very healthy, I work out at the gym, I do all the things the fitness magazines tell you to do but there it is, that immovable

extra weight. I count calories, I log work-outs, I read up on and use every get skinny stay skinny strategy religiously out of fear of one day being her. My stubborn body barely shifts, refuses to submit to my demands, but I persevere. And if I slack off, opt for the second cookie, random nightmares of waking unrecognizable force me back to diligence. In my dreams I wake surrounded, caught, cornered by all that flesh, forced to try specialty stores to encase my bursting meat, realizing I've grown beyond them. Unable to breath or walk or recognize myself. In waking I worry that all I can do is make provisional precautions, postpone the inevitable for one more day. I will not become a mountain, immoveable and solid, spreading, rooting deep underground. Neverending.

The next time I saw Father I kicked him in the head. It was Grandpa M's funeral, he was a fiddler and a fisher, a finer man than his son. I could have seen Grandpa M five days earlier, at Uncle M's wedding, seen him dancing and drinking, the kind of living that finally did him in. We had been to Aunt M's wedding, so he refused to go. Aunt M had more courage, I guess, to invite us and risk strengthening the division between herself and her brother. Little Sister and I had worn matching dresses to her wedding, black velvet bodices with skirts of layered white lace, red roses at our throats. My first new dress. I was the most glamorous I had ever been with my rhinestone headband, two of my front teeth missing.

Uncle M could not stand this, I guess, the absence of his brother. Maybe he thought we wouldn't notice. Children are so underestimated. To invite Father means not inviting us, the unwanted. So, instead, it had been months since I had seen Grandpa M, and then, only fleetingly. I can never forgive Father for this, keeping me from one the kindest men I have ever known. At least, that is how I remember him, his spreading laugh, the rosiness of his cheeks.

The phone call interrupted our spaghetti when I was eleven, a strange man on the phone asking for Mother. Then, "That was your father. Grandpa's dead," I fled to my pillow, choking with tears, the taste of tomato sauce rising in my throat. We made the three hour drive through a rain storm, not sitting with my extended family because they are Father's family more than mine, bawling while Father sat stoic. Seeing him made it more difficult to deny his absence, to keep

pretending that he was dead or had never existed. His absence was made so much more tangible by his sudden presence, making my unwantedness so much more palpable. His focus wasn't on his father, or on his grief, but on escaping my eye, on avoiding the trauma of my standing there, undeniable.

Bagpipes in the mud of the graveyard, my new white vinyl shoes with the heart cut-outs ruined. The party after at just Grandma M's now, everyone trying to bring life back into the place with music and food. We only stopped by for a few minutes, I remember someone insisting that we come in for a minute, it must've been Aunt M, before we made the three-hour drive home. Uncle M swinging my eleven-year-old body over his shoulder playfully, my kicking and squirming to get down. I can still feel the thud of crisp muddy vinyl against his skull and the sudden silence.

I did not know what I had hit until after I saw the whirl of him running through the room. Father just wanted a sight of me and I booted him. And all I had wanted for eight years was Daddy again, the yellow of that sunlight. I had ruined my chances, and now, for this, I sobbed. Poor girl misses her grandpa, they thought. Sometimes I have been so glad that I kicked him, even wished that I had done it harder. Maybe it wasn't an accident at all. My cut-out heart in his face. I have heard that pock in my dreams, the smallness of my foot against his rigid skull. The regret of the possibility of him thinking it was my intention. And wondering if it was my intention. The absence of his intention toward me, ever, of knowing it. Of cornering his intention in a room and torturing its secrets out. And what was his intention anyway, to go through that room? To sneak a peak, to give me a sign? To show me that he was still alive, somewhere in some alternate dimension? Or was it merely coincidence? Seeing someone so important only a



few times in my life gives every interaction a talismanic quality. The dash of my foot against his head, our only physical contact. Can there be love in that? If we meet again, will it have to be with fists, or words more scarring than any three rounds could be? I do not believe in accidents anymore. I am tired of being an accident, to Mother, to him. I will claim my own agency. I wanted to be born even if they didn't want me. I will not let my existence be denied anymore. I will be a foot against their skulls.

I don't know what Grandpa M thought of all this, I hope he was angry at his son for shunning us, like Grandma M says he was, but I do not know what side he was on. Usually he wouldn't take sides, Grandma M and Grandpa M never fought, Mother says, not once. Grandma M would rail and seethe and Grandpa M would stand there asking her if she was done yet, infuriatingly rational. Mother blamed this lack of arguing for the collapse of her own marriage, she thought the M's were abnormal, only freaks don't scream, especially in front of their children. She said Father did not know how to argue, such a necessary skill for a marriage. She told him if he ever beat her she would kill him, she'd had enough of that, and so, she says, he would punch through walls, break useless things. Lately I wonder if she wasn't the one who would do this, I can see her missing pain. She craves scars.

We do not fight either. My husband is like Grandpa M, outrageously calm. I could not handle this for years, I would scream and yell at his silence. In one of my most regretted moments, I climbed onto my husband's car to leer at him through the windshield, but he just sat there and I realized I was just crazy. It was never him I was mad at, I began to realize, and I slowly became even-tempered, stopped hiding behind the pinch of all the vicious words I had been taught.

Grandpa M's mother was some kind of a drug addict, and when she died Grandma M went first to her hovel, on Prince Edward Island somewhere, so that Grandpa M would not have to see her remnants. The carpet of needles like some twisted forest floor. That's all I have heard about her, about Grandpa M's parents. Nothing about his father, if he was around or not, only Grandpa M's avowals that his children wouldn't have to endure any of the unmentionable things he had.

I know what it is like to clean up after. I wish that I would have gone first to the tiny apartment, but my Sweetheart wanted to be the one to do it, didn't want me to see it. He knew his father, who loved me more than he should have would not have wanted me to see the bottles and bottles and bottles. So my Sweetheart cleared out most of it before he would let me help. He stopped counting the bottles when he hit three digits he says, but I wonder if he has the number emblazoned somewhere on his subconscious. We still find bottles and cans in odd places, in the rafters, the eaves, even though my mother-in-law thought she found and disposed of it all a decade ago. The counting never really stops. On the basement wall next to the water heater of the house we will be moving into, the house where my Sweetheart was raised, the word "DRINK" has been printed in green permanent marker with the "DR" crossed out and spray-painted over with "TH." When I first saw this, the sloppy silver of the "TH" shining over the neatly printed word underneath left me cold. My Sweetheart looked embarrassed and said "my father did it—don't ask." I'm not sure if it was all done in a single act, or on two separate occasions. An epiphany in spray paint, a failed determination. Sometimes I think about painting this over, as my Sweetheart cringes when he sees it, but I worry that it might be a kind of sacrilege now. His father made the beautiful things in this house, the french doors, the cupboards, the leaded glass

windows. It is not my place to erase any part of his memory.

My Sweetheart told me he expected the glass that was everywhere, and we were both used to his Father's apartment's stench of booze and cigarettes, but not the Zehr's bag in the corner, so out of place that he couldn't toss it without looking inside. And then without me there to do something, anything, to be the one to look first, so he would never have to. His father's pants steeped in blood. And they told him it was a peaceful death, he just fell over into heaven, so very quick. Those paramedics, so cool and careless, throwing the dead man's pants into a grocery bag, a Christmas present for my husband. I almost lost him then. I did lose him for a time, a part of him I will never reclaim. His father's blood on his hands.

And now how do we pretend Christmas, all snowmen and coca-cola splendour, when December 22<sup>nd</sup> plows into us? Coming home after I don't remember what now, something happy, a family dinner, a friend's home, something sweet and warm and never to be retrieved. Eight O Clock. The snow flashing blue then red then blue. Cops outside our door, nothing new in our neighbourhood, he went outside to investigate, to point them to their usual targets, the drug dealers two doors down, the man across the street who pummels his wife and children whenever he gets the chance.

Then my Sweetheart came back in followed by a dejected-looking cop, ready for his couch and a beer, the glowing embrace of television. Followed by his Grandma, freaking out like I've never seen before, no better word for it. And something was wrong and they were talking about things that made no sense and my sweetheart seemed so calm and a full five minutes before I knew what was wrong, when the cop finally told me, "his father passed away." Passed away, so lovely and meaningless, like he expired. It calls for a divan, the elegance of last words

and rites, the pale beauty inherent in a proper death. But those luxurious deaths don't involve police. Their presence is routine whenever there is an unexpected death, the policeman assured us. Nothing suspicious. He died alone, suddenly enough to make this cop have to come and investigate. How much loss has he seen?

And my Sweetheart trying to pull it together for his Grandma, your child isn't supposed to die before you she kept insisting with her watery eyes and quivering lips. Her important grief. But I know your father isn't supposed to go so early either. My father leaves a hole in my chest, I'm punched through, and now this, my Sweetheart's father's death, never to be a father-in-law now. No worries about how he'd react to his son not inviting him to the wedding because of the ruckus he'd cause now. To save his mother that grief. This man who loved me more than Father does, even if it wasn't always proper. Telling me you'd like to steal me away is better than stranding me. He would have loved for me to call him Dad.

Many made the mistake of saying perhaps it was better this way, my Sweetheart's father was suffering so much and now he's at peace. Some thanked God for this ending, for his tired soul's sake. I even fell into this trap, looked for anything reassuring, but this turned my Sweetheart to rage. At the funeral, my Sweetheart's mother wouldn't let me sit with the family, though I had spent more time with my Sweetheart's father in those last three years than she and her other two sons had. I should have been used to these kinds of exclusions, of being relegated to the lesser rows of mourning, but still, it smarted. As if I had no right to feel that loss, though I knew him better in his last years than two of his three sons had. Though I don't blame them. So many of those visits were excruciating, he could only look at you from the corner of his eye, his head ducking like an abused animal. He couldn't make his hands still for a second, always

smoking smoking and shuffling shuffling his worn deck of cards for hours and you could do nothing to give him stillness. The pride that forty-eight year old man felt for his sons but his inability to show it, or to feel love for himself. My Sweetheart broke out into sobbing at the funeral, Banshee wails that still shake me when I recollect them. I could do nothing to comfort him from the row behind but to give him my hand, which could never be enough. Mother later told me that she thought he shouldn't have made such a scene.

My Sweetheart tried to pretend all was normal, it was alright, he was a big boy, started blaming me for his unhappiness, at work, at home, everywhere, until I was no longer anything but wrong. And I clung to him desperately and tried and tried but he couldn't hear and my nightmares pull me back to those horrible weeks. My love packing up all his things one morning, me being abandoned once more. And all the trust I'd had those first four years with him, the lull of certainty I cherished, disappeared when he left. He said he wasn't sure he loved me anymore. I was hollowed out, sucked clean as a summer melon, the teeth marks only visible on the inside. I was too tired and empty to even try to drown my sorrows in booze or drugs. I clung to the pull of routine. There was nothing to do but go to bed alone, get up alone, shower, eat, get dressed. Doing the things I've always done seemed easier than not doing them. Somehow some people saw this as strength. They didn't realize that by refusing to change my routine, I could pretend he was still in it, just there, out of reach of my eye's corner. All I had to do was turn around and there he'd be.

It is so strange to be loved again now, to be back in such good graces. I can not believe it. So long I have felt unworthy of love, but now, in my new family, it's everywhere. The taking is hard when you're waiting for the curb, expecting the return of exclusion. But here I am, with the

things I never thought I'd have. Freshly married, newly minted. And everywhere it's congratulations and I worry that it's all just a charm, the lures I've been coveting. A gold trinket can not keep him safely mine. I worry that this is only substitution, that so many things are inevitable, the swoop of desolation can't be far off. But I refuse to welcome it, I will stave it off.

And now we are going to move, to buy the house my Sweetheart lived in his whole life except for these past two years. Moving in on my new family. A house so much bigger than the one I grew up in, sometimes with six people scrabbling there. Nana in the largest room, Mother in the second, Little Sister and my shared room, the teeniest in the place, my basement uncles. A motorcycle gang used to live in that house. Their tire tracks still linger. Now I'll have three bedrooms, a dining room, a sunroom even. More than I could ask for.

Those Josten's photographers come each year in September to take your picture with a blue or grey background, or sometimes one with shooting lasers if you are lucky. As if each year can be summed up in a photograph. The moustached man telling you to show your teeth more before he ducks under his little black curtain and sticks his arm out the side with a flash. Then the regret, immediate, as you realize you were blinking or scrunching your nose or doing some other permanently disfiguring thing. And then the painful group photo, strained moments of positioning. No, no, you come kneel in the front, you're too small to stand up. Don't try to hide back there. Now put your hands like this. No, like this. His clammy finger under your chin, pushing your head as far sideways as it will go and still seeming dissatisfied. Now say cheese!

Looking at these pictures tells me nothing about these years of awkward, slow growing. It's not clear from this picture with my first grade teacher that I loved her so much that I begged her to fail me so that I could have her for another year. That Grade One was so much better than Kindergarten and the ancient bidy that put my two youngest uncles through the same tedium before I was even born: draw four green circles at the left hand corner of your page. Now draw three blue squares at the right hand of your page. But I didn't think pages have hands, Mrs. Bidy. Shush! Now, what colour are everyone's circles? Kindergarten was about how well you could follow the rules, and I did it so perfectly that for the first two weeks of school I asked Mother for permission to use the washroom at home until she finally got fed up and told me I

didn't need to ask. And being bored bored bored. Grade one brought the shapes of letters to the sounds I already had and my wonderful teacher. All of Grade Two I wished I was back in Grade One, I told my former teacher so at recesses. I hated my stern teacher and our noisy classroom in "The Pod," somebody's idea to promote togetherness or excess stimulation or team teaching or something that had degenerated into four classes of noisemakers with only makeshift cubicle walls to block out any of the sound of over a hundred children. And I made the mistake of telling Mother that we were doing projects on nature at school and she made me sit inside for the whole weekend researching the ruby-throated hummingbird and writing and illustrating a book about its colours and habitats and eggs. When I showed it to the evil teacher, she called Mother in for a meeting and said that she wasn't supposed to be doing my homework for me, that I couldn't have possibly done it for myself. Mother insisted that all she had done was let me use her bird book. But my teacher never believed her and found excuses all year to punish me for my supposed insolence.

Grade Three wasn't as bad, except the teacher wouldn't let us say "nice." She insisted that it was a useless word that didn't mean anything and that we, as cultured individuals, must be more descriptive. Her vendetta against nice made life sound better than it actually was, I thought. I found myself using words like superb and marvellous that didn't have the simple sweet taste of nice, that made things sound ridiculously glamorous. In Grade Three, we had to learn the dreaded cursive writing, and I grew to hate that word too. Cursive. It gave me the key to Mother's hateful notebook. Mother made me practice my penmanship after school and on weekends and was so angry at me for my awkward hand. Her writing is petite and even and immaculately inoffensive. But slow and steady as I tried to make my fingers, tracing the shapes



over the widely spaced lines, I could never do it right. Even now when Mother sees my writing, she hates the look of it, she reminds me I'll never get anywhere with such an ugly hand. But I don't worry so much about it now, I even have students tell me they like my handwriting, that it's different and nice. Mother insists it's just like Father's.

Grade Four was the art teacher for home room, and we made tiny pots and ashtrays that we glazed and she fired in the kiln, an extravagance I could never understand at our school of shared, tattered textbooks. The kiln was the love of her life, but all I could make were lumpy little humps that made her lips twitch. Then she went away for a while, they never tell you why when you're a kid. It's easy enough to figure out if they're pregnant, but she was too old and skinny for that, so it must've been cancer or a mental breakdown or rehab. All I cared about is that we had the lovely pregnant Miss come to fill-in, the opposite of what we were used to because she seemed ready to pop, like she should be the one on leave. She was obsessed with Holland and told us all about it, six weeks of tulips and rivers. She let us do our own projects on any country we liked so I chose Japan because I liked the cheery cherry trees on the cover of the sole book on Japan in the school's library. I'd sit in the old claw foot tub that some genius had upholstered in carpet scraps for the nice nicest place to relax in the school. All the kids loved the tub and the teachers loathed it, probably because they were too dignified to lounge in it and realize how wonderful it was. We all fought over the tub and three or four of us would squish into it during our library time while our teachers had their smoke break.

In Grade Five I had my first boy teacher. We called him a boy teacher even though he was fifty, as he often reminded us. All I remember about that year is Mr. D telling us all about everything that had every happened in his life. He told about all the escapades of his youth, at

least anything rated G, how he lit the shed on fire, how he fell through the ice. He had so many adventures that I'm not sure he didn't lift some of them from the Hardy Boys, but he liked telling stories, so it was alright. He told us about how hard it was to find a woman good enough for him, about his dates. As soon as a woman said "yous" or wore the wrong colour lipstick, she was excised. Mother knit Mr. D a whole sweater for Christmas, burgundy with deer antlers on it, the front of the deer's head on one side, and the back on the other. Mother never quite managed to finish knitting me a sweater until it was too small or out of fashion. I was embarrassed to give Mr. D the sweater. I thought Mother wanted to be added to his list of dates, and I couldn't bear the thought of her being mentioned in class. Yeah class, this lady I went out with last night was too fat. Just too fat. I don't know what I was thinking going out with her. He wore the sweater constantly and told everyone about how Mother gave it to him and how much he liked it, so that everyone thought I was more of a brown-noser. I hated that stupid sweater.

The one constant throughout Grade School was the slow trudge to school and the slower trudge home. We lived just a fraction under a mile away, just close enough to keep us in the poor school district and not far enough away to let me take the school bus. Often Mother would warn me earnestly that one day Father would come for me, that he'd try to snatch me after school. Every day I'd look for him in the bustle of honking parents. I worried I wouldn't recognize him. I thought he might want to try to stay hidden, so I'd wait sometimes by the curb until all the cars had pulled away, a sign that it was ok. I was ready. But I was always disappointed. Father never came. I never had the rescue of that kidnapping.

It was too much trouble, I guess, to fight over me. Maybe Father never wanted me in the first place, as Mother always insists. But I bet I'm the best thing he ever did, and he's too late

now to take any credit. The rest of the family clamours to take credit for me, as if they've somehow encouraged and supported me to help me get to where I am.

Mother woke me at three a.m., screaming.

Little Sister's psychologist had told Mother to lock up all the pills, but she didn't listen. That day, 16-year-old Little Sister, my Sweetheart, and I had gone sailing with a friend of the family. All day on the lake, the wind in her hair. We watched L.A. Confidential and had popcorn that night. No fights, not like usual. She later said she picked that day because she knew she'd be happy.

Little Sister was so white, so pale, and all I could do was rub her back and tell her not to fall asleep. Mother was screaming at her, screaming at nothing, "Why did you do this! Why did you do this to me!" Screaming and shaking her until I intervened, rubbing Little Sister's back and whispering to her, don't fall asleep. And her eyes were black, irises swallowed by pupils, black as the sea.

The cops came first, before the ambulance, standard procedure when there's an overdose. They yelled at her, "Why did you take the pills? What did you take?" Yelling and yelling at her blank black eyes, and she could only mumble nonsense back. Then the ambulance came and took her away and I went with Nana to wait in the E.R. Nana didn't want me to go, and said, "Go back to bed, there's no point in you being there, you can't do anything." I knew Nana couldn't do anything either. I wanted to be there with Little Sister in the ambulance, to stop their screaming, to rub her back, to coax the life back into her. Why would she come back to those screams? But

Mother went instead, wailing by her side, “Why me? Why me?”

Nana and I waited hours in the E.R. before we heard anything, Nana grimacing at all the sick people, my nose in my Norton anthology, highlighting away the minutes, the thump thump thumping in my skull. I tried to take refuge in the words, but they kept moving, dancing around the page and turning themselves inside out. I recopied my notes again and again, trying to find some semblance of order. Then, suddenly, it was five thirty and we were allowed to see her, her ghastly face and swollen purple lips. They kept giving her charcoal to drink. She puked it up in big black chunks. Puking and puking so much I’m sure she lost some parts of herself. But she would probably be O.K. the nurses said. Probably. Her life hinging on that word.

They ushered us out again at six a.m. and I was too exhausted to wait there for more probablys. I went outside, surprised by the dark, the few cars passing down Ouellette. I called my Sweetheart and his mother answered. I knew she’d be awake, going to start her shift at another hospital, to take care of other tender babies. I had to tell her what had happened so she’d wake him up, but somehow I didn’t want to. I felt like it was my fault, like Little Sister had been trying to escape me, or like I might be next. My Sweetheart drove the few blocks to pick me up in his pajamas, half-sleeping down the quiet streets, startled into wakefulness, half-expecting it to be a dream. And he slept with his arms around me on his mother’s couch, and all I can remember is his arms, his gentle fingers. And tucking me into his single bed, that dead sleep. When I think of it now, I can’t believe I got up to go to my nine o clock class, as if the past night was not a good enough excuse for skipping. But there is something in the routine of school, the reassurance of desks and schedule, the lull of lectures.

Little Sister doesn’t remember that night or even most of those next two months, but that

time stretches into years in my memory. The buzz of fluorescent lights and hack of elderly coughs, the smell of sickness and plastic chairs. The void of her eyes and my Sweetheart's arms. I thought she'd be able to come home soon after. I planned my vigilance. But they kept her, transferred her to the eighth floor for safekeeping. They do not call it the psych ward. They put her on dozens of drugs with unpronounceable names, words that twisted my tongue. And Little Sister sat on the orange plastic chairs, numbed, and shuffled around like the rest of them. She stayed there for two weeks because the hospital doesn't have enough money to keep the mentally ill any longer than that. I see some of these people on the streets sometimes, with their carefully constructed routines. The self-made rules that make life more bearable. This one opens the garbage can lid to look for useable, or, at least, shiny, trash. That one walks can to can looking for cups with leftover liquid inside to pour out. That other one sits on that bench all day mumbling. Some of their habits seem more understandable than others, which makes me question myself. Why is some craziness easier to relate to, to find kinship with, than others? These strictures they live by are so similar to the schedules we place on ourselves.

They sent Little Sister to Windsor Regional when I thought they would send her home. She wasn't fixed yet, I guess, but I didn't see how locking her up with truly crazy people was going to help. Mother stopped visiting every day after a few weeks, then gradually started coming only once a week, sometimes less once the novelty had worn off. Telling all who would listen about the tragedy she was coping with, lying about the hours she spent in the ward, holding Little Sister's hands. Mother was too angry at her to be in the same room with her for long. Little Sister said she'd try hard to come home because she missed Max. My bus ride all the way across the city from Jefferson to Prince, then sitting with her two hours a day for two months and I was

nothing next to her dog. I dropped a class to be able to spend more time with her, but it didn't seem to help.

After a few weeks there, Little Sister dug a ballpoint pen so deep into her wrist that the jagged scar still lingers. She kept clawing at the bandages like an animal, willing to bite through her own arm to escape the trap. They moved her upstairs, where the crazies weren't allowed to go outside. There were no pictures on the walls up there, no ping pong or pool tables like downstairs, not like anyone ever played at those anyway. The crazy people seemed substantially more crazy up there, and more dangerous. Periodically, one of them would have to be grabbed by two husky orderlies and dragged to some dreaded, solitary place that all the crazies and I feared. There was always much kicking and howling during these removals, and I wondered how much the orderlies were paid, and assumed it wasn't enough. The longer she stayed up there, the more Little Sister began to seem like one of them—fidgety, glass-eyed, nearly catatonic. A shuffling spectre with her blue lips and horrid eyes. She began chain smoking, her only movement the up and down of her bandaged arm and the slow, desperate drags. When I visited, I usually found her huddled on the balcony with the man who thought he was Jesus and the old Italian woman who plucked her hair out and never stopped rambling on in gibberish or her mother tongue, I couldn't tell which.

Little Sister still smokes a carton a week. She used to have five times more energy than me. She tap danced and did gymnastics, the splits both ways. I didn't learn to ride a bike until I was twenty-one, nobody bothered to teach me. I toddled along with my training wheels until I was nine when I gave it up. She would careen past me on her two-wheeler, her hair flying out like the handlebar's streamers. She's getting back her stamina again, shovelling shit and riding

the horse Mother bought her to try to get back her love have made her more solid. But I wait for the hacking cough, the return of more extravagant lies, the three a.m. phone call.

Little Sister used to lie and say I hit her. Sometimes I did. She was always scurrying about me, jumping and twirling and singing and screaming. Never still for a moment. Sometimes, when I was seven or eight and she three years younger than me, I would want to shake her, hit her, beat her. Anything to make her stop, to make her quiet. She would hit me and jump on me, but it never bothered me too much, not as much as her noise, as her never letting me alone. She always wanted to be within three feet of me, leeching, I thought. She would poke me till I wanted to rip off her fingers. I never hit her because of these annoying attacks, it was her constant noise that filled me with rage. She refused to fall asleep at night and would shake our bunk beds and insist on listening to a tape Mother had made for her: thirty minutes on each side of The Beach Boys singing Kokomo, again and again, her favourite song. Bermuda Bahama C'mon Pretty Mama Key Largo Montego Baby Why Don't We Go—hearing it still makes me want to pummel something. Or maybe it was the sweet blue light of Little Sister's eyes, the smile she used to have. I always felt so horrible after I smacked her, and remembering it now makes me queasy. Twice, I made her cry. This hurts me more than I can say, the remembering of this, my cruelty. I am not innocent, it is my fault too, I have helped to turn her eyes to black. I want that Little Sister back, the five-year-old with two french braids pinned to the top of her head, the rosiness of her cheeks. I helped kill that little girl with my seething loneliness.

Once I slapped her so hard that Mother heard the blow from the next room. The thunder of Mother, swooping me off the floor, dangling me by my collar. Mother always bragged about the time in high school a boy, who she says outweighed her by fifty pounds, had been picking on



a friend of hers and wouldn't stop. She picked him up by his collar and held him up against the wall. Just held him there so he would get the message. She does not know where she got that strength. He never bothered Mother's friend again. I am not surprised by this, Mother's act. This was second nature to her, from what I have heard about her childhood. Shooing the younger ones away when the Captain was drunk so that he'd go after her instead. Taking their beatings for herself. The honour in those bruises made them easier to bear than the verbal beatings Father gave her, the clichés of working late and weekend fishing trips with the boys. Mother told me she always knew, said she didn't mind if Father "had his little something on the side" as long as he kept coming home to her. Without the stories she and my uncles tell about their childhood, I would not be able to fathom this kind of love. Her life has been a compromise.

For years Mother only spoke of Father with hate, but now and then lately, her love slips in. She tells me she dreams of him, of when they were first married. That heaven. Plopping me down in front of Pokeroo so they could have thirty minutes of uninterrupted bliss. When she talks of how much she loved sex with Father, I ache for her. She has not been with any men for so long, no women either, only him, twenty-some years ago. There were one or two friends when we first moved in with Nana, but Mother said it was just too awkward, too difficult to schedule dates. Too hard to find a man who would take on her children. Her baggage. I think she was too afraid to try, to risk herself again. She cloaks herself in protective layers of fat so that men don't consider her. Now she says she wouldn't want to be with any man that would have her. He'd have to be a freak to want her. I don't know how she keeps on going, the drudgery of day to day with nothing to look forward to, only to see her children grow further from her.

My Sweetheart's Grandma has been watching her figure for seventy-three years, counting each bite. Like her children, she is tiny, one hundred pounds, give or take. She is often shocked at my brash disregard for calorie counting, how I reach for a second devilled egg despite the ampleness of my hips. She complained that finding a decent ensemble to fit her for our wedding was difficult, she says size 6 dresses are usually made for much younger women. I adore her vanity, her properness: it is the coquettishness of a real lady. Seeing Mother for the first time would have dropped her jaw if not for her carefully cultivated manners.

As soon as I met her she was Grandma, years before my Sweetheart and I married. Somehow my Sweetheart's father's family took to me quickly, unlike his mother who couldn't stand me, until, inexplicably, shortly before the wedding, she opened up to me. Grandma has always been Grandma, and I'm closer to her now than I am to either of my grandmothers. Maybe it's easier because I do not have those early years of memory of her. I have stockpiled countless recollections of Nana's cold reprimands and angry silences. I remember too many of my Grandma M's absences, too many exclusions from family gatherings when Father was there. Or maybe it is because she was always Grandma, open armed and smiling, the kind of acceptance I'm still learning to trust.

Grandma pulls out a tar-stained sheet of paper spread meticulously with names and dates. She adds my birthday to the top right corner, squeezing me in next to my Sweetheart, on the

edge, above our wedding date. She tells me about her long dead kin, each spider on the web has its own story, a defining moment in their lives. Even those that Grandma has never met come alive in her telling, anecdotes that have travelled all the way from the Old Country. Even though she's never even visited Hungary, the blood of that country flows through her. It colours her cheeks, her cooking, her stories.

Her mother was a true lady, married to a wealthy man when she was only fifteen. When he died of diphtheria, he left her, at seventeen, a widow and mother in debt. He had been a secret gambler, wasting away the family's fortune. So she became a nurse, living in the dormitories for the first year and then a small apartment with her baby, because that is what a woman in her situation had to do to survive. Then the great war came, and trained Florence Nightingales like her were needed on the Front. Grandma's father, a lawyer, spoke seven languages. He ended the war a major, which impressed her, but he said it was just because everyone above him kept dying. He fought and he was injured and Grandma's mother nursed him. She talked to him every day through his coma. After he woke up, he thought he'd die of boredom, so they put him to work using his Latin sorting medication. He saw Grandma's mother more now, and they somehow fell in love, despite or perhaps aided by the chaos around them. He secretly practised standing for weeks, so that on their modest wedding day, he was able to surprise her by rising out of his wheelchair to kiss her. After the war, he never wore shorts in summer's heat because his calf muscle was mostly gone, and he had to keep a mustache to hide the absence of his upper lip. But he learned to walk again, to tell young Grandma all the plants' names in Hungarian and Latin, so that now when I ask her the name of something in her garden, the name comes to her in three different tongues. She tells us of how she had to learn the names in English so that she

could ask for them from the nursery, because, tragically, the untrained farm kids that worked there didn't know the proper Latin names.

Grandma is proud of her heritage, her parents are elevated to gentry, to aristocracy, by her tellings. Her stories are like the novels I poured over under my covers as an adolescent, but better for their truths. If you squint, she is Daphne Du Maurier in the flesh. But her other grandsons will have none of this, they have tired of her repetition. They claim they do not visit because of her ceaseless smoking, the reek that gets in their hair. They complain of a cough when she is mentioned. But it is her constant chatter they can't stand, her repetitions of the same anecdotes, the recounting of every detail of her mundane old age. Her comebacks to telemarketers, the challenges put to her by the deer that have been forced from their habitat by the encroaching subdivisions to eat her precious bulbs, her worries about rising fuel prices. They do not know what they have. The women in my family do not have such forgivable vices.

Every name on the foolscap pages held together with yellowed tape has a story. The one she tells us about her son, my Sweetheart's father, is about asparagus. When he was eight or nine, some American boy scouts were camping in Ojibway park, a sidewalkless block away, and he showed them how to pick wild asparagus from the ditches lining the road. The boy scout leaders were so impressed they asked him to come back again the next day to join them, and he had such fun. All Grandma's stories about her younger son are like this, focussing on joyful things, showcasing his youthful skill and ingenuity. Now that he remains only here on paper, and in unexpected whiffs of the gingerbread cookies he used to help her make, or in the rise of her gladioli, she no longer mentions her frustrations with him, her tender coaxing for him to bathe, to eat the groceries she so often brought him, to stop the drinking. The stories stop at the end of his

childhood, as if he ended there. No sign of what led him to drinking, to beating his sons, to hiding out in his truck with a 2-4 when he was supposed to be working.

Grandma's story will be of gardens, a life in clematis and hydrangeas. She prides herself on her trilliums, the only ones I've seen outside books. Her acre or so of yard has been carefully planned for decades to be lovely, for flowers to flourish in a way that seems effortless, unreal almost. Hers is the most beautiful garden I've ever seen, with more loveliness than the stiffness of perfectly manicured parks. It almost seems too much for one person to bear alone, the weight of the pines, the sweetness of hummingbirds supping at her honeysuckle.

I expected to hate her for this, this acre and a half of land backing onto Ojibway Park, so that quail sidle by followed by their young, and only the appetites of the deer are a constant worry. I expected to hate her for the beauty of this when my backyard growing up was a ten by ten slab of cracked concrete. But I can not be jealous of this natural opulence because it is all labour. Every seed has been planted here by her hands, she has studied gardening books for years, she knows all the techniques and terminology, every inch of this soil and its nitrogen content. She has not rested through her retirement, her yard is a full-time job. I have always despised laziness, my memories of Nana lying on the couch watching Oprah and giving orders. I adore Grandma for her work ethic, I relate so much to her for her obsessive drive. Perhaps this is why we've always clicked, that and my appreciation for a good story, even if it is so well-worn with use that I can mouth the words along with her telling.

Little Sister wouldn't come to my university graduation lunch, couldn't come because Mother and Nana would be only a table span away, leering. Ever since Little Sister moved out of Mother's house, there's been the usual talk of disownment. She moved in with a family who kept their horse in the same barn as her stallion, got to know them while spending time with her beloved, through her therapy of scraping hooves and shovelling shit. Bonding over the smell of cigarettes and horse dung. It was supposed to be only for a month, some time away for her to figure things out, but Mother knew this wasn't true even before Little Sister realized it. Mother tells everyone who will pretend to listen that Little Sister has traded her in for a better family, with a mom and a dad and younger siblings and a cat and a dog, how can she compete with that? And essentially it is true, Little Sister has finally pieced together a family who loves her, just as I have. Mother says it would've been better if she had moved in with a boy like I did, but when I packed up my things three years ago, Mother gave me the same glares Little Sister's getting now. She says it would've been better if Little Sister got married, but I suspect she's not the type for a conventional union, and all Mother wanted was to get out of my wedding anyway. So now our roles are reversed: Little Sister's hated and I'm... less so.

So Little Sister couldn't make it for the momentous occasion, didn't see my cheesy greeting cards, the demonic sparkle of the brooch Nana gave me. I decided not to attend the ceremony, hours of speeches and waiting just for a slip of paper and a medal, to get the family

time over with more briskly. To avoid more talk of how “It’s so surprising that those people say you’re such a smartypants, but we all know English is just bullshit anyway.” So we went for lunch instead, past the lobsters in their tank with the crippling elastic bands around their claws, unfit for a fight.

Mother was surprisingly well-behaved, trying to seem charming to my in-laws in her pleading way. She bought me earrings that I would’ve loved six years ago, gold hoops. She had her nails done and a long-sleeved black T-shirt with peacock feathers silk-screened onto it. It wasn’t even five sizes too small in her usual fashion. She assumes that buying smaller clothes makes people think you’re thinner, as if they try to glimpse your tag to fit you into the proper category. As if 44 is so much better than 50. Sometimes I hate Mother most when she is like this, so warm and jovial in the presence of strangers. She seems almost demure, delicate even. Begging for pity, for heads to be slightly tilted to the side. Her hands clasped in front of her, showcasing her prided fingers, her luxurious hot pink talons. Mother, who could outswear any foreman, blushes at curse words in restaurants. There is no hint of the screaming, the accusations, the fits. Strangers and acquaintances and the people she calls friends are lulled by the gentle gush of her voice, they would never believe the woman I have seen. My in-laws, Mother’s friends, even some of my family members have not believed me about her when I have tried to tell them what she’s really like, as if putting it into words proves something. They would never believe me if I told them about the time Mother bit my six-year-old fist so hard my blood pooled in the caverns made by her teeth. To teach me a lesson. I had bitten Little Sister, for taking my toy or some other silly, inexcusable reason. I do not remember biting her, just that Little Sister did not cry, and the fire of Mother’s eyes. And the pain of it, the pain of it, and the smallness of

my hand in her mouth, the hard pressure that would not stop. I think there was some talk of this, because it happened at Grandpa and Grandma M's house on one of our rare visits, some talk of how this wasn't allowed, this wasn't the way to teach a child, the furrow of Grandma M's forehead. But I never bit again.

Mother and Nana have only ever hugged me in public. Christmas and Easter and Birthdays and restaurants, the wonders of touch. The magic of the holidays and the public places faded when I realized the ulterior purpose of their affection. They were not just saving it up to make it extra special. When we left the restaurant, Mother tried to outdo my mother-in-law with her natural embrace, by forcing a squeeze and a peck on me, for the first time since my wedding. Without the strangle of my face, onlookers would probably assume that our family was full of these tender moments. She always tells me to smile. Nana has given up on this pretense I suppose, because she waited at the door for all of this to finish, waving from four feet away.

All through giving me the outdated graduation earrings, her hors d'oeuvres, her salad, her entree, her dessert, Mother chatted and made her usual jokes. She found out that she lived on the same little LaSalle street as my mother-in-law when they were toddlers. She struggled to find a link between them, aching for gossip about mutual acquaintances. Nana got in on it too, the Captain was a volunteer fire fighter with my mother-in-law's father, they must've been friends. Don't you remember the Captain, the one who fell off the truck and had to have part of his brain removed? They both remembered some man nicknamed Smelly, but that was all.

After too many dead ends, Nana then talked about her latest cruise, only twenty bucks for these cubic zirconia rings, you'd never know she's not a millionaire. And how horrible it was that the waiters only get paid fifty dollars a month, that they only get to see their families every



nine months. But it's such an economical way to travel and you're treated like a queen. It's just annoying to deal with mandatory tipping, two dollars a day for the waiter, three fifty for the maitre'd, it should be included, we shouldn't have to tip them if they're not doing a tip-worthy job. Then she started making fun of our waiter, his attentions to my Sweetheart. I think that guy likes you. What do you think? Hmm? Gonna give him your number? Or some such thing. My Sweetheart, my in-laws, and I didn't laugh.

We pushed in our captain's chairs and said our goodbyes and Nana glared at my Sweetheart and said, "You need to learn to take a joke and relax. You need to get a sense of humour," as we put on our coats. I was surprised at how hard my Sweetheart, who prides himself on his twisted sense of humour, took this criticism. I am so used to her attacks, the nimble jabs, so brutal even when not founded in reality. He did not know until then that she doesn't like him, and wouldn't listen to my avowals that she doesn't like anyone. Judging by the way my parents in-law gaped at so many of the things my family said at the wedding, I think they are starting to realize it too. They tried so hard to make excuses for Mother's bitterness when we watched our sci-fi wedding video. They try so hard to deny the obvious hatred that my first family strains to keep from bubbling up in front of company, but these outbursts are undeniable, no real excuses can be made for these precise moments.

Nana was angry that I refused to go to the graduation ceremony, and denied her the glamour of posing with me in cap and gown, the first in our family. She told me this past summer when I'd finished school, shouting over the melee gathered at the annual reunion, "You're the first one of us to do this. Don't mess it up. You're my only hope." Stealing words from Princess Leia because she couldn't find her own, and already the insinuation that I was on the edge of

failure. As if I owe her something, but she's never given me anything, never helped me with homework or tuition, never made it easier for me. Mother hasn't either. I earned every penny that went into my education through scholarships and working too many hours selling junk at places like Burger King and Value Village. I dream of my original family, trying to pull me off the ledge, telling me to fall backwards and then not catching me. The never ending free fall.

But I will not fail. School is what I do best. The few papers I have saved from grade school are covered in gold stars. My teachers gilded me. They were miraculous, the tap of their wooden pointers against the board, the size of them hovering over my desk, the brush of cardigans against my forearm. All I ever wanted was to please them, their smiles as they handed me back my quizzes, Great Job Again K! in red ink. I did it all for them. They gave me worlds with their chalk and their ink. I found the shape of myself in the alphabet, the comfort of letters, the smooth quiet I had always wanted. Words, the shape of them, the sounds. I took them in my bed at night, straining my eyes in the twilight so that now I'm blind without my glasses or the contacts I began wearing in high school. These letters, my first love. Would I trade you for them, my Sweetheart, if I had to choose? When you left me that day, I branded myself with my letter, made it my own. Now you see it more than I do, the k tattooed on the small of my back, defiant.

These letters were the greatest gift, they make me realize I am not alone. I read A Little Princess in grade three and felt her pains, became her in her attic. I had dramatic fantasies of our meeting, the father who would rescue us in his carriage. And I died there on that bed, and had my hair burnt along with those little women. Such lovelier sisters than mine.

How could I ever fail in school, to let my teachers down and shut out these oceans of words? Even now, they are the main part of me, these symbols. Outside of these walls, these

pages, there is risk. There is loss. But these words can never leave me. And I have nightmares of leaving the academy, finishing my Master's and maybe my PhD. and post-graduate studies and whatever else I'm allowed to do and being finished, schoolless, lost. Maybe I will teach, my back against the chalkboard, braving the aisles of upturned faces. But I can feel the oncoming deluge, the flood of the "real world," the swirl of current ready to drag me under.

One day, when Saturday was cartoon day and Sunday was church day, Mother sent me upstairs to get a photograph of my babysitter's daughter. I kept it in my jewellery box underneath the business cards big people had given me and my plastic rainbow bracelets. Just at the top of the stairs I heard a terrible noise, like a monster death moan. I ran downstairs, terrified. She sent me right up again, wouldn't believe me that something was up there, waiting for me.

My hand was sticky on the plastic of the rail. My feet on the stained carpet of the stairs, my toes against the familiar gouges in the hardwood underneath, left by the motorcycle gang who used to live in our house, that rode motorcycles up and down the stairs. I had none of their courage. I had to face my fears, she said. But I hated Mother, every second on those stairs, I hated her because she wouldn't come up with me, wouldn't prove to me that nothing was up there, watching.

I ran into my bedroom and slammed open my jewellery box, breaking the twirling ballerina off at the toes in my clumsiness. The half of her broken toes that were left kept on spinning to the tinkling music. And then it came again. Such a grumbly growling noise, but this time I felt it too, deep in my belly. My stomach's complaining. Even now, even knowing that it had been my own tummy all the time, I'm still terrified when I think of this, trudging up the stairs to some vague doom. And whenever I would take out my broken ballerina from her place stuffed under my mattress so Mother wouldn't know what I had done to her, I would shiver. And if I see

the colour of that jewellery box's nylon lining, bright teal that smells of sulphur, I feel it.

Something unknowable over my shoulder.

I got this same feeling whenever I looked at the music box with the juggling clown that Uncle M, Father's brother, had given me. Mother always joked that someday it would be her turn to give his children noisy toys, because she hated the noise we made. Now she has her chance, he has two beautiful children, one of each. But he doesn't seem to mind the noisy toys, the sunshine sounds they make. Someone got it into their head somehow that I wanted to collect music boxes, but Mother loved them more than I ever did. Their pinging didn't please me. The top of my dresser was full of them, plastic containers of songs I only knew through their tinny translations.

My first was a Strawberry Shortcake, sitting on a basket of pink plastic strawberries that you could open to play a song I still remember but can not name. The clown came second, a mime technically, but with all the creepiness of a full-fledged clown. After a few months, some mechanism broke, so that his song and awkward movements would start randomly. Sometimes he would come alive in the night, jerkily swaying side to side, his single yellow ball on a tin wire pinging from hand to hand. He was featured prominently in my nightmares, especially the one in which gigantic toys attacked me. I still have this one: I'm in a room with thirty foot ceilings and no door, only a tiny window by the top that I couldn't possibly reach, and the room is full of macabre teddy bears and dolls, their heads brushing the ceiling. The music box mime is their leader. His twinkling music as he tilts his head from side to side, and tosses his ball from hand to hand. But he doesn't like his ball. He wants my head, my hair streaming as he pitches the roundness of it back and forth. Even in waking I feared this, the four-inch mime growing to thirty feet of wanting to pluck my head from my shoulders.

You could say I was a fearful child. Cautious. I never wanted to get dirty, always worried about the consequences. I guess I stayed that way until I met my Sweetheart and realized that mistakes can be washed away, that mud doesn't always mar love's luster.

I loved school, but came home crying every day those first few years. My teachers made wonderful parents, but there were all those desks full of brothers and sisters, those aisles of hair pullers and pinchers. All at least a half a head taller than me, me with my head alight, strands of flame that would not behave, would not sit at the back of the room and hide. Carrot top (but carrot tops are green) and Pippi Longstockings and Anne of Green Gables and you must have a fiery temper. But mostly pulling pulling pulling my pigtails till finally Mother got more tired of it than I and she cut them off. And so I had hair like a boy, and I felt hideously ugly because of it, but they kept on with their taunting. Now that I've grown into my hair's fire, I can take compliments about it without always blushing or suspecting people of lying. More women than I can count have asked me what hair dye I use. When I tell them it's natural, some of them don't believe me and give me an evil look like I'm hoarding a treasured secret. Then I tell them that both my parents had red hair, so I couldn't miss, and they sigh, disappointed. Sometimes they cluck at me like I robbed them of something and I wonder how many of them made fun of little boys and girls like me, little oddities. I wonder if they'd even remember their tormenting. It annoys me to see so many people with dyed red hair. It's so prevalent now that people seem to forget it's something that does occur naturally. I've even had bottled redheads tell me my colour just doesn't look natural, not like the new red. These dyers don't deserve red hair. They haven't earned it. They didn't get made fun of for years, simply for having a rare kind of hair. And even still, I'm asked that dreaded, far too personal question about my nether regions by seemingly

normal people, who would never think of asking equally bizarre questions of people who seemed different because of their religion or skin colour. There are always bullies, slyer as you get older but still there. You can not hide from them.

There was a group of girls at my grade school, a few years older than me, that had decided to make my life hell. This continued from the time I started Kindergarten, and three years later, and when Little Sister with her strawberry blonde braids started school, they went after her too. They finally stopped when I was in grade four and Little Sister was in Kindergarten. They did not get tired of it, no no. But finally after Little Sister and I told Mother about two of them following us home everyday, chanting “little bitchy redheads little bitchy redheads” and throwing rocks at us, she went to the school principal about it. And the girls came into his office and they cried and they lied, but they never bothered us again.

I never understood why one of these girls taunted us, because she herself had red hair. Maybe she had already paid her dues by being picked on for years. Maybe she was in denial, or self-loathing. I don't know, but I always hated her most, for turning on her red-headed comrades. Before their trip to the principal's office, these girls would hang out in the school washroom. Not smoking or putting on lipstick or anything, because none of the kids at my school could afford any of these things, and their impoverished parents would notice if they stole a smoke or a tube. They were always just lurking there, waiting for an unsuspecting first or second-grader who had to pee. The shit-smearred washrooms at our school had no locks, they were too much of a luxury at my grade school I guess, where things were so often broken but rarely fixed. I think because it was just a school for poor kids, with the projects just at the edge of the field behind the school, the school board assumed we wouldn't know any different. The doors were

too far from the toilets for little hands or feet to hold closed from underneath. So these girls would wait until you were fully committed, then they would kick the stall door in and laugh and point and yell at you, usually things like “Baby has to go potty!” “Don’t force it!” or “What’s that smell!” And the poor little pee-er could do nothing but sit there and take it. Once, at recess, they even pulled me off the toilet mid-pee, so I got some on my underwear and had to sit in it all afternoon, much to their delight. And they followed me down the empty hall yelling “baby peed her pants!”

I suffered their washroom torments three times in grade one before I came up with a solution. I would never go to the bathroom at school again. This meant I had to hold it from the time I started walking to school at 8:30 until I got home at 3:30. I made it through a few months without too many close calls. Then, one unfortunate day in June, I really had to go after lunch. I tried not to think about it, but by recess, it was getting hard to think about anything else. Still, I persevered until 3:30 when we finally got released and I walked home as fast as I could while keeping my knees tightly clenched together.

Making it to my street I felt exuberant, I had done it. Nothing could stop me. But I still had three more blocks to cover. I held myself down there, telling myself to hold it, hold it. Two more blocks. One more. I started running because I didn’t think I could make it. But this was my biggest mistake. I couldn’t hold it any longer while I was running, and it streamed down my legs, a spreading wet shame. I thought if the neighbours saw me running they would know something was up, they would see the blooming darkness on my corduroys. I slowed to a walk, put my Winnie-the-pooh backpack in front of my privates. Finally I made it to home, took the key from around my neck and got inside.



Those girls were right, I thought. I was a stupid baby. I cried for a few minutes more because I didn't know what else to do. Then I went down to the basement and took off my pants and underwear and put them in the washing machine like I did with everyone's clothes every week, grateful for the first time that I knew how to do laundry and that there was never anyone to greet me when I got home from school. I changed into clean clothes and vowed that they would never make me a baby again.

They ambushed me in the washroom several times in the next two years after this, never growing tired of their little game. But I would just stare at them and finish my business. Sometimes I would even yell at them to shut up. They didn't seem fazed by this, but they never tried to pull me off the toilet again, which I felt was a small victory. I saw them do this to other little girls, but I did not intervene. I was too afraid of the consequences. But now I feel guilty that I didn't help, when I had sat there dripping so many times, wishing for someone to come to my rescue.

I remember when Mother told me why she loved Polka Dot Door, its songs and stories and so much more. I must have been twelve, I remember the wisps of my mall bangs puffing across my forehead, when the elusive Polkaroo became sinister, a green and yellow and red monster hooting Polkaroo-ooo Polkaroo-ooo Polkaroo-ooo. How she would relish plopping me in front of the rotation of clean-cut corduroy-jumpered hosts and Humpty and Dumpty for a half an hour. How she and Father would look forward to this chance at thirty minutes of getting dirty in the bedroom while I was pacified in front of the set.

I remember Little Sister's obsession with sex when she was seven or eight, how uncomfortable it made me. She would ask questions about it all the time, when she saw people on TV kissing she ask if they were going to have sex now, if they were gonna do it. I would tell her to shut up, I didn't want to know about it, I thought she was gross. But Mother would delight in answering all her questions in detail, and telling us things about her own now-defunct sex life that I didn't think we should hear. That I didn't want to hear. Having seen Mother's sweaty body so many times and not wanting to, being made to wash her back when she bathed once or twice a week because she couldn't reach around her own bulk, it sickened me to think of her in the act of love. Of course, she was not as voluminous when she was married, and now, it would be practically impossible for her to have sex without some real ingenuity and risk, I could only see her in her present shape, which I knew in too much detail. Mother's refusal to be embarrassed,

her skin-tight nightshirts that allowed unwanted flashes of vulva, the personal massager she left plugged in next to her bed, all filled me with dread. I begged her to give me some privacy, to stop walking in on my showers to use the toilet, to stop parading her naked folds around me. She did not allow locked doors. Still I have nightmares of that impossible swathe of pink, of her diligent inspection of my maturing body in the bath.

Little Sister lapped it up then though, Mother's details about the gloriousness of her frequent love-making with Father. Now she seems to be so repressed, hiding herself under men's XL sweatshirts and too-large jeans. I always thought Little Sister was different, and not just in the way she could be cruel. She was popular in grade school because she was athletic, a first in my family. When I had the gym teacher for grade six home room, her sole purpose in life, I was convinced, was to torture me by making me attempt to vault wooden horses and dodge a barrage of balls carefully targeted at my head. I was always the smallest in my class until high school, when the shorties from other elementarys made me less noticeable. Throughout grade school, whenever we'd have a race, goalpost to goalpost or around the school, I'd always come in last in my class. Every single year, every single time. This made my classmates laugh at me and pick on me and it made the gym teacher holler and holler at me to hurry up, as if I could will my legs to go faster but wouldn't. I prayed for a limper to transfer to my school.

The gym teacher adored Little Sister for being everything I wasn't. She was thin and she took tap dancing and gymnastics classes. She could do the splits both ways. In the swimming lessons Mother forced me to take, I kept failing. Yellow, then red. Little Sister was allowed to skip colours because she was such a good swimmer, and we eventually ended up in the same class even though I'm three years older than her. She lapped me every time. She sticks to

horseback riding now, and people say I'm thinner and prettier than her. But still I see her, cartwheels on the balance beam while I am stuck at the edge of the mat.

It is not just her former athleticism that leads me to think about this, not just her tomboyishness. There have been incidents, nothing concrete if you want to ignore the obvious. There has been a string of best female friends whom she spends all her time with until something unexplained happens between them. Then she can't badmouth them enough. Most of them have been crazy, certifiable even, if you ask her. When she tried to kill herself, her best friend came to visit her, but Little Sister sent her away. This girl, who Little Sister had told me was fun and great and perfect, whom I had assumed was more than Little Sister's friend, was suddenly even worse than the rest of these traitorous girls. And then this girl started "spreading rumours" that she and Little Sister had been dating, that she loved her and now she had been dumped for no reason. Mother nodded and took part in Little Sister's denials. No no, she's crazy, my daughter's not a lesbian. I was just concerned with her getting better, with keeping her alive. I assumed that she'd come out when she was ready. But still, five years later, nothing. And never a boyfriend, though she's had chances. She can be really cute if you don't mind her mood swings. I try to get her to confide in me, tell her I'd love her no matter what, and I would. But you never know. She might just be timid around boys, around men, because she's fatherless. She might just fit the stereotypes. But still. I've always thought she was gay, since we were little and I didn't have a word for it yet. I can understand her holding back. When I was in grade nine, a girl, who I thought was a friend, told the school guidance counsellor that I was a lesbian, this action spreading that rumour faster and farther than mere gossip ever could. For a year and a half, people would yell "Hey, dyke!" when I walked to my locker, and even now, twelve years later,

when I see people from high school it will come up in conversation. The girl who started this works at Starbuck's now, and when she makes my coffee she smiles and acts like we were bosom buddies in high school. She keeps asking to see my wedding pictures, smiling so sweetly that it makes me want to throw my snotty double tall sugar-free vanilla non-fat latte in her face.

But too, there is always the initial shock when they meet Little Sister that people feel compelled to explain. When we were little, we were sometimes confused for twins by old women who didn't care enough to look past the brightness of our heads. We were both small and pale and had startling hair. Now that isn't enough. We are never mistaken for twins any more, and people find it strange that we're related. People try to smooth over their gaping mouths by saying they didn't expect her to be taller than me, or that, my, she doesn't seem blind at all. One of my less tactful, or maybe just more honest, friends told me the reason we're so different is because I'm friendly and thoughtful and pretty and she's just... surly. He said that was it, she was surly, and she seemed so angry. And surly does seem to sum her up pretty quickly and efficiently to the common observer, even if it is harsh. She is surly, chain-smoking in her baseball cap and schlumpy men's clothes, shooting bitter looks while I rush about trying to please everybody. She swears and hangs out at husky stations, chain-smoking and drinking tar-thick coffee full of triple cream, triple sugar. She always seems to be growling even when she's silent. But I feel like people just try to write her off as a lesbian because it's easier than wondering at her real reasons, at why it's so much more complicated than that.

It's awkward when so many people ask me about Little Sister after meeting her for the first time, if she's bi or just lesbian, leaving no other option. But maybe she's just not interested at all, why does she have to be, and why is it anyone else's business? Or maybe she hasn't found

the right person yet. But it's somehow more uncomfortable for people, even strangers that she's single and never seems to date and isn't in some set category than if she were promiscuous or gay or some other thing that large segments of society frown upon. It makes me uncomfortable because I worry that she's like Mother, that she's given up on finding happiness with someone else. I don't think she has to be with someone to be happy—I don't want to be the married sister, setting the singles up and feeling sad for them if they're not all settled like me—I just think she seems genuinely lonely and I don't want her to give up on love before she's even started.

I never trust that anyone truly likes me, I do my best to win people over, chuckling at the right moments, leaning in attentively, matching the tilt of my head to theirs. I can take on stranger's phrases, make their words my own without them knowing it. Usually I'm not conscious of these subtle adaptations. Sometimes, when I realize what I'm doing, changing myself for others, often for people I detest, I feel disgusted with myself. Perhaps that's why I've given this up at family gatherings, refusing to yield my mannerisms to theirs, to become more like them. They have never appreciated this chameleon art anyway.

Sometimes, I'll make a game of fitting myself into other people's skin, to see how far I can mimic without being caught and chastised for it, without seeing a slow recognition in their eyes. But I never get caught, except by children. There is something so intimidating about children, smug with their rosy cheeks, lording over me what they have, the security of mommy and daddy's love. I can not win them with a tilt of my head. If I crouch down to them and try any of my tricks, they know what I am doing. I'm not sure how they see through me. Maybe because they are raised on repetition and rhyme, they are more leery of being copied. And usually, grown-ups never try to learn from them, they are taught that their movements are clumsy, something to be unlearned.

Children make me nervous. They frighten me, even. Perhaps I'm just jealous of them, their held hands and patted backs. I always had to earn my place and never quite succeeded. I was

always desperate to be teacher's pet, craving the favouritism my classmates shied away from. Taunts were nothing new to me anyway, and if I could make myself believe that the smiley faces on my busy work were just a little smileyer than everyone else's, I could feel that warm smugness for a precious moment or two. The surrogate affection in the plus sign, I wanted A+++ even though it doesn't exist. I needed to be past perfect.

Whenever any adult hears that I'm studying English and Creative Writing, after they ask if I'm going to be a journalist, they ask if I'm going to be a teacher. Without fail, nine out of ten people I tell my degree title to assume that "creative writing" is journalism, something that makes me laugh, but also makes me feel dismal. Our news is accepted and expected to be creative writing, not facts, but nobody seems upset about this. I give them haughty answers to protect myself, usually something like: well, I'm too specialized to teach, except in a university setting. But really, it's because the thought of being alone in a room with thirty or forty children terrifies me. I could never relate to kids or teens even when I was one. There are so many horror movies where beautiful little blonde children, by some horrible twist of fate, become red-eyed demons. But I am shaking from the first scene at the shining globes of their heads, the strength of their chubby limbs. Children have an infinite, intrinsic potential to become monsters. I am waiting to hear about the first of their mutinies, it would only take six or seven of them to pin a teacher down, they could hold a school in seconds. And nobody would ever believe it, lies would never even have to pass by the whites of their baby teeth. All the teachers on the continent could be killed on one wild day of rampage, easy enough for tiny fingers to organize, since they know more about technology than I do, and every adult except me, and a few other weary souls too afraid to speak would toss spare change into coffee tins in grocery stores, towards finding the evil



terrorists. What are they waiting for?

But sometimes I love children, it's biological, I can't resist. I want a little something to tuck in at night, a tiny worshipper. It would be something to be sure of, if I didn't mess it up, love for mommy is automatic. And I have more love to give than I need. I don't want to be wasteful by leaving it unused. I can be swayed by cuteness, by precociousness. And I would probably only love too much, swaddle them too tight in my arms. But no, I will not become a schoolteacher, even for rows of innocent little lambs looking up at me, waiting for me to mould them in my image. The thought that an unknown amount of them would be thinking, Pick me. Pick me! mirrors of my eager eyes. I can not be mother to them all, to all the ones who need it, and how could I choose which ones to lavish myself on? There are not enough gold stars for what I would like to do.

So a baby would be love and fear, hopefully more love than fear, but this is me, so I don't know. Maybe one day I'll wake up all maternal and the time will be right and everything will fall into place. I'll plant a picket fence and an apple tree, and swing on my porch swing until I ripen. But I fear I'd have to move away, or else they would mar my children as they did me, like thieves in the night. I don't want their influence.

I have no poetry left in me. No words to shape the way you are, the consonants of your breathing. My fingers are heavy with this responsibility, with trying to be fair when there can be no fairness, when you don't have your say. My whole life you have had your say, all of you, telling your versions and not letting me speak. When I think of you, I think of food always, the bad tastes you have left in my mouth. We gathered together at tables only on holidays after Nana moved out. I took my dinners of pop tarts or cereal balanced on my lap with Oprah, putting my palm against the surface of the TV when I turned it on, to feel the blue glow buzzing around my fingers.

In grade school, we ate dinners together for a few years, Little Sister, Nana and I and sometimes Mother if she wasn't working late at some dead-end job or taking night classes at St. Clair college. I thought Mother just didn't want to be around for our hot dogs and beans, but now I realize that she probably did want to, that she would have preferred that domesticity to her punch-card existence. I remember she got a data entry job typing in all the information for the new OHIP cards making \$9 an hour, which seemed to me like an unfathomable amount of money to me then. My Nana took us to see her at work one day and I couldn't believe how many computers there were in that one room when my whole school had only two Tandys. Mother said she even got to type my name into the system and give me a number and I asked her if she chose me a good number, but she said she didn't get to pick. She would complain about how boring

that job was, but she only had it for a three-month contract and then it was being broke again, or welfare, or both. Mother tried to hide that we were on welfare, tried not to take it, even though one year she only made \$9000. Regardless of whether we were on welfare or not, I was never very sure, there wasn't enough to buy us new shoes or fruit roll-ups or any of the other things I begged her for because of the status they'd bring me. To lift me to cool kid status instead of seeming pogie poor. I thought if she had been a nurse maybe we could stop shopping exclusively at Woolco and BiWay and that I wouldn't have to eat so many damned hot dogs. The ultimate insult at my grade school was to call someone a BiWay shopper, to say where'd you get that, BiWay? And I would always lie as fiercely as I could that I got my stuff at Sears or the mall, even though it was obvious they didn't sell the kind of crap I wore there. I wrote Keds in blue pen on the heels of my thin canvas shoes, wishing I could make it so. Mother got angry at me for ruining them, she said nobody would ever believe they were Keds. I knew that Keds were only a lousy fall-back brand anyway, something to wear if you accidentally left your Nikes and Reebok Pumps at your Dad's when you had your weekend visit. But still I hoped I'd trick some people.

Mother had a string of substandard jobs and I always wondered why she didn't go back into nursing for its better pay, but she said she didn't want to work nights so that she could be around more. But she was never around anyway, always at school or working, or too tired to do anything but watch TV and eat M&Ms and yell at us. I wished she would go back to nursing in a hospital. I was tired of living in stranger's hand-me-downs and having holes in everything. But when she tried to go back to nursing, to do day work at an old folks home and then a "community living" place, she hated it. She hated working at Harmony in Action worst of all, but she didn't call the people she took care of retards as much as a lot of her co-workers did.

I wonder now if Nana gave Mother flak for refusing to be a nurse and being on welfare and having crappy jobs, and for going back to college twice. They always fought a lot, but I only paid attention to their screaming matches when they had to do with me or Little Sister. When I was little I was angry at Mother for not being able, or, I thought, willing, to buy me the things I needed or wanted, like Varnet T-shirts or plums. But now I can't believe how hard she worked, how much more confidence she must have had in herself. And now she has a decent job, on contract for the last fifteen years, so they can rip her off by not paying her the union wages many of her co-workers make, but she loves it, designing transmissions and engines and doing things I can't even pretend to understand. After graduating from college in with a certificate in drafting, she had a really hard time getting a job, as one of only three female graduates and as someone of her size. She saw jobs she interviewed for go to classmates that she had a twenty-percent average lead on in college because they were men and didn't have her bulk. And when she found a job at last, the men would laugh openly at her and snigger behind her back and call her Fatty and other things she wouldn't tell me. But she kept on and eventually, when they realized how good she is at her job, the taunting stopped, and she started to be respected, maybe for the first time. People always ask Mother why she won't go over the border to Detroit to work, she'd be able to make twice as much with the exchange rate, but she won't leave. She told me she doesn't want to go through that again, all the taunting that made her feel like shit, but I think she has sold herself short. She worked overtime as much as she could to pay off the huge credit card debt she'd accrued while working rancid little jobs, often earning less than she would have on Pogie. 7 till 6 everyday, then fast food for her dinner, and watching TV in her room eating Ruffles and dip made from onion soup mix and sour cream. This has been her life. But the debt hasn't gone down

very much because she just keeps spending now that she can, or when she feels she has to, like when she bought Little sister a horse to try to placate her after she attempted suicide. My good memories of Mother are of Little Sister and me sitting on her bed with her in her pack ratted room watching situation comedies and hoping for a chance handful of candy. When we were real good she'd get us a chocolate bar to split, and I was always jealous that she had her own every night. But now I'm glad I didn't.

Before my Nana retired and after my uncles moved out of the basement, I was in charge when Little Sister and I got home from school, but she never listened to me. We'd eat granola bars and watch cartoons or I'd spread myself out on my bed and read fantasy or science fiction novels until one of the grown-ups got home. I missed Mother, but I liked the freedom. But when Nana retired from the old folk's home and took up residence on the chesterfield, she decided that we should put our after school time to use and she made us dust or vacuum or windex the tabletops, yelling at our inevitable mistakes.

In high school I joined most of the clubs to get away from that drudgery. I was in Choir and Curling and Band and Prom Committee. I even joined the Explorer's Club even though I hated hiking so I'd be able to stay away from home longer. I took extra music classes before school in Voice and Flute so that I had to leave the house at 7 am to catch the bus for class across town. For this, I auditioned to go to the special arts high school across town because I love music and, secretly, because I wanted to try to escape the fate that most of my grade school classmates are now living: mothers of broods they began bringing into this world in their teens from various fathers, scraping by as cashiers at the Dollarama or on welfare, with permanent under-eye circles which remind them of their mothers. Last week I saw a girl I went to grade school with and from

across the street I didn't recognize her. I thought she looked familiar, but I thought she must be much older than me because of how haggard she looked, like she had spent her life being beaten into submission and she was going on for no reason other than to take care of her children. She was pushing one in a tattered buggy and pulling another along by the hand. As we crossed each other, I realized she had been my tormentor for nine years of grade school, harassing me five days a week, with only the tainted reprieve of the weekend and the summer with my family for me to look forward to. She had called me chubby and carrot-head and we had wrestled for my best friend's attention for years. Now she had swelled to a swaying fatness and her tired, sunken eyes gave her the abject look of Mother.

I'm still wondering what made our lives go so differently. Her mother had been on welfare too. We had both eaten shit growing up, but Mother always held her up a worse example. She came to the first day of kindergarten munching on Cheetos for her breakfast, a symbol for Mother of how much better we were than that girl. Of what a Good Mother she was because I didn't have an orange ring around my mouth. But throughout my childhood, I never was given any food that couldn't have survived a nuclear holocaust. It was all meant for a bomb shelter. Will my corpse be preserved for years because of all the chemicals I've ingested and the radioactivity no doubt passed to me by Father, who always sent the geigometer to beeping? That girl was more popular than me because she could run fast and she was skinny and scrappy. She was the dirtiest kid in school, the unwashed strings of her hair sticking to her pasty forehead so that the ladies who came to the school periodically to check for lice cringed to touch her head even with their gloved hands. But she was always free of little critters, and I was the one sent home a couple times with Little Sister to have Mother slather the stinky Nix shampoo onto our

scalps and rip the tiny teeth of the lice comb through our hair to pull out the dreaded nits. That girl had to fight for everything she had, like I did, but she used her fingernails while I used my brains. In grade school, brains are far less important. But fingernails can only get you so far, they are most efficient at teaching other girls who's boss, shredded skin and pulled hair quickly put you in your place. So she was able to dominate over the rest of the girls even if they didn't like her, making them chase me and kick me and pull my carrotty top, even though her hair might have been strawberry blonde under all that grease. I'd get tired of trying to play with them, of their fickle games of either running away from me or chasing me, so I sat by myself on the school steps, waiting for the bell to ring, dreading recess and lunch hour and their torments. I can't help thinking it's Karma when I see the weight of her years on her, while I, her victim, am the happiest I've ever been. But even Karma has taken it too far for her, she has been punished too much. I do not need that much revenge, to imagine her saggy-shouldered bending to feed her babies sticks of cheeze-like product.

I'm not sure how the boys from my class are doing. Their mistakes are less obvious. From what I've heard, they're mostly doing odd jobs and factory work, a few have had run-ins with the law. When I was younger I thought going to jail was an unavoidable rite of passage. You learn to tie your shoes, you have your first kiss, some time later you have your first arrest. Hopefully the charges are dropped, and it doesn't happen at an especially awkward time. I was slow in learning to tie my shoes. When the Kindergarten teacher tried to teach us, I had velcro straps across my shoes, so the travels of the bunny over and through the bunny hole were impossibly puzzling. She had me practice on my classmates' shoes, but that was all backwards, and seemed too much like servitude for me. I still avoid laces, it seems like too much bother when you can just slide in. I'm

sure my uncles breezed through this though, as they eventually taught me an easier way to tie my shoes. They just left theirs tied and forced their feet in and out of them when necessary. My uncles have also all been either arrested or have had a last-minute escape from the cops at least once. Mother was the only one of her siblings to avoid the law, but I've always thought that's because she's more boring. I have always been surprised that Mother was never arrested, given how much she hung out with my frequently wanted uncles in her youth. When my uncles would tell me the story of how they were throwing snowballs, or no, it must have been chunks of mud because it was spring, I was impressed by their ingenuity and courage. When one of those chunks of something hit a cop car, intentionally or not they'll never tell, and the two massive coppers squealed backwards and got out chasing "you motherfuckers!" through a cornfield and they knew they couldn't outrun those cops for long cuz they were drunk and high and so they lie themselves flat on the damp earth between the thigh-high rows so that the cops could do nothing but curse. And my slow uncle almost gave them away with his usual tee-hee-hissing laugh but those dumbass cops were swearing too goddamn loud to hear him. There are so many stories of daring escapes, but they couldn't always get away.

My favourite uncle is getting so paranoid, a combination of the fifteen spliffs he smokes a day and the occasional drug bust. Someone tipped the cops, gave them the next-door address but they figured it out. They broke down the beautiful wood door that the old woman he was staying with loved. Most of the women from his circle are called old lady, whether they're old or not. This always confused me when I was little, because his girlfriends didn't seem like old ladies at all. It took me a while to realize the difference between an old lady and an old woman: an old lady was somebody's wife or girlfriend, an old woman was somebody's mother. My uncle never



lived with any of his old ladies as far as I could tell, he doesn't want that kind of commitment. He has lived off and on with the old woman though. The old woman, the mother of mothers. The old woman always has an ever-shifting mix of stragglers living with her, people that have been left behind, some relatives, some friends. They all give her something for their room and board, but never money. I'm not sure what my uncle's arrangement with her was, but I suspect he's lived there in exchange for some amount of free product rather than out of the old woman's kindness. She is not the kind of old woman you mess with. There are lots of old women, but she is the old woman, the one who used to be married to the old man, the daddy of the whole thing, the man in charge of the criminal circle my uncle has moved within for years. You do not piss off the old man and you certainly do not cross the old woman. She has a kind of power that you would never realize if you saw her shrivelled up body chain-smoking at bingo, but all of the sketchy guys my uncle associates with treat her more respectfully than they do their own mothers. Nana hates the old woman. When the old man died, the old woman tried to find out the location of all his thousands or millions of hoarded cash. People like the old man do not use banks. My uncle says he knows where the money is buried, but he'd be killed if he tried to dig it up. The old man killed people to get that money my uncle says, and there are others willing to kill to get it now that he's gone. I think he died of lung cancer or heart disease, or something unglamorous like that. Only his own body could bring him down, though others had tried. I never know what to believe, everything my uncle says is exaggerated by his compulsion to lie and the pot haze he lives under. I do know that he was afraid of the old man and proud to have his blessing, and that he did what he could to avoid the old woman's bad side, including paying \$800 to have her door replaced, which he complained to me about, but never to her. He stayed on her good side for a

while though. She didn't kick him out until she found out about the incident with her young granddaughter. My uncle's best friend's daughter. Then he had to flee the place, to keep a low profile, living in his K-Car and worrying that his cell phone was tapped. That they would find him. But for a while, his biggest concern was the door, the disruption to the old woman. And of course, the terrible loss of his babies.

The cops smashed his lights, not even bothering to take his equipment. Sure, the bulbs are \$100 to replace, but no biggie. But they took his two plants, his babies. He doesn't care too much about the probation, they won't do too much to you given the uncertain state of things right now, but he lost his darlings. The two he brought in his carry-on from Vancouver to Windsor, Purple Haze and Afghan Dream.

He spent three weeks hanging out at the airport, studying their systems, their x-ray equipment. Weeks of strategic planning. He figured out how to get through. He put his babies into stereo tubes and put the ghetto blaster back together. He's always been good with electronics. And it worked beautifully, he kept his knapsack cradled on his lap the whole trip, and now some stupid bust and they took them away, his most potent creations. Sure, he told me, they didn't find the real stash, the grow-op that no one knows the location of but him, but all he has there is commercial stuff, no cuttings of his favourites for his personal use. When Mother went to the hospital when I was younger he'd take Little Sister and me to visit her. We celebrated Little Sister's seventh birthday with tubes coming out of Mother's arms. Mother would always beg my uncle to bring her fast food, and although he called it a sickness, an addiction, he always complied. He seems to be in mourning for those plants now. When he first told me about how he smuggled his little babies onto the plane in such a loving tone, I was startled for a second into

thinking that he had some secret family somewhere, secret children he kept locked in a basement somewhere, telling nobody until this disclosure. Then I realized that he just meant his plants. But they aren't just plants to him, they are the culmination of his art, perfected through years of study and experimentation to create a buzz that even he found potent. I never was allowed to try any of his— he said I couldn't handle it, and I believed him.

I wonder if I got my green thumb from him, my love of all things growing. Mother and Nana can't even keep marigolds alive, and when I tried to grow potted plants when I lived with them they always died, starved for sunlight and air. I would overwater them, giving them too much, not curbing my love as I have learned to do. I give Mother plants sometimes, hoping, cuttings of the easiest ivies, or aloe. But she never remembers to water them or put them in the sun. She leaves them alone to wither and die in closed rooms.

Everyone comments on it, my green thumb, as if my anatomy is somehow enhanced. Our potted plants were stolen off our porch both years my Sweetheart and I lived on Campbell Ave., that renter's street full of refugee families and students and the more permanent poor. I just hope someone's still caring for them. This year I had my first vegetable garden, handfuls of tomatoes and cucumbers, and only the squirrels stole from me. Living the dream. I grew up with a square pad of concrete for a backyard that's smaller than our deck now, so people who compliment me and ask me where I learned to garden, as if I've have generations of teaching, stupefy me. Just try to care a bit and you'll know when something's thirsty, just look at the colour of the leaves and you'll see if it wants more sun.

I came home to two messages, Mother and Little Sister's voices, give me a call at Nana's when you get this. Their calls were an hour apart, and I usually only hear from each of them once a month at most. I knew then that something was wrong, that the worried feeling I'd had for a few weeks, that had grown to a throbbing pulse that afternoon, was well founded.

I thought it was Little Sister, a spreading red dripping. I wondered why she wasn't calling from the hospital, maybe they wouldn't let her go, tired of the authority's inefficiency. I imagined her blue-lipped and placid, her pupils overtaking her face. The twin black holes I have nightmares about. Or maybe Nana's lover was dead, old age, or an accident. I expected a body.

I called and Nana answered, "How are you?" and her "Fine" was off-kilter.

"I've got something to tell you" and I felt like I had said it, the dragging of seconds.

Thwump. Thwump.

"Is it bad news?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I've got a lump."

"Oh. Oh." My chest, suddenly cavernous. Emptied of all organs.

"I go for surgery on Wednesday to get it removed."

"Oh... shitty. That sucks," I am always the least articulate when it matters, when words

might be able to do something.

“Yes, it does.”

“I’m sorry, Nana. That’s really shitty. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, of course not,” she laughed.

“I know... I just don’t know what to do.” And she passed the phone to Mother, chuckling.

Mother was reluctant to give me specifics, “We didn’t want to tell you until we were sure.” So there is no going back now, no faulty test results. There have been second opinions. Mother explained things to me in jargon left over from her midnight shifts as a nurse, but it meant nothing to me, hollow-chested.

“It means it’s really bad. Really really bad.” I will not ask how bad. I don’t want the starkness of words now.

“Did they catch it early?”

“I don’t know. It’s only been a month.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s only known about it for a month.”

“She went to the doctor a month ago?”

“She’s known about the lump for a month. She didn’t want to go to the doctor, because she didn’t want to be told to stay home from her cruise.”

“What? That’s not funny.” Nana’s cackling in the background. Laughing at her unfair secret. “Her fucking cruise!”

“I know. She says the doctor told her it probably didn’t get that much bigger in the last month.”

That word again, probably. Probably. The way lives hinge on it. Probably will probably come to me tonight, cloaked and daggered in my dreams, hovering. I ironed for the two hours until my Sweetheart came home from work, unable to read the skittering words in my texts, or to call him or any of my friends for their “I’m so sorry/what can I do’s.” I waited for the whoosh of air back into my lungs. I’m still waiting.

Three days before my wedding, Mother took me to Essex to pick up my marriage license, because it’s \$75 cheaper there than in Windsor. On the way back, when we were waiting for gas at a full-serve, she told me she was surprised that I hadn’t gotten a breast reduction before the wedding so I would “look nicer.” I have never wanted one. I would never want to remove a part of myself like that, especially just so other people would like looking at me more. She was just trying to undermine my confidence, maybe hoping that I wouldn’t go through with it if I was worried about my overly-ample bosom spilling over my gown. Or maybe she wanted to test my Sweetheart, to make sure he wasn’t just like some of the guys I dated in high school until I realized why they were with me. I have thought about it though, and maybe I’m just scared of the pain or the doctor messing up, or of being somehow less myself without them. Shopping for tops is always difficult, the few that will button up over my chest dropping down straight from my bosom, tenting me, which has caused some tactless people to ask me when the baby’s due. Sometimes I try to wear blouses, but I either have to safety pin the important buttons closed or that some errant breast will unfailingly pop through at the most inopportune moment. Bra shopping is the worst though, and I put it off until my poor brassieres are tattered to uselessness. Regular lingerie stores don’t carry my size, but I always try their biggest one on, hoping for a miracle. Every year I seem to go up a size, my body’s stopped growing except for my feet and my

mammaries. I'm looking ridiculously maternal, and if I ever have babies, unless I have quints I'll be able to donate extra milk to orphaned babies like my mother claims she did. My breasts have swollen to porn star status so that I'm always the biggest in a room, making it difficult for many men and perhaps even more for women to look all the way up to my eyes. Despite my accomplishments, I have seen many people struggle to take me seriously after seeing me. I know it seems unlikely to them that my breasts and my baby face and little girl voice are mingling in the same body with my brain. I worry, though, that someday I won't get a choice, that I'll have the smaller breasts I've always secretly wanted, or even none at all.

I spent the day of the phone call shopping with my former maid of honour. I came home obviously pleased with my bargains. I had noticed the pink ribbon my friend wore and thought it was silly. A few months ago I read that *Self* magazine was responsible for the pink ribbon, and it lost its credibility for me, even though I secretly read the magazine. A tad too fashionable, I thought, the darling disease of women's magazines. So much hype when it's only one in nine, so many more women die from heart attacks, strokes. And yet Granny had it too. And why must it be pink, as if women's suffering is glamorous and loveable, as if the pollution that is memorialized in the mutilation of women's bodies is okay somehow when swaddled in a pretty pink bow. I'd colour those ribbons a brackish russet, the colour of a scab with the smell of rot.

I remember when I found out Granny was lopsided. When I began to wonder if she longed for it back, like a limb, the phantom space she filled with Kleenex like a twelve-year-old. I then realized why she never went swimming at the cottage like the rest of us, just trailed her feet along the edge of the water, watching us. But she got through it, lived till ninety-six, just like her mother had before her. I used to want to live almost forever, like this, before I realized how

much pain that would entail. Fewer Christmas cards each year, being stuck in loops of memory. The routine of being alive: wake up, go pee, brush teeth, shower, get dressed, eat breakfast, brush teeth, etc. Repeat. The cessation of newness. And the forgetting, the riskiness in every act. The shuffling of once proud feet.

Little Sister says don't worry, Nana's tough. But I know that voice, even stretched across wires, poles away, was afraid. Nana is full of bravado and laughter, but her snide, clever banter is no cover this time. Whenever something happens in my family, some catastrophic thing that no one wants to name, we joke. Our tongues flap with jests, never stopping, never leaving silent space enough for serious whispers. To outsiders, this frantic joking, sometimes cruel in its honesty, can be frightening, or we are seen as behaving in poor taste. Mother and Nana are trying to cover up the news with noise. There is more than one way to be hysterical.

This announcement has brought Little Sister back together with Mother and Nana for a moment, as these disclosures usually will. But I don't know how to span the gap. My Sweetheart asks if we should have Nana over for dinner, but how to do this without the choking stench of the reason, when we've never had her over for a meal before? When the last three years of our conversations have been limited to holidays and how's-school-fine-pass-the-gravy. The guilt of ungiven invitations hovers over us. Nana helped raise me, now that I think about it. She was the only one who ever cooked in my house, who made Little Sister and me meals, even if they were only hot dogs and Kraft Dinner or meat loaf with smashed up potato chips and stale bread as filler with canned beans. The one who would clean our house, *her* house, even if she called me a lazy slug or a piece of shit whenever I didn't jump at the chance to scrub the floor. Sometimes I don't like to admit this, that she helped raise me, that she may have had a larger hand in my



upbringing, if you can call it that, than Mother did. I don't like to admit our similarities, our cute little noses, the snide self-effacing barbs we make. Living with her for thirteen years, we were always two mules scrabbling against each other in mud, refusing to give up one breath of space.

A few months after my parents split up, when I was three and Little Sister was just born, we moved in with Nana. She always made it clear I wasn't welcome. Perhaps, like Mother, she suspected I was the cause of the split. Taking her daughter of twenty-seven and her three-year-old and newborn granddaughters back into her home brought Nana's total charges up to five with my basement uncles. Five unpaying desperates in her little three bedroom condo, depending on her, when she probably wanted a life of her own for once. She was finally divorced from the Captain by then, ready to start on her own, wishing that her children wouldn't always be tugging on her apron strings. When I look back on it now, I'm not as surprised at her constant yelling and name-calling. Compared to her, by spending summer afternoons reading on my bed, I probably was a lazy-good-for-nothing-worm. I spent as much time as I could leeching the blood of books while she attended to the things that had to be done.

Mother told me once that Nana feels guilty about how she treated me, wishes she hadn't pulled her anger across me. I was touched by this, but sometimes I'm not sure if it's true. I wonder if Mother made it up to try to bring Nana and me together. Nana has never tried to reconcile with me, and I don't know how to go about forgiving when I'm not sure if she even wants it. Whenever I see Nana now, I blanket myself in monosyllables. I repress my seething with clenched grins and frequent trips to the liquor cabinet. When she sees me now, she is almost polite, aside from the occasional outburst. She never calls me lazy slug or says that I am a waste of space any more. I'm not sure if that's because she's changed her mind about me, or if

she's worried I won't come, even for Christmas, if she reverts back to her old habits. There have been times that I have thought that her death would be a relief. The end of threats and name-calling. If I told Nana that I worry that because of this nasty thinking her cancer is somehow my fault, I'm sure she would tell me "Don't flatter yourself."

Nana went to see a fortune teller when she was sixteen, a woman who told her she would have five children and their names, and numerous other things, all that have proved true. She told Nana that she would die when she was seventy-two, and all last year Nana was fearful. She updated her will and was careful crossing streets. Then, when she made it through the year, she was relieved. She had cheated death. But maybe the fortuneteller was a year off, or told her she had one less year so she'd have time to prepare, and she'd feel like she had extra time. For years, when I would tell friends about Nana's fortuneteller, I told them she would live until seventy-three. Then one day Mother heard me telling the well-worn story, and she corrected me, but seventy-three always stuck in my head. Now that they've told me about the thing, it seems sinister. Nana's birthday is the day before mine, just after Christmas. The elder by fifty years and a day. When I was a kid, we would often celebrate together, both bemoaning our combination Christmas and birthday presents. We would share cake and candles, squished in between Boxing Day and the New Year. If she is not around to take on the candles, I will not be able to do it.

I'm tempted to ask for a time line, but I won't, because that's not how she wants it. She'll say that people live through this kind of thing all the time. But my mother's "really really bad" says it all. She does not exaggerate about things like this. When Nana was being wheeled in to have the lump removed, Mother claimed she was having a heart attack herself, wanting the glamour of her own gurney. They are always eager to put on a show.

Shades drawn they come, memories of you, Father, the flickers you've left me with. I want the cool dark of ice floes, but my dreams are filled with the flames of your face, shining there. I have no buckets for dowsing, there is no forming of lines to the river, passing buckets from hand to hand. No hard work of strangers, knowing each other in the passing of metal, fingers crossing, the red lines of handles left on tender palms. I want containers full of the dark of the well to throw on you, to put you out. But my hands are empty.

Last night I dreamt of you, dead. Your body frozen in middle age, as if someday I might pass you, taking on paler shades than you've had time for. You were all laid out there, as if sleeping. I don't remember ever seeing you sleeping. Perhaps I had no room in my little toddler head for that kind of retention. I wanted you eyes open. My memories of you are less than photographs, a flash of sunlight across your hand, the incongruity of you in the brown corduroy chair in Nana's house, that one time. I often looked at that chair and saw you huddled there, awkward and smug, watching me play with my train set on the parquet in front of you. You knew this would be your last visit. I kept your shape in that chair, let its arms wrap around me. I wore out your corduroy ridges.

I always had to shoo Nana's now long dead toy poodles away, because she let the dogs have the chair for themselves. When I wasn't there to prevent them from digging out its stuffing, she didn't stop them from that sacrilege. The chair is gone now. I tried to stuff the soft yellowing

whiteness back in, to cover it in dark pillows, to salvage what I could. But Nana wouldn't hear of keeping it, with its tender insides exposed.

When I dreamed of you dead last night, there were no flowers, no decorations, perhaps it was too early. Just you, absent even in your presence, nothing new in your distance but a body on a table, too cold for touching. And Grandmother M wondering when to tell me, how to begin that impossible conversation, to admit the solidity of your continued truancy. And I was not surprised. I expect nothing more of you. I'm not waiting for any tearful reunions. I anticipate no guilty apologies worthy of televizion, no tenderness. You may be dead for years before I know it. You have been dead for years.

Of course I won't be invited to your last hurrah. I would cause trouble, cast shadows over the dead, my presence a dishonour to your memory. I wouldn't even have to speak to finally be remembered. The shape of my face. The undeniable flash of my hair, the colour yours used to be before it faded away. The rarity of a halo of fire.

What is your legacy? What will your sons do, what have they done that is worthy of remembering? I know nothing of them. Is the oldest, your step-son, a cardiologist saving lives? Or a junkie, walking into old women's homes while they watch their too-loud televisions, lifting their purses from rarely used dining room tables? What, who is my brother? Is he doing nothing like Little Sister, is he married or gay or vegetarian? Would I like him if I met him at a party, before I knew his name? Would he startle me with our similarities? I don't expect him to be anything like me, nobody in my family is, especially Little Sister. That known sibling.

You're the one I'm supposed to be most like, Father, at least when Mother is angry at me and looking for an insult. But why should I care if I'm like you, unless it means that I'm destined

to hurt other people? I'm just sad not to know either way, not to know what you take in your coffee, or if you prefer tea. Will we meet someday again, unannounced or orchestrated? Maybe when Grandma M dies, but you may try to exclude me from that too, make it an invitation only funeral. I'm sure reckless Aunt M would tell me, though, and then you couldn't handle being in the receiving line, you would have to flee like you did at Grandpa M's funeral. Fearful of a potential handshake or confrontation.

I wish I didn't think of you, that you were dead long ago and I could grieve and be done with it, instead of these years of your constant refusals. Are you troubled like me, do you see an over priced therapist who does nothing for you or are you completely serene, glad to be free of the mess of us? Do you dream of me, do I come out in the awkward moments of sleep? Do I still have a chubby toddling body, do I wrap my arms around your knees, pleading "don't go, Daddy." The feel of corduroy. Maybe I have the angel face of one of those horror movie kids, so terrible even before they've gone all wrong. So tempting, so hard not to hurt. Or am I all womanly, pieced together from pictures, floating, without any images to make my legs. How I looked at our last meeting seven years ago when I would not give you the pleasure of my eye. Or do I have Mother's old face, Mother's old voice, the way she was before you left her so irrevocably to herself, to the well of her self-pity. Just floating, not bothering to tread after all these years, she gave up on trying to claw up the slippery wet bricks long ago. She doesn't care what's at the top anymore. She lives on dreams of remembered light.

Do you sleep heavy and dreamless, waking refreshed and shining? I hope I've haunted you all these years, that you dread the pillow, the fitfulness to come. That you must lie again and again to your wife about your night whisperings, that you don't remember, but you do because I

am burned into you. A scar you see whenever you close your eyes. I want you to share it, this painful restlessness that you have left me with. I cannot forgive what you did to your children by leaving us, what you did to Little Sister and me with your absence. I look on my younger self as my own child. I want to avenge her, save her. She isn't me any more but she still needs my help and love. I hope she keeps you up every night and makes you go grey, even though I love you. I wish that she could die, to have some quiet, but she will never rest while your shadow covers her.

Little Sister says if she isn't told that you are dead before the funeral she'll revolt, she'll never speak to Grandma M or your siblings again. She wants to be there, flaming. Mother says Little Sister emailed you before she tried to kill herself, tried to get you to talk to her. She has not had one word from you her whole life. Did you think she would be safe there when you left us, lulled by the wish wish of womb? What was it like watching your son being born a month after the phone call that you have another unwanted daughter? Did you worry that it might have been a mistake, that he'd come out with a cardinal head, so every time you'd look at him you'd have to remember? Or worse, that the baby would be lacking that one essential part that Mother's children failed to give you, our unwanted vaginas shining pinkly in the doctor's hands? But no, when I saw him that one time, the summer before university, my brother was a brother and dark, nothing there to remind you of me. He does not have your nose or lips like I do. Just you.

My Sweetheart asks me occasionally if I want to contact you. He has always thought that we should reconcile. He doesn't understand there's been no we for far too long. His father's death has made him worry about the potential weight of my regret. But I think there is no need for reconciliation, the differences between us are not what you run from, we have had no time for differences. You quiver at our sameness. My Sweetheart is always disappointed when I tell him

no, he will never understand what this is like. Every day is a new abandonment, your familiar refusal. I will not offer myself up for you. You already refused Little Sister's attempts at piecing something small together, as if any shards were left, and when it drove her to turn herself into a sacrifice, you did not call. You did not swoop in like she had hoped, to save her from the life she's always lived, daddyless. You didn't send a stupid get well soon card or flowers as some people did, not knowing what else to do. "Get Well wishes/are sent your way/To help brighten/up your day./Hope You're feeling Better!" "Thinking of You/With warm and heartfelt thoughts./Get Well Soon!" "May your day be filled with/Sunshine and flowers/Get Well Soon!" Always that capitalized imperative with a sturdy exclamation mark. Get Well Soon! Or else. There are no special greeting cards to give to someone who's attempted suicide, none to give to their loved ones who may hurt more than they do "Glad they caught You in time/Hope You're happy to be alive" or "I'm Here for You/The next time You think/Of ending it all." No, you didn't even send flowers, like that's enough to cheer someone who wishes they were dead. Oh, pink carnations, life IS worth living. But any little token from you, so useless from anyone else, might have been enough for her. Some stupid card from the dollar store would've been enough. Just knowing that you had thought about her for five minutes, that you might have actually cared if she had been a success. You probably didn't even bother to blame yourself. She was already dead to you anyway. Or maybe she never existed.

I don't know if there will ever be a full recuperation for Little Sister, but I guess she's recovered the tenuous foothold that she's always had. Her toes cling to the edge of getting by. She's stopped trying to kill herself lately, at least. But maybe she's just waiting for the right moment. The courage to force herself into your life, if only through the undeniability of her

death. You've always been less tangible than even the imaginary friends she had growing up. She was hoping for a white knight, but she only got you. Invisible you.

Even when I tell him this, my Sweetheart still naively hopes for our reconciliation. But what kind of truce can I call between us when there is no us, when you might as well be imaginary. You are as real as the frog that lived at the back of Little Sister's throat. She could not call you into being, so how could I? My Sweetheart thinks I worry that you'd hang up the phone. He doesn't understand that you've been screening your calls for over twenty years now. The fear of hearing my voice, one word from me would be worse than a thousand heavy breathers. You would call Mother once a year to tell her that the child support cheques were in the mail, the familiar grey envelopes stuffed with money for Mother. You reluctantly gave her \$130 a week for our care, and for a while after I moved out, she started giving me some of this money for the first time. \$45 a week. Reluctantly. Worried that I'd tell you she was keeping the money from me and you'd stop supporting her fast food habit. Then once when I Googled you, as I do every few months now out of curiosity, your name finally popped up. Advertizing the cottages you have for rent "on seven miles of beautiful white sandy beach. The lake is crystal clear, the shallow sand bottom gradually tapers providing a safe swim area for children to play. Sunsets have been acclaimed as only second to the Aegean Sea. Families have been returning to our cottages for 20+ years." Gee Dad, sounds like paradise. And nobody, not one of the M's, ever let it slip to Little Sister and I as we ate our Cheezwhiz sandwiches on the cement square we called a backyard or when I went to school full-time and worked thirty-five hours a week so I could pay to be there that you had those extra twenty cottages lying around for over twenty years. Little Sister and I with holes in our shoes at those Christmas parties for charity cases every year



because we didn't have a Dad, while you owned your own resort. And my Sweetheart wonders why we can't be friends.

Sometimes when you would call Mother once a year, I would be the one to answer the phone, and I always knew who was on the other end of the line. I do not remember your voice. I have no recording in my memory to replay. But I've always known you over the phone, Father, even without your words. Even when it may not have been you. I've had prank callers on and off for years and I've always suspected that the absence on the other end of the line might be you. There is no sound of breathing, no sigh or click, just the familiar shape of your absence. Have you been trying to trace me in my hellohellowhosthere? But never venturing further. We never get any further. And always waiting for me to be the one to hang up. As if I am ending it. Sometimes these callers dial back to me again and again. Make me fearful when I'm alone of creaks in the floorboards, wind through the eaves. I calm myself when I remember it's probably just you. I should confront the silence at the other end, but I don't really want to know. If it has been you all along, I would be hopeful and cheerless, and we'd still be no closer. I wouldn't want you to know that I've always known it was you, Father. As if that would be giving you something. I'll give you the childish sound of my voice because it is such a small piece. I am only speaking as a stranger in my who'sthisstopcalling. You can have me as a stranger but nothing else. That's all you want anyway. Maybe you don't want even that much. And if I confront the stillness and it was not you, it still could have been you all of those other times. One of those other times. I will not give up that hope.

All I hear of you is silence, not like the other, less haunting voices I have catalogued in my brain. I remember people for their voices, the sounds they make, rather than by their looks. I

often don't recognize people until they speak. My memories are of sounds, of conversations. Like the tape I have of Granny, her familiar cadences. When unpacking our things, I came across this tape of an interview I did with her for a high school project I was doing on senility. Still, it left me breathless, her unexpected words floating out. Her essence bottled there.

She sounds almost coherent at first, answering my eighteen-year-old voice.

Can you tell us how old you are? 96, I think.

And can you tell us where you live now? I live in several places.

Can you tell us a little bit about them? Yes. The one I live in now has been prit' near a year. It's a, it's a kind of a, oh, a rented place.

Do you like living there? Uh, no. Not too much.

Oh. Why not? Oh. It's... it's different because you're not really on your own, you're with other people and they have a lot to do with the way you live.

How do you like the meals where you're living? Oh they're fine. They're roast beef.

Well, I think everything is even... like the sugar and that. They make all kinds of things.

What kinds of things do you do during the day? Uh, not too much. I... uh... go to different places. I go and see people and... I don't know.

Tell us about the staff? The staff?

The girls. Oh. They're fine. You never get to know them real well, but they seem fine.

Ok, can you tell us a little bit about your life before, when you were younger? Um. Oh, I don't know. I seem to have gone to a lot of places and visited a lot of people, and, uh, I think everything was very calm, and I don't know what else.

Then Nana takes over.

Remember when you were crossing the river in that boat and the police were lookin' for ya and you were a rum runner? Well, I'm not gonna tell them that stuff. (We laugh, her sense of humour and propriety still firmly intact.)

And the prairies and you were a homesteader and your father and mother and you played with the groundhogs? Oh yeah, there's a lot of things.

And how you weren't allowed to see dad when you were younger and your parents didn't agree with you seein' em cuz you were Protestant and he was Catholic and you had to meet him on the street corner? Yeah, I bet that's something they'd like to know. (Laughing.)

You had a car till last year, didn't ya? Yeah...

How young were you when you got your licence? I don't know, that's so long ago isn't it.

But you drove up till last year. Yeah. But traffic was terrible, terrible. People were terrible.

So how many kids did you have? Three.

You had three? Yes. One baby died. That was a long time ago.

Do you remember when we went to see the quintuplets? Yes and I remember going by to see'em out the porch. You can put that in, I think. Cuz the quintuplets are still in the paper. Or maybe it's a book I got. There's a book and it shows three women. So you know people might be interested in that.

We drove up in an old car. Yeah, we drove up in the tin Lizzie, and they were on the porch, and they were all playing. They looked out to see how you were lookin', like you should go home.

Do you remember when the car burned up, and that was up in Calgary? And we had to call Daddy to come and get us? That was terrible. Do you remember that? You don't remember that. I remember.

How many grandchildren do you have? You got all kinds of great-grandchildren. You can't even remember their names. Yeah.

What other things? You did a lot of things in your lifetime. It's a long lifetime. 95 years. Not too many people live that long you know. No, they live from about sixty to about eighty.

You gonna live another ten years? Yeah, where will I be then, on some porch? Looking out like the quintuplets did.

Got anything else to say? No, I haven't. There's most likely a lot of other things, but I can't think of 'em.

She died a few months later, but still I have her there. I wish I had a copy of her words when she was still Granny, before her descent. Listening to the tape makes me want to make copies of everyone's voices. It's so much truer than a photograph.

I could always recognize the colour of Father's voice. That kind of hateful fear is obvious for much farther distances than have ever separated us. My Sweetheart has never heard this tone, this tinge to a voice. His life has not been perfect but he has never been ground to dust like this. And I hate my Sweetheart when he suggests that I should take my fingers and pull my chest open again for Father to flay. I have already been all the shades of red.

I wish that my parents did not take up so much space, that they were gone from here like I often pretend. They do not deserve a second of my thoughts. But the more I put them out, the more they keep returning. I want to be all grown up now with no worry of childhood, to just get

over it, to live as if I have sprung from nothing, starting today. But each of them forms a side of the vise that crushes me. I try to be careful, to pretend I don't notice the constant press, that it is a comforting weight. I should try to learn from my Sweetheart, he makes things out of wood. Picture frames, a wine rack, our coffee table. He fixes things. I should learn to do something so solid, to make something useful and permanent. I stick to baking, try to hide my ineptness at cooking in brownies and gingerbread. There are cooks and there are bakers. My Sweetheart was born a cook. I try to make him dinner, I undercook the fish and burn the rice. I keep trying, but I fail. I make messes that take longer to clean up than it would take him to cook a seven course meal. He tells me I don't have to, I can just help him, I don't have to be good at everything. But I want to be able to provide that basic sustenance, not just sugary excess.

Mother only cooked on holidays, except for the staples I grew up on: hot dogs and beans, hot dogs and kraft dinner, hot dogs and canned corn. When I was ten I refused to eat another hot dog ever again, and after that I had to find my own grub. It's not surprising that I'm so short, we never had fruit or uncanned vegetables. Mother said they were too expensive, plus she didn't like them. She had a few specialties: spaghetti was an event. I always hated roasts of any kind, I stuck to the safety of potatoes and bread, until I tasted my mother-in-law's cooking and realized meat wasn't just something to be forcefully stomached. My Sweetheart's sense of taste is much more refined than mine because he's had so much more practice. He hates Mother and Nana's cooking more than anything, he thinks the leathery things they do to beef are tragic. He tries to be polite about it, giving them cooking tips. He tries to get them to use marinades, to nudge them off the couch if there's smoke to check what's burning, to not leave the house when they have things on the stove. It never works, so we try not to go hungry the few times a year they invite us over.

Another call, Nana's voice on the line and I know something's wrong because she called a couple days ago to invite us over for Easter and she wouldn't call again so soon. I usually only hear from her four or five times a year, and call her or stop by about the same amount. Or maybe only two or three times, but I don't like to admit that. I've seen her more lately, since the cancer. But it's Mother this time, and this can not be good. She used to be in and out of the hospital all the time with blood clots, but she's been more stable the last few years, only confined to her own bed a cumulative two or three months a year. And it's always been her legs, skin red raw and usually covered in oozing sores. Her normally huge calves will swell up to the size of watermelons, throbbing red, seeming like they will burst into juiciness. But it's not her legs this time. Something in her abdomen, Nana says. And Nana thinks it's her uterus or appendix or something and that they'll have to take it all out, "but she's sure not a very good candidate for surgery." She's needed surgery before this, but no anesthesiologist will touch her. And if they have to cut her open, to dive into the girth of her, it will be the end.

All my life I have been waiting for Mother's death. Every moment she keeps breathing seems miraculous, a defiance of the laws of nature. It is a fear, a worry that has always gnawed at me until it has become an expectation, the three a.m. phone call. I don't like to answer the phone and I always run to answer at the first ring for this reason. When she used to say "I'm going to drive away and never come back and it's your fault," I'd cry and I'd beg her not to get in the car

and she'd say, "No, I'm going, your father had it right." And she'd be gone till dusk while I sat on the porch steps. These times were not the worst though, because there was always some hope of her returning. She never packed anything so I knew she'd have to come back sometime. But when she used to say, in her darkest moments, "I'm going to kill myself and it's your fault," locking her bedroom door on me, I'd pound and claw at it till my seven-year-old fists pulped. I used to cry and beg her not to, I told her I'd do anything to make her happy, but she'd say that it's too late. I'd already killed her.

I dealt with it by lying to myself, by pretending it wasn't happening, by lying on my bed, reading everything. Anything that could drown out the noise of that place. I used to believe that every family must be like this, every child secretly unwanted. Why should I expect any different than that everyone else was like this when they were at home? I thought that everyone lived in the slamming of doors. There was nothing I could do but try to be perfect so that maybe Mother would be happy with me, if she couldn't be happy with anything else. But I could never manage it, never get things just right. I devoted myself to studying: schoolwork and music and girl guides and every club at school. Anything I had a chance at being good at that kept me out of the house as much as possible. I had to be the best singer so I practised until I got solos in the choir. I had to be the best student so I studied until I got all the highest marks. I had to be the best in every club, so I did extra until I was. But even all my perfect test scores weren't enough, because I inevitably missed a bonus question. In Girl Guides, even the All-Around Cord and Canada Cord were not enough because some other girl sold more cookies than me. Being in choirs and plays wasn't good enough because I didn't get all the solos or the leads. But there was always the hope that I could do better next time, that I could manage being the best in everything I did, from brushing

my teeth to chairing committees. I have had chronic insomnia for as long as I can remember, reviewing possible test questions in my head to the red flashing of 2:15, planning my strategies at 3:45. And when I finally fall asleep, nightmares allow me no rest. The recurring dreams of showing up to school unprepared for an exam, of not being able to find my way home. And now that I sleep much easier next to my Sweetheart, the nightmares of him leaving, of forcing me to go back to live with Mother, Nana, Little Sister. They skulk under my lids larger than any monster.

In my nights of obsessive planning, I realized that the problem was the closer I got to being the best in one thing, the further I became from success in another. And the older I grew, the more I realized that the subjectivity of the judges could not be avoided, that everything wasn't as easily quantifiable as I wanted it to be. That because so many things in life were not ostensibly judged, how would I know if I was the best or not? And, more importantly, how would Mother know? By the time I began to recognize that the more achievements I attained, the more awards I showed her before stacking them up under my bed, the more she despised me, it was too late for me to stop. It was easier for me to struggle to be as close to the top as I could than to give myself a moment's rest. With a moment's rest it would be possible to remember how unloved I felt. The open notebook, that curving hatred. So I tried to find new meaning in those fleeting flashes, the handshake and smile as someone important handed me another certificate. The tangibility of the physical representation of some kind of achievement. The exaggerated love and support in those certificates kept me going, even as I relegated all of it to boxes in the closet or under my bed. Even as I forgot about them so quickly. The temporality of a plaque for this or that, when as soon as it was in my hand I knew another one just like it was now up for grabs for next month, next



year. So that now I was back at square one. Getting an award was like scratching my name from a list: you've done well in music this year, here's a gold star, you have been acknowledged, now you're back to where you started. Nobody cares who was the employee of the month for September in December. And, of course, there are often fairness policies that do not allow repeated winners, to give everyone a chance. The kind of nicey-nice rule that messed up my plans for years.

Now I keep up out of habit, but I'm not as bad as I once was. I try to slack, and I manage. My struggle to over-achieve is less obvious, it doesn't take as much work now. I'm starting to feel lazy, coasting along on month-old achievements. I see one or two of my peers working at the frantic pace I used to keep until I met my Sweetheart and he calmed my flurry and I try to distance myself from them. I try not to care if I do well, try not to set goals. I can feel my lunatic drive still creeping. At least I realize now that I won't ever please that unforgiving Mother, that no matter what I do I'll probably make things worse. It is unavoidable. It is difficult though, to try to believe myself when I say that I don't care what she thinks of me. The open notebook is still lurking, the prongs of her perfectly round and sharp penmanship hook me. I have always failed somehow for Mother at being a daughter. I was just never good enough for her at being a person.

I have grown up expecting Mother's death, knowing that I will be responsible, no matter what. I cannot cry every time now, cannot beat my hands raw with every new sickness. I can only act calm and dignified, only shut down and observe or I'd have to lock myself in my room and shout. My whole life I've been breaking it down into steps, the preparations that will have to be made. I'd rather torch the condo than have to search through and categorize her possessions, to touch the things she has touched. I will take the boxes from the basement and load them into the

trunk and take them to Value Village. I can not sort things out now. Mother has always told me that she is afraid of cremation, but I don't know how I could afford a coffin to fit. Would I need to order it in from Utah or somewhere or have it specially made here? How long would that take? And I don't know how long it will take to set in and how long I will grieve, because I've been grieving so long.

At least now Little Sister has a new family so we won't have to take her in, because my Sweetheart said he could never deal with her hate on a daily basis. I guess I couldn't either. Will I try to be strong and take care of Little Sister and Nana? Could I do that without breaking? When I went to visit Mother in the ER her eyes were circled grey and she somehow looked thinner but my Sweetheart said she didn't. She looked worse then I've ever seen her, and I've seen her sicker, but she looked more hopeless. More ambivalent. And she said that she'd dig it out if she only had a spoon because she's not going to live with this pain any longer. No doctor can get that pain out.

Nana told me Mother would be waiting in a bed in the ER because it would take a while for her to be admitted, but when I got there and asked the nurse to look for her she told me Mother was still out in the waiting room. Did I go see her against Nana's wishes out of guilt or compassion or love? I am always worried it will be my last chance, so I have to go and try to say all the right things so I will regret it less later. Mother looked so disappointed to see my Sweetheart and me, that she wouldn't be able to tell everyone how she'd waited alone for hours in the ER with nobody caring. Mother told us to go home, but we stayed for twenty minutes or so, until she insisted we leave. She said she's been having this pain since November and that the doctor told her to go to the ER twice before but she wouldn't, because she didn't want to go

while Nana was going through radiation. Mother and Nana, so alike, putting off going to see professionals until the last moment, full of excuses. They didn't know if it was her uterus or her appendix or what, the ultrasound wasn't strong enough to see through her bulk. She said she didn't care if they took everything out. She hoped they would bump up all the tests she had been waiting for that she was not scheduled to have for another month. She was sure she needed surgery. She wanted to have surgery. She was worried she'd never get out of the ER. I was worried she'd never get out of the hospital.

Mother stayed in the hospital for a few weeks, and I visited her each day, though I hated seeing her so often. Then, after a few more weeks of being at home, she was finally scheduled for surgery. Nana, Little Sister, and I waited for hours in the hospital for her, uselessly. At first, Mother had a room, and the lady in the next bed asked the nurse to move her out of there, but the nurse assured her that there was nowhere else to go, so the woman had to settle for the meagre protection of the closed curtain. Against us. There is no real privacy in a curtain hanging around your bed. It did nothing to keep out Mother's moaning or Nana's constant clipped questions to Little Sister and me.

When are you finished school? Next April.

What are you going to do then? I'm not sure.

Well, don't you think you'd better figure that out? I know.

Can't you do something to help your mother? Like what?

Figure something out. Do you want a pop? She can't have anything to eat or drink, I don't think I should drink in front of her.

When are you finished school? Still in April.

Then Mother was taken for prep and we were stuck in the family waiting room. Hours of orange vinyl chairs and the reek of sick punctuated only by the harassment of Nana's conversation, and her attempts to force me to ingest inedible cafeteria sandwiches that she finished for me. She can never let a scrap go to waste. Trying to read but unable to because of the smell of sickness clogging my nostrils and Nana's intermittent harumphing, and knowing that Mother was dying in there. After four or five hours, an American couple came into the family waiting room and Nana forced them into conversation. The husband's mother was in for surgery, he had grown up here and had moved to the States for his wife. The tedium of hours of waiting made talking to them seem much more interesting than it usually would have. Stuck in a room of family I cling to outsiders. They are more like me. The relief of strangers.

After a few minutes Nana began to tell them all about themselves, categorizing them into stereotypes the way she always does. This is how Americans and Canadians are different and this is how men and women are different and this is how you and I are different. At least they were white, so she didn't spell out the differences between white people and other people, like when she starts in on the Chinamen or the Eye-talians or the Coloureds. I wonder sometimes if she's even aware of how much she offends people, of how hurtful she can be, even to strangers. She told them she thought they were hoity-toity yuppies as if they'd be thrilled with the news. Just like her granddaughter, snotty-like. I tried to smile as un-snotty-like as I could when Nana pointed at me, and the woman laughed. She tried to defend herself, but she soon realized that she had failed Nana's crucial test question: do you like to shop at Wal-mart? If you ever meet her, this is the one question you can never answer no to, because she will call you a snotty yuppie forever and spend all of her time trying to correct the error of your ways. There are the inevitable

diatribes about how cheap cheap cheap everything is there, the listing of the prices for the items you use every day. You know, people are stupid to not shop there. Stupid. After television and gossiping about family, it is her favourite thing to talk about. You would think she was a paid spokesperson, or working for some pyramid scheme. There is no reasoning with her or Mother, they are joined on this crusade to ensure every last person they meet shops there. Preaching the gospel of savings. I used to try to tell them about why I didn't shop there, the standard humanitarian reasons of union-busting, of the ruination of local businesses, but their evangelism was much stronger than mine.

So I tried to talk to this foreigner who was so flawed in Nana's eyes, this snotty yuppie, while Nana interrupted us every ten seconds or so with jabs about either one of us. About how much the woman and I were alike, in our uppitiness, though she was a 40-something lawyer with a pool, while I am an impoverished grad student who writes essays protesting her right-wing views. When Nana asked how they voted, Nana who never votes, who could not name three current Canadian politicians, the woman seemed unfazed, but then was startled at Nana's ability to switch so quickly between jabs about both Republicans and Democrats, cribbed from movies and television. Her punch lines are always a little off kilter. The woman told me that she was impressed with me and that she thought I was very astute, very observant, though I don't recall what I said that made her think this. I could tell she knew I wasn't like them, that she was laughing at Nana more than with her, that I knew Nana was being rude and hurtful even though she acted like she was being funny. Nana pretends it's all a joke, and it sometimes is, but always at someone else's expense. Nana told them how everyone says she's just like Raymond's mom on that show. Nana thinks this means she's funny, but I think people just tell her this as a nice

way of telling her they think she's rude and insensitive. I've only seen the commercials for it though, so maybe I'm wrong.

Then some woman came in and asked for me by name and introduced herself as the chaplain. Then that hollow feeling. This is what it feels like. So this is it, this is the end of Mother. I am listed as her next of kin because she thought Little Sister would be too eager to pull the plug and that Nana could never do it. It would be too much stress for them both. Making me responsible for her death. Thanks a lot. And what would I do? Would I cut her off as soon as I could legally do it? Sooner? Would the guilt be too much so that I could never do it, never be sure enough of my reasons? Or would I leave her vegetal, torture her with feebleness, keep her bedridden, semi-conscious forever? All this flashed in a second, but then she said she had a message from my Sweetheart, that he would be late. She was somehow the only person in the whole place that had the time to relay the message. My blanched face made the American woman ask me how I was, that that must've been scary, and Nana laughed. Then the American woman took a walk.

And finally, after eight hours of wait, the surgeon came in and said Mother was fine. They took out the hernia. No problem.

What about the tumour?

What tumour? Her confused face.

Did you find the tumour, did you take all of it out? Is it benign?

What tumour? There was no tumour.

What?

We took out the hernia. Standard procedure. It was just a simple elective surgery. Just a

little hernia, not really necessary to take it out yet, but it's gone now. There was really no need for you to wait all day. She's fine.

Oh.

What tumour, the tumour the surgery was supposed to take out. The mandatory life-or-death surgery. The possibly cancerous tumour the size of a watermelon that Mother said you said was growing inside her. The tumour that was like a ticking-time bomb. The Grim Reaper inside her. I didn't even want to see Mother after that, after weeks of expecting her death from the giant tumour. Cancer at the least. The invisible tumour. The imaginary tumour inside her that she talked about like Little Sister did with Mr. Frog in her throat. I was too exhausted for accusations. But it would have been more effort not to go see her, after hours of waiting.

Her weak smile, what a trooper. Did they find the tumour? I asked.

No... um... they still didn't find it. I think I'll have to have another surgery. But they found a hernia while they were in there, thought they might as well take that out. I think it's from my C-section. From when I had you. I've had the pain since then, since that incompetent doctor twisted my bladder all up when he took you out.

Oh. Another surgery. The surgeon didn't mention that.

Yeah, well. We'll see how it goes.

And that is how she answers my timid questions. Mother, still experiencing labour pains twenty-four years later. After that, I've been too tired of her lies to listen to her wailing any more. There have been at least two faked heart attacks this year. Panic attacks, she later calls them, but acts as if they were as serious as heart attacks. I have never seen Mother embarrassed, except by me. When Nana was going in for her biopsy Mother was so stressed out that she started having

chest pains. She was sure it was a heart attack she tells me, and they had to get Mother her own gurney. A sympathy gurney I guess, because the doctor said there was nothing wrong with her. Then last night, months after her surgery and months of paid recuperation time off from work, her car was rear-ended. Mother drives at least fifteen kilometres under the limit at all times, as it is too much of a physical effort to press the accelerator, so this is not surprising. A tap to the bumper it sounds like. The car didn't get a scratch on it. But Mother started having what she thought was a heart attack, so she made Little Sister call her an ambulance. She said she was going to die. No worries though. It was just another panic attack.

My Sweetheart tells me that he couldn't believe how often my family was sick when he met me. Either one or some combination of Mother, Nana, or Little Sister is sick at all times, usually with more than one ailment, and usually more than one of them. Growing up around them, they always talked about how miraculously healthy I always was, as if they were disappointed. Little Sister took weeks off school for illnesses no specialist could identify. Mother misses months of work each year.



I worry that I've abandoned you, Little Sister. I've stopped taking care of you like I used to, I've given in to your pushing. Now I only see you holidays and we're both outcasts, though you seem to fit in with the family better than I can. You are more distant than a stranger to me. I feel like I know nothing about you, that I can find no closeness between us. Even when we shared the smallest bedroom in Nana's house, so little that we had to have bunkbeds because two twin beds wouldn't fit, we shared nothing but space. We always fought harsher than most siblings, not physically, because we couldn't get away with that, but deeper wounds. We went straight for the things that would cut the most.

I went to visit you every day for as long as visiting hours would allow in that dreadful hospital, watching your glass eyes, holding your freezing hands. I was the first to notice that you'd chewed almost all the way through your lip. I felt so much rage at the nurses, the doctors, for not noticing the blood pooling in your mouth. At Mother for her infrequent visits. At you. I have never seen you more determined than when you decided you'd had enough with life.

I thought you made a breakthrough with your therapist, you finally started telling the truth about Mother. That as soon as she came home every night, she'd sit on her bed eating junk and watching T.V. for the hours before she slept. How she only looked away from her McDonald's and sitcoms to berate one of us. Finally, something true out of your mouth. Finally, a reason. You asked me to meet with your psychologist to corroborate your "story," so she would know that you

weren't making it up. That Mother never wanted you to do anything yourself, she wanted you to be sick so she could keep you at home forever. So she wouldn't be alone. I met with her, that bobble-headed doctor with her condescending questions. With her "Oh, that's terrible. How does that make you feel?" As if it wasn't obvious in my clenched jaw. My fists. I told her of my frustrations, how I wanted to help you but couldn't, how I worried how you'd be when you came home. If you'd ever come home. And she bobbed her head and said nothing useful. And then she asked me how I had come through everything. "Why aren't you the one in here? Why weren't you the one that tried to kill yourself, since your mother treats you worse? How come you turned out so well?" And I sat there, fidgeting. How dare she ask that? The question that burned me. I had wondered it so much myself. I told her some bullshit about being resilient, but I didn't believe it. I still don't understand why you were the one that took those pills, that stabbed that pen into your arm. It seems like it should have been me. I think I just couldn't be that selfish, as Mother had always given me speeches when I was little about how she would never really kill herself because that was too selfish. Then she would tell me that if I was going to do it, I should at least do it right. People that sliced across their wrists were stupid. You have to do it down your arm like this, Mother motioned. Look for that green under your skin.

When my babysitter's husband hanged himself when I was seven or eight, Mother described it in great detail, and I imagined his body hanging from our stairwell in our home that was a mirror-image to the sitter's. She talked about how the man had wanted his wife to find him, hanging there around the corner of the stairs, but his son got home early from work, and found him there. Swinging. I remember the man's thick curly hair, and dark eyes. Eyes that seemed so much more alive than yours have for years. Do you remember that, how our wonderful

babysitter moved away, how she never took care of us again? Mother said we were too young to go to the funeral, so we went to dance class at the community centre instead. Sliding across the floor on our knees to Michael Jackson's "Dangerous" while other people stood in black, searching for something to say. I don't ever remember being sad for him, or sad that he was dead. I just remember feeling sad for my babysitter, sad for her son.

When Mother woke me that night, all I could do is hold you and whisper in your ear. You don't remember that. I felt so calm because I had to be, with all the screaming around me, the cop's shouted questions. I stroked your face and talked softly to try to get you to want to come back. But you say you don't remember that, you say you don't remember me coming to visit you in the hospital. You say you don't remember any of it. You have not grown since that night. You have surely aged, grown haggard and more hateful. You are swollen with bitterness. But you have not grown. You barely finished high school with your teachers pushing you through. But you have been out of the hospital for six years and you've done nothing. After a few months, people said they thought you seemed like you were doing a lot better and I nodded. There was no point to challenging them, I wanted to believe it. Then, after a while, people stopped saying those things, or they forgot about those unfortunate few months. But I still remember arguing with the doctors that they should let you come home for Christmas. I still remember your bleeding lip. And I don't think you're better, because your eyes are the same. You have just given up on trying to kill yourself. You haven't got the energy. But I still wait for the call, still fear that you'll try again.

Now when people ask how you're doing, I say "fine," or "the same." You're doing the same things you've done since you were sixteen, but now you're twenty-two. You're not in

school, you have no job. You don't call or email. Mother bought you a horse when you came home from the hospital. A horse when my toes poked through most of my shoes growing up. A horse but nothing healthy to eat in the house. She thought that would cheer you up, and it has. A bit. I think she was trying to buy you off. She realized she came across badly, and she wanted to look like a good parent. And her bribe worked, it kept you quiet about her for a while, no more mention of the things you told the psychologist, she passed all that off as crazy talk until you moved in with that other family. Mother calls it your "surrogate family," says that you've traded her in for a better version, but I think, why shouldn't you? You spend all your time with your horse, your "surrogate family" is talking about opening up a stable, and it's your dream to run it. But avoiding people in exchange for animals isn't really progress. Running away from her, from me, isn't really dealing with anything, is it? I've talked to my Sweetheart before about how I feel guilty for leaving you with Mother, for letting you live with another family when we will have two extra rooms when we move. But he tells me he wouldn't stand it if I took you in, and I guess that's fair. You've never given him anything but the finger, and you have always been crueller to me. You say I've never done anything to help you. You've lied about everything, and I can't do anything more for you. I have to draw this line. Still, I feel like I'm abandoning you, even after all this, even after all your lies, all those years you lied to Mother about the things you broke, blaming it on me. All those refusals of love. I guess I've given up on you, but it kills me to say that. To leave you with them. But I still haven't escaped them myself, so how could I save you?

Now our lives are in boxes, piled floor to ceiling. My Sweetheart's things, my things, neatly labelled room by room, fragile in permanent magic marker. The way our lives seem to fit so tidily together, my Sweetheart filling up the space I have left, I, taking him to tightness. I

worry that someday this may be a choking for air, that we will be reduced to the cramping of muscles. But I won't be stopped by the nagging what if's any more.

Tomorrow we will make the transition to paper plates. By Friday, everything we do here will be disposable. We will subsist on convenient travel-sized portions. Then Saturday, with all its hullabaloo. It's only halfway across town, but I think it will take the full day. We will load our friends up like pachyderms, give them cubed armfuls of mysterious things. When I help friends move, I always want to peek inside, find a secret, something naughty or to treasure. But when I get up the gall to look, it's always only books or shoes or wine glasses.

Our photographs will hang on new walls. No, not so new, on the walls that embraced my Sweetheart from birth until he moved in with me. Those walls know him better than I do, I envy the scuffs and scratches of that memory. We may paint, change it to our colours, fix the leaky, squeaky things that have always bothered us about the house. Or not. Just relish its occasional spottiness, leave any stray spiders free to cobweb the corners.

My cat Sally has been moaning all day, mourning her favourite haunts that are covered in cardboard and newspaper. She's taken to lying on the bath mat, clinging to the last comfort left. She stares at me when I pee, frightened of the maze of boxes in the other rooms. I wish I could tell her what is happening, soothe her meows with promises of bigger window ledges, more finches and chickadees to eye.

She came with this place and I don't think she wants to leave it. When we moved in a couple years back, in the swelter of July, we found her on the porch and she wouldn't leave. There were never any strays in my neighbourhood growing up, maybe the constant pesticide spraying or sprinklers turned them off. I've never seen a stray on an impeccable lawn. Or maybe

there were by-laws: Number 26, No climbing trees, children should spend their time doing their chores or at least stay out of the gardens, Number 27, No cats allowed, especially on our lovely lawns.

Mother always told me to be careful in the sandbox because that's where cats went, but I didn't see anything wrong with cats being there. I never found anything in the sandbox but sand and cigarette butts and smashed up beer bottles, and I thought she gave cats a bad rap. Granted, I never did see a stray cat, or even a loose one in the park. Maybe they were all up to no good a few blocks away. Leaving this place is not as simple as it seems, even for the house that knows my Sweetheart better than I do, with the French doors and the cupboards that his father built. But Sally will have the window ledges of her dreams, there are so many places filled with light.

### The Anxieties of Autobiography

Kathleen Woodward claims that “women write under the sign of anxiety” (Woodward cited in Smith “Autobiographical Manifestos” 438), and I have experienced multiple anxieties in writing Part One of my autobiography *The Red Memory of My Hand*. Kathleen Woodward argues that the writing of autobiography takes place “under the sign of anxiety, ‘a state of expecting a danger and preparing oneself for it, although the danger may be unknown to oneself, that is, not consciously known’” (438). In writing about my own life, I have encountered challenges that are unique to this genre, in addition to the usual challenges that writers confront in crafting their works. My anxiety has centred around fears of being disowned by my family, of confronting my absent father, of embracing my own female subjectivity and grappling with the unreliability of memory. I will describe some of these anxieties throughout my poetic statement, as well as the process I have undertaken of moving through writing ‘under the sign of anxiety’ towards composing under “the sign of hope” (438).

My primary struggle in writing this autobiography has been my anxiety about my family’s reaction to the text, and the possible repercussions of their discovery of the family history that I am revealing in such a public way. In owning my history textually, I risk being disowned by my family. My anxiety about my autobiography’s potential impact on my personal life is revealed in *The Red Memory of My Hand* through the speaker’s recurring fear of being disowned. The threat of being disowned extends beyond the writing, as it has been a threat held over me my whole life, for any possible transgression I might purposely or even unconsciously commit. As several of my

family members have been disowned, I feel this is a real threat, and will inevitably result if my autobiography is ever published. My family has a long history of disowning its members: my great-grandmother was disowned by her parents for marrying a Catholic, one of my uncles was expelled from and locked out of the family home without warning, and I have been essentially disowned by my father who refuses to hear my name spoken in his presence. I have too many family members who are not on speaking terms on both sides of my family to mention them all here. My family practices a disowning continuum, ranging from a few months of shunning to permanent exclusion from any contact with all family members. This disownment is usually enacted by my Nana or Mother, who then inform everyone below them in our matriarchal family structure of the disciplinary actions that are to be taken against the offending relative.

If my manuscript is ever accepted for publication and this narrative is revealed publicly, I expect to suffer the most severe penalty, probably being completely cut off from all family interaction forever. In writing this manuscript, I have begun to come to terms with this risk. I have rarely felt “owned” by my family in a positive sense—my family’s acceptance of me has been bound to my position as the family scapegoat. Due to my family’s continuing emotional abuse, I struggle with the desire for the release and freedom that could result from being cast out by them. I still fear the permanence of this abandonment, even though it would probably be best for me. I cling to the vestiges of my dream of “family,” even if my family only succeeds at being a nightmarish version of this fantasy. Before my revision process, I had included a lot of self-reflexive introspection in the text about my concerns about my family members discovering the autobiography, but I removed these digressions in favour of developing a more independent sense of subjectivity for the narrator.



My anxiety about my autobiographical project being discovered by my family while writing this text was so extreme at first that I would not name any of my characters and I shied away from even calling the text an autobiography. However, as the narrative became longer and more complex, the character's lack of monikers proved to be very confusing for the reader. Still, I stubbornly clung to this namelessness for months while writing the text, so that much of my creative energy was spent on just trying to make it obvious which character was which without naming them. As I gradually realized that I would need to take ownership of my writing for it to be successful, and as I was writing a clearly autobiographical text, it was silly to continue to at once assert and deny that the "characters" were actual people in my life. I thus decided to name my characters in relation to their positions in my life, to eliminate confusion, to preserve some anonymity for them, and, as I will discuss shortly, for the archetypal resonances inherent in these designations.

Much of my anxiety in the actual writing of this autobiography centred around the necessity of creating and confronting myself as narrator and my family as textual figures.

Georges Gusdorf claims that:

[t]he subject who seizes on himself for object inverts the natural direction of attention; it appears that in acting thus he violates certain secret taboos of human nature... The image of another 'myself,' a double of my being but more fragile and vulnerable, invested with a sacred character that makes it at once fascinating and frightening. (32)

I have felt a similar anxiety in confronting myself as the narrator, and wrestling with my writing

voice which is both bound to, yet estranged, from me. Gusdorf claims that “[t]he author of an autobiography masters this anxiety by submitting to it” (33), and I am still working through my discomfort around this idea of constructing my own double. Perhaps this is why, in discussing my autobiography, I often say “I” when I am actually referring to “the narrator,” even though I always separate other writers and their constructions of the narrator in their texts. In refusing or denying this separation between myself and the narrator, I thus eliminate some of my anxiety and discomfort with this double-ness, yet add to the possible socio-political ramifications of the autobiography by insisting on the authority of my version.

My anxiety around duality is not limited to the divide between myself and the speaker. In writing my autobiography, I am also forced to encounter the textual doubles of my family members, people who are terrifying forces even off the page. In duplicating my family members textually, I sometimes worry that I have created and unleashed a monster—putting these people on the page both contains them and imbues them with a kind of mythic power. I have submitted to my anxiety about this duality by choosing to give these characters the names of their familial relationships to me, rather than calling them by their given names. In this way, these characters reveal the power they have over the speaker, and they subvert the associations the reader has with these archetypes.

One of the most demanding challenges in writing this autobiography was the difficulty of trying to make the absence of the father a presence narratively speaking. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan argues that “the father’s...symbolic role is that of teaching...boundaries—he is a limit-setter. As a result, the father is both feared and emulated, since his presence has taught the infant about laws and taboos” (Ragland-Sullivan cited in Benstock 149). As the father’s presence is necessary for

this teaching, I explore my acquisition of these laws and taboos through and despite the palpable absence of a father in my text. Also, this autobiography in itself, in its content, form, and the declarative act of it, is a subversion of the laws and taboos of family and the privacy of the domestic sphere. Shari Benstock claims that the “fencing-off” mechanism” (149) that the father teaches seems to create a “clearly defined barrier between the conscious and the unconscious” (149). Gusdorf contends that “[t]he writer who recalls his earliest years is thus exploring an enchanted realm that belongs to him alone” (37) and my work occasionally shifts this notion of autobiography into the realm of nightmare. The text often moves from living to dreamt nightmare, and I use dreams as a conduit for the speaker to communicate with the absent father.

The structure of this autobiography reflects its matrilineal narrative. My stylistic approach—wherein consciousness and unconsciousness commingle—reflects the way that the father’s absence has delayed the creation of boundaries in the narrator’s mind, and the manner in which Nana takes on the patriarchal role of making boundaries. I choose to tell the story in waves rather than using a strictly linear narrative construction; the emotional importance of each event determines its chronology in the text. Although this text is about the absence of the father, it is rooted in the presence of women: Nana, Mother, Little Sister, and the narrator. Although these women feel powerless because of the psychological effect of the abandonment of this symbolically charged male figure, they are also strong in their own ways, although they do not always realize it. Nana is clearly the commander of this family, although she uses her powers to dominate the other characters rather than playing the typical female role of nurturer, and in this way, this becomes a matriarchal narrative by default. Mother feels as though she has lost her anchor in being left by her husband, and she thus obeys Nana’s rule in a child-like fashion, rather

than realizing her own strength and the effect that she has on her own children. Both Little Sister and the narrator must come to terms with living in this accidentally matriarchal family, and when faced with the neglect and emotional abuse they experience, they look to the symbol of the father to fill the void that Mother and Nana cannot fill.

I also felt anxiety about the burden of trying to tell the truth, even though there is perhaps no truth without subjectivity. According to Paul John Eakin, “[t]he latest developments in brain science confirm the extent to which memory, the would-be anchor of selves and lives, constructs the materials from the past that an earlier, more innocent view would have us believe it merely stored” (106). In constructing this autobiography, I was forced to attempt to construct and recapture the past, but I could only reconstruct my own subjective experiences from a spatial and temporal remove. Israel Rosenfield argues that “recollection is a kind of perception” (Rosenfield cited by Eakin 106), and through my writing process, I have learned that rather than confining my writing, the disconcerting limits of my subjectivity give the writing more depth. I try to write in a psychologically accurate way, and to be as honest as possible. In *The Red Memory of My Hand*, I write only about actual events as accurately as I could remember them with exaggeration, keeping as strictly to “the facts” of my memory as possible. However, as we all remember differently, other people who appear in my autobiography might argue that there are discrepancies between what I have written and their own memories. Memory and subjectivity are charged issues in my family where truth is often contested, which further compounds the anxieties I have felt surrounding my attempts to honour my own subjectivity.

I have been strongly influenced by the oral storytelling of my family, and I explore the ways the stories they tell shift and change in their telling in my autobiography. My family is full

of storytellers, each with their own standard repertoire that they draw out for holidays and other special occasions, their stories growing bolder as their faces redden from the alcohol that is necessary to keep them together and civilized. I have heard most of these stories so many times that I can tell them myself. The structural skeleton of facts usually stays relatively the same with each telling, but the dramatic stylistic effects are malleable. There are always subtle tonal nuances, a different emphasis depending on the audience and the occasion. Each of my relatives has a different recollection of the same events, as each of their memories are different given their own subject position. The act of writing down my story in a family that values oral history is a transgressive act for several reasons. It violates familial norms, it imbues the story with more authority in a culture that privileges written texts, it reveals domestic concerns for greater public scrutiny, and writing in the context of the academy gives the text professional status and the appearance of objectivity.

Through my writing process, I made the transition from worrying about maintaining an objective view to embracing my own subjectivity. Through exploring the problematic aspects of my own subjectivity, I hope to add to the female voices in this genre, because, as Sidonie Smith asserts, “[the] poetics of autobiography, as the history of autobiography... remain by and large an androcentric enterprise” (Poetics 15). Susan Babbitt believes that:

[t]wo points in particular distinguish women’s and men’s autobiographical writing.

Autobiography expresses the understanding of a life: women’s writing has not assumed that a life must be unified in some preestablished way, while men’s writing seems to assume that a life-story leads progressively to some specific end...The second point...is

the contradictoriness, or at least the complexity, of self-understanding—in particular, the recognition that self-awareness is not the direct result of one’s perceptions of self. (215)

I think that my work fits with Babbitt’s model, as I do not provide a typically tidy, chronologically organized narrative arc. I have also attempted to present the speaker’s “self-awareness” as complex, and contingent on the speaker’s experiences and interactions with other people. I attempt to illuminate the narrator’s developing awareness of her own subjectivity in her transition from childhood to adulthood through her interactions with others throughout the narrative, by revealing how these interactions explicitly or implicitly influence this process of self-realization.

I decided to write this autobiography as a way to claim my own history and identity. By writing about both my family’s and my own private selves, I am violating social taboos that do not allow for such candid public revelation of the domestic sphere. Carolyn Heilbrun asserts that autobiography “is indeed a struggle for one’s own voice... the ownership of one’s story comes about through the exploration of relationships... self-understanding is also a result of understanding others” (16), and it is through this exploration of my familial relationships that I attempt to reveal myself/the speaker. Susan Babbitt claims that “autobiography is itself the claiming and discovery of self, and... also about subjectivity, responsibility, freedom, and autonomy. Autobiography tells us something about the process of self-constitution because it performs the act of self-constitution” (215), and I am seeking my own self discovery through my writing process. Writing *The Red Memory of My Hand* has given me a sense of autonomy and the realization that I have the freedom to learn from and change my life.

Throughout my writing process, my goal has always been to begin to move from writing under the sign of anxiety to writing “[u]nder the sign of hope and what Hélène Cixous calls ‘the very possibility of change’” (Smith 438). I have focussed on “the generative and prospective thrust of [my] autobiography” (Smith 438) to work from an anxiety about the past and present towards this goal of hope. I found that the most difficult chapter for me to write was the cheerful one about the cottage, but I also feel like this chapter was perhaps the most successful. The transformative, reparative element to writing autobiography lies in the possibility for change that it offers. I wrote this autobiography to seize my own power from my existing family structure. In breaking the taboo of silence around my family history and risking rejection by both my family and readers, I claim the right to my history. I am declaring my own agency, my right to tell my story, in the transgressive act of writing *The Red Memory of My Hand*. As the title implies, given the incident it alludes to, this is a text that is mingled with both pride and shame about where I have come from; *The Red Memory of My Hand* is a literal slap in the face that comes, strangely, out of love.

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