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HEART'S CONTENT

by

Martha Wells

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

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1997

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Canada

for Elizabeth A. Wells
and in the memory of
Richard Wells
(1 August 1937 - 19 December 1989)

I would like to acknowledge financial support from the University of Windsor and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my director, Dr. Alistair MacLeod, for inspiring me and showing me the need to decipher cryptograms and rein in pun(ishment)s.

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FUTURES

Surely they would have preferred the Sunday, even when its symbol underwent metamorphosis from an empty sepulchre to a chocolate hatchery. Maybe the Better and the Best are implied for the days following Good Friday. Anyway, all of the stores would be closed, so Doris was forced to stockpile goods after work on Thursday. This twenty-four hour scheduling upset created untold storage difficulties because her allocated Friday food was still taking up its seventh of the fridge space.

Long weekends are not designed for singular people. Doris faced four days in her bachelor apartment, alone. The only refuge in such a pad is the bathroom. Due to the former tenant's lack of urinary tact, it had occurred to Doris when she moved in - four months previously - that strictly bachelorette apartments ought to exist, like the pre-nuptial parties. Despite the sibilance, spinster sounded to the twenty-seven-year-old unattached woman more like a desert than a dessert. Doris devoted this Friday morning to cleaning, a chore normally relegated to Sunday afternoon. Even a bleach-dipped toothbrush failed to remove the dark ring on the linoleum where the toilet had broken its gummy pact with the floor. She believed the seepage which regularly wet the heels of her socks to be the toilet's protest against feminine hygiene.

Living in little better than a refrigerator box with plumbing had already altered Doris' lifestyle. Since there was no separation between kitchen and bedroom, her diet had to be made conducive to sweet dreams. And she had stopped cooking greasy foods on the stove-top a month after she moved in when she slid her finger along the headboard, mimicking a snail's track in reverse, and

left cleanliness behind like the visiting mother-in-law of new wives' tales.

By 6:25 a.m. on Saturday, Doris realized she was unable to sleep in, or to stay up late, her work schedule having colonized her circadian rhythms. Once as a child she had decolonized an anthill.

During the weekend, she returned often to the rectangular bathroom mirror. There was a fracture across the top left corner, where a staple would be in a sheaf of paper. She had decided never to appear in that top corner. She preferred solitude to the company of bad omens. Her vow was proving difficult not to break, however, since the bathroom was small and the mirror unavoidable. The bathtub faced the mirror. After a few weeks of ducking when she first moved in, Doris had recognized the need to enter the butt-end of the tub, while pulling the curtain closed behind her. Only then could she remain unseeable as she walked the length of the tub to turn on the taps.

Unable to adjust to the rhythms of an unemployed drummer, Doris couldn't spend any time lying in bed, awake and inactive, on her days off. During her period of acclimatization back in January, she had considered the apartment building squintingly, better to understand its anatomical systems. The building's water supply had a temperature imbalance. When hot water was asked to hit both extremities of the building at once, either the top or the ground floor always suffered from poor circulation, resulting either in a cold shoulder on the eighth floor or cold feet in the basement. But the stats from months of early-morning building surveillance assured her that none of the other tenants would be showering at 6:30. To achieve the correct temperature, she simply had to line up the nail-polish indicators on the knobs over the tub with

those she had painted on the wall, strokes of genius. Since the mirror's watchfulness necessitated a constant immersion, this had proven to be the most humane way for her to start her shower. Doris thus circumvented the need to joust at the cold-water knob with her right arm for minimal exposure to climatic extremes. She was bothered by the shower curtain which hung loosely when dry, but which drew closer to her as it got wet. By the end of her shower, she was fighting the would-be shrink-wrap, which was irksome as static cling in a long, loose skirt. Her showers tended to be short.

By the gratuitous Monday, she had forsaken showers. She looked into the bottom half of the mirror and contorted her mouth into an ostensibly toothless smile to remind herself she could look worse. Then a filmy floater began its descent under her left lid. Ever since floaters had been neutralized by her encyclopedia, Doris could chuckle to herself about the opaque imperfections in her aqueous humour. Sometimes, on normal weekend afternoons, she would sit in front of the window next to her bed and her stove and track the floaters, rolling her eyes back up again every few seconds. She'd imagine that the grey film was pollution descending on the city. But that game could only be enjoyed in daylight. After dark, she'd have had to turn on the overhead light in order to see the floaters. Not only would the world be able to see her rolling her eyes, but the window would then become a mirror. She didn't like to think of having herself filmed like that.

On the Supreme Monday she looked in the mirror and thought she saw a floater, but it turned out to be a ladybug following the fissure. Relieved the creature was taking the south shore of

the crack, Doris offered the bug a Q-tip, then resettled her to the safe palm of her hand. Here the bug traced the life-line until Doris put an end to her path with her thumb.

Ladybug! Ladybug! Fly away home.

Your house is on fire.

Your children do roam.

Doris had always hated that rhyme without reason. How could anyone be expected to go home to a burning house? How could she fly with wings of fire? How could she abandon the search for her runaway children?

As a child, she'd watch an uncamouflaged ladybug act as a beacon stalking her vagrant children up a trunk toward the branches. She'd climb the ramp Doris had made of her fingernail and end up settled in the trailer park of Doris' palm. The members of the Ladybug Club claimed the number of dots indicated the years a bug had been alive. The club members also knew that hyperextending all your fingers until the inside of your wrist bulged was a form of augury. The extent of your fertility was determined by the number of lumps that appeared. Lucky Doris would have seven.

Tragedy befell Doris' world as the ladybug split her back, homewrecking, to reveal wings which carried her to freedom on the shower curtain. Not housebroken, the pimple beetles had always left, as now, a fresh-mown smell in a yellow dot on Doris' palm as soon as the trailer park was jolted by the earthquake of a sneeze. As Doris scrambled for a Kleenex, the ladybird ended up

tramping against the current of the condensation toward the window's brow, a floral topper Doris had purchased at Honest Ed's.

The honorary Ladybugs would stand at the base of the tree outside the piano teacher's house down the street and wait for the bugs to show up. Sometimes they had to pretend to be nonchalant, to sneak up on the tree when it was least expecting it. The piano teacher was of the old, knuckle-rapping school. And his dog had a penchant for pulverizing Doris' leg between its paws.

This time she wouldn't put her pet into a bottle; in Mason jars they turned to stone. She'd just close the windows. "I'll bet no one ever asked about your family history. Tell me about yourself. Oh, you're a little bit shy? Not a problem. For now, we'll see what other people have had to say about you. That's okay, we'll just sit and read this encyclopedia."

"Take a look at this. 'As a part of ritual courtship and mating, the male beetle transfers spermatophores to the female.' That sounds all right, you know. The sperm is all done up in a tiny, sealed sheath. Humans can be *so* messy. Everyone in this city thinks I'm a true spinster. I don't get it; I don't mind the concept. Do you guys ever do it *just for fun*? Check this out: 'Springtails partake of indirect sperm transfer, which results in dissociation of the male and female. Males drop packets at random for females to gather at their leisure and discretion.' I don't believe you're like your relatives at all, are you? That's worse. Don't you agree? There's no telling who those men think about when they make their donation at the sperm bank. A real

lady doesn't accept packages from strangers."

"When ladybugs perceive would-be attackers, they have two available ruses. The first is playing 'possum.' Don't listen to your instincts, darling. I think they prefer you to be passive anyway." Doris skimmed a few lines before continuing. "Ah, this is more like it, girl. 'In reflex bleeding, sudden abdominal contractions force yellowish, evil-smelling blood through weak points in the skin, usually at the leg joints.' You've got built-in mace, honey. That's brilliant."

"The people at work probably think I'm a big prude. I don't talk to them much, you know. You should see them at break-time. It's like they spend the work-time winding up their tongues. I hate the breaks. We're not allowed to stay in our cubicles. I have to turn off my walkman because people would look at me funny AND say stuff about me that I wouldn't be able to hear. It's the worst when they stick around for lunch. You can't let them see you're alone. So I take my time in the bathroom, you know. I started out going up to the one on the top floor of our building. Not on the elevator, of course. The stairs take longer. But there's no need to walk up whenever the people in my unit all take off to the café down the street without asking me to join them. Sometimes I go outside, pretend I want fresh air, you know. The remaining smokers can't say anything bad about me if I'm right in front of them."

"Ladybugs are among the few beneficial beetles And they're among the few meat-eaters. Oh, ladybird, ladybird. I have sinned." As a child, Doris had not done the necessary research. She had placed iceberg lettuce in the Mason jar with the ladybugs and watched the leaves turn slowly

to slime.

"I'm going to get you a little treatipoo." First thing Tuesday morning, Doris called into her work - she was a tax adjustor - and told the unit supervisor she had caught a bug. Then she trekked to Loblaws, her head angled down against imaginary winds. She searched for a miniature rose, a supermarket plant she knew harboured aphids.

"You should've heard me tut with disapproval as I passed over the plants with black spot. That'd be like me buying cracked wheat bread instead of sixty percent whole wheat. Then I found the trolley of damaged goods. That's what one of my girlfriends in high school called herself after her brother practised on her. Some of it is unsalvageable. But there, in behind bags of overripe bananas, dented cereal boxes and bloated tins of soup, I found your present. I think the little holes are cute." Doris placed the semi-perforated miniature rose on the coffee-kitchen-night table. "Regular price \$4.99. I got it for \$1.83."

She called into work again late Tuesday afternoon and asked for a week's leave. There was no problem; she just wouldn't get paid. What were they saying about her in her absence? Or, even worse: Had she crossed anyone's mind?

By Tuesday evening, Doris fully understood her mother's complaints about cooking to accommodate conflicting diets. Vegetarian rectitude would have to be sacrificed. She would eat with the rest of the family. She told the ladybug, "bacteria is animal life," and left her whole

Wednesday menu, including the meat-lover's tastalike vegetarian tofu burger, naked on the counter overnight. She also boiled part of the ladybug's plant, skimming the aphids from the surface of the water, to get an infusion of makeshift rosehip tea.

When she awoke from her habitual nap on Wednesday afternoon, Doris was flattered to find the hard red shell on her pillowcase. "Oh, my darling!" she whispered. "Did you want to sleep with Pretty Old Doris?" But she soon realized the ladybug wasn't sleeping, wasn't playing 'possum. "It's too soon, my Little Cranberry. And us just starting to open up to each other. You can't leave me." Doris muted her sobs with a cupped hand. "Selfish thing, letting myself doze off in the middle of the day when I have company. I'll make myself pay for this. But what do I do now?"

Her usual crew of floaters was soon drowned by tears. She pulled her rocker to the epicentre of the room and settled down with the *Chatelaine* which was already outdated when she had lifted it from the gynaecologist's office the previous month. Permitting herself to consume the "jiffy-time" decorating article she had been saving, she scanned the walls to determine which of her six Christmas gift calendars would have to be sacrificed to make room for the chipped dinner plates she would "snazz up" with the lace trim from old underwear.

Her chafing grief soon practically exposed the nerves beneath her tracing-paper skin. For once, she wasn't startled when she noticed Munch's plastic *Scream* somewhat deflated in the corner. She sensed movement, though, and knew the blow-up masterpiece couldn't be rocking in the still

apartment. When she stared into the face of angst, she could swear she saw a blood vessel break in its right eye. "Oh my God! Is that you, precious? Oh my honey, I thought we'd lost each other forever. But, how did you ...?" Doris found the old red shell safe in its pillbox tomb. "Leaving the past behind?" She compared the contents of each palm. "Heavens! Am I shrinking or are you getting bigger?"

Back in her rocker, Doris returned to the bookmarked "beetle" entry in her encyclopedia. "Animals encased in armoured skeletons' - I like that - 'armoured'. Remember that Simon and Garfunkel tune? How's it go? 'I am shielded in my armour.' Maybe no one ever played it for you. Tell you what: I'll flick on my walkman later and turn the volume right up so we can both hear through the headphones. Sound good? Good. Now, where was I? Oh yes. 'armoured skeletons which can grow only by moulting, or ecdysis.' 'Ecdysis' - gross. Sounds like a skin condition. Well, I guess it is one, isn't it?" Doris laughed loudly, rocking, for more than a minute. "Sorry, sweet pea. I get carried away. 'Moulting is a hazardous process at all times. The animal is extremely vulnerable to enemies until its new cuticle is formed.' Cuticle. I like that. Would it be okay if I called you that? Yah. Cuticle."

Doris surveyed her apartment, tucking all small, rough-edged objects into an emptied Tampax box. She fretted for a few moments about the sandpapered flat paint, then reasoned that it couldn't be worse than tree bark. She retrieved the miniature rose from the garbage and laid it on its placemat.

On Thursday morning, Doris decided that she and Cuticle should get better acquainted. The first few hours were filled with pleasantries about the weather and with truisms about the crucifixion. Then Doris began to flush the impurities from her nervous system, having convinced herself that Little Cuticle could listen better if she were allowed to scale the window, drop down to the lower edge, then climb back up again.

"You know that doctor out in Etobicoke with the cheesy sign - 'Glad to Be of Cervix'? Dr. Whosit. I went out there so no one from work would hear about it. What goes on down there" - Doris pointed to her crotch - "is none of their business. Anyway, it really wasn't her job, but the doctor told me I should get a companion, preferably a cat because I'm away at work for most of the day. But I was afraid of what that would mean, you know? If I got a cat, would I be saying I was okay with being alone? But, you know what? This does feel good, letting everything out. You know me better than anyone else here. See? I'm not hard to get to know at all, now am I? Hard to come to a city of people you don't know. And I'm everyone's stranger. I was pretty happy at first, all the same, to get away from that whole thing back home."

She stood up on the rocking chair, intent on balance while she removed her clothing and threw each article, bunched up, onto her bed. "Before George, guys used to break it off with me. They said I frustrated them 'cause I couldn't communicate. It had nothing to do with what I *could* do. I knew they wouldn't want to hear what I was thinking anyway. You know what they're like. They wanted me to praise their video lottery wins and agree that they were fun drunks, laugh along. Acquiescent humour. I let them beat me, at pool, when they let me play. But I didn't

say much to them. And they wanted me to sleep with them, of course." Doris leapt from the chair as from a burning boat and pressed both hands against the windowpane in front of her face, braced forward in search position.

"But, you see, I told myself I couldn't sleep with anyone until it felt right. My big sister had warned me that anyone would be able to make my body tingle. She said I should just ignore that, that I'd know it was love when my head went funny. When I met George, we talked and talked for weeks. I'd go to bed outlining my ears with my fingertips, thinking of the way his lips formed o's, the way his neck grew when he swallowed between topics. Soon his voice started to lick its way up my thighs, like the bass boom at school dances."

"George turned out to be a real talker, all right. Well, those guys couldn't believe that George Hoffman - everyone thought he was a loser - had been able to get at me. After he took off to the Northwest Territories to look for work, a bunch of them felt they should try to outdo him. I never was good with crowds."

Sunday evening. Doris is walking west on Bloor Street. Within her not-strictly-necessary mittens, she is using her fingertips to push back her cuticles. "She died so that I might live." Normally, she walks staring down not at her feet, but at the heels of the person in front of her. She has become adept at regulating, in this way, at what speed she should travel, taking the information in stride. But today she is determined to be level-headed, absorbing everything around her.

Doris' head spins in the whirl of buses and footsteps and the odd voice calling from the doorway - "Hey, ..." - which always turns out not to be for her. Conversations swell as they approach, crash against her stony silence, her rocky stare, then retreat into their ocean of history. People follow the traffic rules on the sidewalk. Doris considers walking on the left hand side, not pedestrian, but European. But not seriously.

Her intestines suddenly twisted into a tourniquet of pain, Doris is forced to challenge destiny, to establish a destination. Time runs with its laces undone. Although she doesn't know if she can make it to Futures, she bypasses the Second Cup, having only enough money for one coffee and not knowing where the washroom is.

The first of many potential bosses had conducted her interview at Futures in January. Doris' bowels were in a state then, too, but from stress and not grief. As she pauses now, vacuum-packed, in the phone-booth sized porch between the two sets of doors, she scans the room for recognizable faces to be avoided. Someone enters behind her from outside, and she is forced to move. The porch inhales the smoky café air as Doris crosses the threshold between outer and inner.

She edges around the periphery of the tables and descends to the bathrooms. Once the other women have cleared out, she is purged, praying all the while that no one else will enter. Since there is no sound from the stairs when she washes her hands, she decides to play an airhead. She redirects the grate of the dryer upwards and bends forward at the waist in front of the flow,

allowing her hair to obscure her face. She resembles those Red Riding Hood dolls who turn into big bad wolves when you lift their floor-length skirts over their heads. Paper bag rape. A noise on the stairs makes Doris revert. No one can accuse her of being vain.

When she tops the stairs, the five people ahead of her before the cash are kept in line by caffeine cravings. Although she carries only a cupful of change, Doris focuses on the desserts in the display case, one by one. They are arranged according to their fat content, a basket of open-air whole-grain scones is the lightheaded, yet sensible toupé above the pear-torte thighs and the heavenly-hash hips. Anyone watching could tell she was keeping her options open, being spontaneous. Doris knows that men hunger for voracious stick women.

She investigates the first half of the saccharine smorgasbord from the end at her left to the center directly before her. The man in front of her in line is also zoning in, his head tilted slightly towards her. Doris can tolerate only a few face-burning seconds of possible eye contact before she returns her all-consuming gaze to the left. Setting her sights beyond her neighbour might lead him on to believe that she is flirting.

Doris begins to fear that the clientele seated behind her will find her sinister fixation curious. She is convinced that everyone in the café is watching her, performing a botched job of visual acupuncture on her back, creating eye-sores. Hellish other people. She doesn't want people to believe she has failed to find any dessert which meets her snobbish standards. Instead, she lets them think she's watching her weight; she pumps skim milk into her coffee.

As she finishes conducting the symphony of choices with her nose and turns to face the crowd, she realizes that she has been entertaining a full house. No empty seats are to be seen. She unties and reties the laces of her sneakers, then is spared further stage fright by a parting couple. Sidestepping her way towards her seat between two of the long tables in the middle of the room like a latecomer at a movie - "excuse me", "sorry", "thank you" - Doris mutes conversations as she proceeds. Halfway there, having passed four people, she translates people's inquiring glances: she has taken the long way. She hadn't known she could forge a wider pathway near the rim of the café, then would only have to edge past one person. She dips her gaze into her coffee, as if to ensure that none will spill over.

A few seconds after she sits down, she lifts her head slightly and discovers she's protected on both sides, by a verbally-aroused couple to her left and by one of the five current chess games to her right. Then she looks straight ahead, expecting for some reason the comfort of a familiar face, her own reflection in the window. But her view is obstructed by another customer. A man is staring at her. She reaches for the sugar, then starts pouring it into her cup directly from the bottle, instead of measuring out her usual few grains more than half a teaspoon. Although she cannot look up again, she has stilled the image of his gutter-snow grey skin, hair, and whiskers.

If he was being driven to visual distraction by her presence across the table from him, he also seemed to be making eye contact with himself over his nose. Doris had avoided the milky iris of the half-blind girl who showed up in second grade. The stillness of the dead eye did not soothe like warm milk; it only lent emphasis to the mad darting of the good eye. The

asymmetrical girl's mother gave her a coloured contact lens for her birthday so she could be seen normally.

Doris is unable to script her next move. Her coffee is too hot to drink, her throat too tight to swallow anyway. Having a marked aversion to aging loners, she manages to avert her eyes from him. The possibilities of the bulletin board, half full of posters from the positive thinkers club, are soon exhausting. The free copies of *Now* are probably outdated and are out of reach, way over near the lunch counter. Doris squirms out of her nylon shell, and is prodded in the cheek by a secreted office pen.

And so, coffee too hot, no resting place for hand or eye, Doris decides to go downstairs again. A younger woman is chewing gum into the phone and spinning the postcard stand which sits between the women's and the men's washrooms. "You can't get away with that shit. Did you hear me? Yah?" The young woman raises her voice further anyway. "Well, tell me what I said." Back in the bathroom, Doris notices a pile of flimsy fluorescent business cards next to the sink and picks one up. It's an advertisement for a product called Arsum. The blurb doesn't explain how the product aids weight loss. She is again short-taken, this time cherishing her good fortune.

"You suck SHIT! Go FUCK yourself!" Doris hears the double-barrelled explosion out in the hall and approaches the postcard rack once she figures the girl has stamped her way upstairs. The postcard selection leaves something to be desired. More postcards, to be precise. There are

mostly promotions for Canadian novelists Doris has never heard of - no one ever sent *her* such a card. These cards contain one quote, usually printed in large yellow or orange letters against a dark background, the writers thus illuminating the darkness of the Canadian landscape it will take each card more than a week to cross.

In her rush to choose before someone emerges either from the men's washroom or from the staircase, Doris grabs a couple of the postcards with the eye-ensnaring picture. It looks like a photograph of an embroidered pillow sham. The words are discernible only after she squints at the sky within the pattern, a migratory V of Canadian geese. (Doris never did like V - Vagina, Virginitly, Virility, Victory, Vanishing - and has even created a different notation to indicate insertions at work.) All in uniform printing: "Ten twenty fifty brown birds flew past the window and then a few stragglers, out of sight. A fringe of Mrs Vardoe's mind flew after them (what were they? - birds returning in migration, of course) and then was drawn back into the close fabric of her preoccupations." Doris was at a loss as to why such an unremarkable passage had been chosen to promote a book. The textile artist had cleverly emphasized the fringe around the pillow. The words themselves seemed to have been poured in reverse order into the V, the last words anyone would read gathering in the crotch or cleavage, depending on whether the reader considered the words or their context to be more important. The author's name and the book's title appeared only on the backside of the card. Ethel Wilson. There had been a Wilson back home. Ernie? Aaron? He was laid off by the logging camps after the fall he filed for Workers' Compensation for the fingertips of his right hand. Only his thumbnail remained. Doris knows how the tapestry would feel under his fingerstumps. Not how he would sense the tapestry, no,

but how the pillow would receive his rough grip. She shivers.

This time she takes the alternate route to her seat. The grey man she gauges peripherally has not budged.

Dear George,

Thank you for asking after me when you requested the letter of reference from dear old Dad. I felt I should tell you myself. I've never been better. I answer to no one. Nothing beats having a great job. This is how you must have felt when you first cut loose from our little town. Dad tells me you have to get married soon. Congratulations! My dad probably forgot to mention that I'm seeing someone. Maybe now would be a good time for me to tell you about him.

It started at a cafe here called Futures. I had strolled down there one night to grab a coffee and read the paper. Our eyes met first. He noticed me as soon as I breezed in. He was sitting with a few friends. He looked up at me, was drinking only to me with his eyes over the rim of his coffee cup. But he didn't smile, not right away. You know the benefits of holding back. The line was short. I ordered hot chocolate with extra whipped cream and rocky-road cheesecake. As my tip dropped in the bowl by the cash, I glanced at him again. He smiled now, motioned for me to sit with him. His friends had moved or left. There were so many empty seats, but I thought, "What the hell", and slid in beside him.

Of course, we got along famously. He's so kind, George. He wanted to know everything.

Things led to things. You know how it is. Well, there's the phone - again!! - and here's the end of the postcard!

Hope things go as well for you.

With love,

Doris

Doris recaps her pen and looks up, forgetting. The grey flesh of her story crosses her eyes like a paper-cut. She hurriedly dumps more sugar into her neglected coffee. Some words make it past his tongue in a gust of beer-breath: "A sweetie like you doesn't need sugar."

"Heh heh." Doris has heard that stuff before, on television. She focuses on the beige whirlpool her spoon has left in its wake.

"But I notice you didn't need to add cream." A familiar pressure evokes the piano teacher's dog attempting to dry dock between her thighs, rocking, while she waited for her lesson to begin. Now she pushes away the laced, vinyl snout that is muzzled in her jeans. There's a thud as her pursuer's foot reconnects with the floor.

Doris' older sister had done the big city. She admonished Doris of the grey characters who would be lurching toward her from the front of subway cars late at night. *Fee fie foe fum* - the giant steps for unkind man could be counted out. Each forward thrust would be twice its apparent length because the ground would always be scuttling away in the opposite direction. Doris was told to look him in the eye, bend forward at the waist towards him, draw her hands to her mouth, and retch until he left.

Doris believes he will be lurking in the hallway when she leaves the washroom. So she prepares herself. His absence only fortifies her resolve. Back upstairs, she sways into a seat, now right next to him. She does not wonder whether those around her will interpret her move as

independent or desperate. She passes him something, a piece of cloth which exudes a fresh-mown aroma, then scuttles through the café, and out to the sidewalk. Anyone looking closely could see the white lace trim she's saved, that's wrapped around her hand as she drops the postcard into the mailbox at the Shoppers Drug Mart down the street.

L'AUTRE (f.)

On any afternoon back then, had I been out on the narrow streets of Saint-Pierre around half past five, I could have met up with Alphonse as he left the *mairie* and traipsed with him through the snow or slush down to the post office. It's likely that we would have then stopped with the sailors for a tumbler of dark rum at the *Bar aux Marins*. Turning towards the fireplace, we may have envisaged the long fingers of the Caribbean Sea smoothing the Atlantic and stroking the beaches of Martinique and Guadeloupe we knew through the brief Sunday t.v. reports from *Radio France Outre-mer*. But eventually, just before leaving, we would have had to turn and look out beyond the post office. The Atlantic would be raising its calloused hand again and again to the furrowed face of the Saint-Pierre harbour. On special occasions, I could have accompanied him then to the nearby *pâtisserie* where he'd pick up dessert, raspberry custard tarts - the favourite of Lena, his twelve-year-old daughter. But when we reached the main road, our paths would have diverged, with nothing more than an "*A plus tard*." I would have begun my slippery ascent to his house, my *pension*. I always chose not to meet up with Alphonse.

I remember looking forward to the afternoons. When my class terminated at four o'clock (the postprandial *atelier* provided interactive language training - from basket-weaving to *tai chi*), I would exchange quick French farewells with my classmates, then would rush up past the fire station. My *pension* was on the corner, in one half of a duplex. The family used to conduct a business in the other part, at the intersection, but I was told that no one had ventured in there for about twelve years. Like so many of the sundry stores in Saint-Pierre, they had carried *un petit peu* of everything and didn't bother with a store-front sign. Never did they surrender to outside

influence and sell goods from Canada or the States, though these products could easily have been bartered for rum or cigarettes with the sailors from Fortune.

That is one of the stories Mireille, the head of my *pension*, told me one afternoon, during tea. She would become quite animated, these times, telling me about her past with Alphonse, about Alphonse's past. Her stories made savoury the French history I was learning at the *Institut*. I never did discover the protocol for finding out more about her. Direct questioning would have seemed impertinent - she didn't pose in-depth personal questions to *me* - and I didn't want her to stop talking altogether. I only ever missed one afternoon tea with Mireille during my four-month stay on the island. That was at the end, the day before my departure late in April.

In January, unlike during the other five winter months, the weather plays few guessing games in Saint-Pierre. Snow is piled flush to the houses by the plow's single cut down the narrow streets. I would arrive home frozen sick from my singing workshop and as my nose melted onto the boots I was unlacing, I'd be given a warm, sweet welcome from Mireille's oven. On this day, as on every other, Mireille asked me politely if I would like some tea and a little something to eat. I sat at the dining room table and Mireille brought out a snowdrift of hot cream-coloured cookies. *Les biscuits russes*. They reminded Alphonse of his mother, she explained, whose people were originally from Russia. Mireille seemed a tender guardian of Alphonse's memories. She told me that he had been an engineering student in France when the Algerian war for independence had broken out. He fought proudly for his adopted country, having left Poland behind.

At this point, only two weeks after my arrival on the ferry from Newfoundland, Mireille was still speaking to me in English. Her words came slowly, but I now know that her

translations were carefully and precisely idiomatic.

"Alphonse, he still finds it hard, I think. He was only sixteen when he went to fight. He joined his good friend, a *colon* from Algeria who had also been studying in France. Alphonse only stayed in Algeria for two years."

I was loyal to my ignorance and found out about the war indirectly. "*Monsieur*, he went to Algeria right at the beginning of the war, or ... ?" I asked, as though I merely wished to fit Alphonse into a clearly demarcated mental time line of history. I, too, spoke slowly, though in French.

"No, no. He was conscripted in '56 and was only there for two years. But he received news of the war for the next couple of years from the hospital in France."

"Oh. Was he wounded, then?"

"Not exactly. He was in the countryside fighting the rebel peasants when his friend was hit."

"By the other side?"

"I imagine. Alphonse only spoke to me about it once. When I first met him." Mireille sat shaking her head slightly as she finished her tea. I may have offered a sympathetic bilingual cluck or two.

During the supper-hour news from France we all chewed in relative silence, watching. I found my position uncomfortable, since my seat was nearly adjacent to the television and I had to keep peering over my left shoulder to see the screen. Quite often, my neck stiff from twisting towards the images, I'd end up grasping the news through the family's reactions to it. The incomprehension evident on Lena's face was, at first, the only thing I could understand.

Nonetheless, these newscasts ultimately proved a vital component of my language acquisition, since Alphonse was always quick to offer what sounded like intelligent commentary on the underlying issues. The French pace of language sometimes overwhelmed me - he spoke as much English as I did Polish - so my concentration was maximized. I let him believe my ignorance was purely linguistic.

One night at the end of January, Mireille had served up *coquilles saint jacques* and puréed potatoes. The reporter in Paris described an "Arab uprising". There was unrest in the capital fomented by demonstrators from the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front. Alphonse shook his clenched fist next to his striated face, growling at the screen.

"That's *my* country! It's being overrun by foreigners, by blacks! *My* country!"

My French skills were yet insufficiently developed to express what I perceived to be a lapse in Alphonse's judgement. While I would have been able to explain only one tenth of the newscast, the import of what Alphonse was saying was clear to me. I had skipped ahead in my history text - my class was still discovering New France and learning to dry fish outdoors on *graves* - and knew the French conspirators against the National Assembly in 1958 had been white. Lena was my ally in wide-eyed silence, as alarmed as I was by her father's outburst. After she had poured herself a glass of the thick French milk from the *Grand Pré* box, she offered me some. Mireille nodded vigorously at her husband, then shook her head.

"I don't know why he had to go ahead and marry her."

My expression must have evolved from fear into confusion.

"My aunt is a black," Lena explained. "From Algiers." Mireille's brother always visited us alone.

I wonder if I would have spoken up then, had I known that during World War I, when the first contingent of *Saint Pierrais* had arrived in France to fight for the Mother Country, French officials had been astonished that these colonials, unlike the *Antillais*, were fair-skinned. It would have been a question of knowing my place.

It had unnerved me somewhat back in early January that Mireille so readily made me her *confidant*. In my experience, women my mother's age preferred to discuss intimacies with each other or with grown daughters. Mireille said a certain hunger for knowledge in my eyes reminded her of her son Jean-Guy, who had left ten years earlier to become an engineer in Brest. I felt flattered to be compared to the handsome young man in the photograph on top of the old piano. But I wondered if she had needed to confide in him as she did in me.

Although I never did hear anyone in my host family complain about the weather, grumbling became one of my first proficiencies in French. Mireille would peer past the lace curtain in the kitchen to give me a forecast before I left for school each morning. Every Friday afternoon, my class would congregate at the *Centre Culturel* for volleyball and swimming. It was not only the weather that scrimshawed this particular day in February into my mind. There must have been many afternoons, after all, when shards of the dreaded *poudrin* would slice my face as I walked home. My habitual swift return to my *pension* was checked by the wind. With my foolishly undried hair and waterlogged ears tucked into my sheepskin hat, I kept myself from crying by intermittently closing my eyes and dreaming of the hot drink and bickies that awaited me. On days like this, when the ice wind would lash me, I could easily have interpreted the undying flush in Mireille's cheeks as the autograph of the northerly winds. But never once during the semester did I see her out around the town.

This day it was *madeleines*. After the Second World War, Alphonse's family was forced by a climate of frozen produce prices and squalls of high taxes to move from their farm in the Polish countryside to nearby Poznan, where his father had immediately found weather-resistant employment at a steel mill. Alphonse had been attending university in Strasbourg for more than a year when the French gave him a choice: he could return to riots in Poland or fight as a French citizen in Algeria.

"I went to France, as Jean-Guy did, when I was eighteen." Mireille had found a job at a bakery in Strasbourg, although she still dreamed of Paris. A year later, in 1960, she married one of her customers, the tall stranger who didn't leer at her, hardly met her eyes at all. The couple arrived in Saint-Pierre, as did air mail, via Montréal. Their Canadian stopover lasted four years. Adept at languages, having been forced by her father to cater to their foreign customers, Mireille found an unofficial job as an interpreter. A woman in their apartment building looked after the newborn Jean-Guy in exchange for the daily bread which Mireille woke early to bake. When they received the telegram about her father's death, Alphonse stopped his job hunt.

Back in Saint-Pierre, they both took charge of the family business, moved into the family home. "My old friends became distant. They said they couldn't believe I had abandoned an ailing parent to seek my fortune in France. I think the real problem was that they couldn't accept Alphonse as one of their own. What did I care? We were partners, Alphonse and I. We had Jean-Guy and we didn't need anyone else."

"And your business thrived, nonetheless?"

"Yes. Well, my father and my uncles had built up a certain reputation here during the twenties and thirties. People still frequented the business out of respect for him and for my poor

mother. She was never the same after Papa died. Besides, we ran a fair business, reasonable prices, you know."

"Of course, of course."

"But then 1978 was the year of big changes. Lena was born and we shut down the store. Alphonse got a job at the *mairie*."

"And you stayed at home, and worked?"

"Yes, I devoted myself to my little girl."

"She's a lovely child."

"I think she's her daddy's little girl. Have you noticed how she beams when he arrives home for supper?"

"No, not especially," I lied. I had also noticed that Mireille did not always look as thrilled as her daughter, but I had supposed she was tired from cooking.

On *Mardi Gras* late in February, my night of revelry and disguise was preceded by a delicious meal of crêpes. Mireille explained that her mother had always kept a tin of fat for this meal on top of the china cabinet in the dining room. I didn't understand. She showed me how to slather the chocolate-nut spread and strawberry jam over the entire crêpe, to dollop the sweetened cream on one side, then to roll it so that the filling oozed out at both ends.

When we had finished eating, Lena piped up, "Papa! You promised to help me find a costume, remember? Mama said I should be Carmen again, but my friend is being a gypsy. Will you help me, Papa?"

"Yes, Lena. But we must do it right away. I have to go into work tonight."

"Again, Papa? Does that mean we can't play Sega before my school party?"

"Not tonight, my little treasure. Come, let's go look through Jean-Guy's things in the attic."

They usually carried their plates to the sink. As I helped Mireille scrape out the remains of her family's abandoned food, I attributed our silence to the blaring television. It was the political spoof in which a frog puppet represented Mitterrand. Alphonse always laughed; he knew about the government. When I placed the last of the water glasses on the kitchen table, Mireille was nodding her head and reshaping her expressive eyebrows in a private conversation. After a minute, she said I could go get ready for the festivities; she had no plans. Perhaps I should have stayed in with her then, as the eyes of her discontent were unveiled, instead of heading to Joinville to search for my peers amid the throng of masked dancers.

In March, I had to be prepared for anything. While the sun might force open my winter coat in the morning, I soon discovered that the wind accompanying the lunch-time rains would merely laugh at umbrellas and metamorphose them from protective hunchbacks into hideous chalices. Then, by the time I headed home after school, another wind change might have made the walking treacherous, as the slush would have frozen into child-size ridges, clutching feet and twisting ankles.

When I made it home on this day, the usual baking smells did not embrace me and kiss me on each cheek. It wasn't until I was hanging up my rain slicker in the porch that Mireille poked her head out of the kitchen doorway guiltily, as though caught eating store-bought cookies. Not seeing her smile was like seeing someone new. As I greeted her and sat at the table, I decided to keep on my heavy sweater. The room was chilly. Although I always watched her as we had our tea, today I faced an old woman. An inch of whiteness had sprouted from her

scalp. The hospital sheet of her face and forearms was stained by the red in her cheeks, by the patterns work and time had etched on her slender hands. I was having bread and jam. She wasn't eating.

"You don't mind it? Me, I'm not that fussy about that kind of bread." She had made a similar comment during lunch.

"It certainly has a different texture." I was actually partial to this bread we'd been having more often lately. Unlike the hard-shelled *baguettes* and *ficelles* I had grown accustomed to here, this bread was dense and chewy.

"Why do you think he suddenly prefers the bread from way down at Dagort to Remy Beck's, right around the corner?" Mireille kept shifting in her chair. She pinched her teacup like a nerve, her bare elbow held at ear level. I had never before noticed this position. I would have.

"Did you know he sleeps in the basement, Alphonse?" she continued.

The presumed safety of my false ignorance conquered the smug power of knowledge. I offered a perplexed look.

"He's been down there for years now. And did anyone tell you that Lena has a half-sister? Not that they know about each other. I wouldn't want that. And now Alphonse has started coming home before Lena wakes up. Staying out all night with this other woman, bringing home the wrong bread from over that way. How long do you think she'll believe her father works so late at the *mairie*? Does she even know what he does there?" Mireille had resented Alphonse's pleasure at his new job as a draftsman for the town council. Their partnership had seemed to dissolve almost as soon as their business closed twelve years earlier.

"I'm sorry Mireille. I never would have suspected." Mostly I was sorry that I had no

advice to offer.

"She's from Paris. I used to get comfort thinking she wouldn't be around for long. She'd do her time here, like the *gendarmes*, like the doctors. I figure Canadian doctors, even those in the remote outposts, have more credibility. Both of my children have dual citizenship."

"That was an intelligent decision."

"But that woman has stayed for ten years now. Her child was born here. At first, she was a reporter for RFO. She would appear on those short Sunday reports from here. She stopped that when she started to show. Now I've heard that she's writing a novel." Her eyes narrowed even more as she sipped the tea that was still too hot.

She was intent on exposure. "How long do you have to immerse yourself in a culture before you get it right? What's so different about us, anyway? I wish she'd hurry up with that book and go back where she came from. I can hardly go out at all now, I'm so wary of running into her. Sometimes I watch her through this window." Mireille now seemed a forecaster of something even more volatile than the weather, as she pulled the curtain not to the side, but towards her face. She peered through the eyelets toward the street. "Walking right by here with the child. Couldn't she choose another route?"

"She knows all about you, then?"

"I'm pretty sure. She must. Yes. Sometimes I see her with the child from the attic above the shop. They go sledding down that hill over there."

"I thought the store was permanently locked up."

"Yes, but ... don't tell Alphonse?"

"I wouldn't."

"Lena, my little lamb, doesn't even know she's competing for her father's love. He couldn't leave her. She doesn't value me. How can she respect me, not knowing why I stay here behind the curtain trying to make everything perfect for her? I have told her I used to be a highly-regarded translator in Montréal. But that's just words to her. I don't blame her, though. Her father buys her things, provides for her."

I decided to stay at the dining room table and pick through my readings for school, in case Mireille needed an ear to fill as she prepared supper. But she didn't go on. Lena appeared about an hour later to practise her piano. She found the notes much as she chose pastries from the glass case at Remy Beck's. While she inevitably settled on the raspberry custard tart, on the right note, her hand always hovered in front of the glass, above the keys, pointing towards imperfect options, discordance. Her slow rendition of one of Haydn's German Dances was interrupted by a phone call. "Papa! ... Pizza! ... A bientôt!" Lena replaced the large receiver and danced around the coffee table, her singing voice now easily connecting Haydn's notes.

"You must sit back in front of that piano. That's only twenty minutes you've done," Mireille intoned flatly from the kitchen as she began to rewrap the sole filets. Then, she replaced the carrots, turnip, and potatoes, already peeled, and banged shut the "crisper" drawer.

As I recall, the crust was too thin for my taste.

I'm not sure if that April was exceptional, but a damp, numb calm imposed itself on Saint-Pierre at the last of the month. There were no more blizzards. The weather changes were more nuanced. Only rarely did sunlight pierce the fog. I had grown eager for skim milk, sliced bread, and leafy vegetables.

The day before the students' conscience-felt declarations to customs at the end of April,

I missed tea because I was scooting around buying souvenirs. It seemed the clientèle in the shops consisted almost exclusively of students from the *Institut*, eager to secrete a little bit of France among their textbooks and long underwear. I'd been told the Saint-Pierrais themselves rarely bought the expensive overseas perfumes, and that the young people ordered all their clothes from *La Redoute*, a high-fashion French catalogue. Among much else, I purchased the permitted two bottles of rum, a carton of cigarettes to sell to my nephews, and some raspberry custard tarts I planned to sneak to my mother in a Q-Tips box.

When I arrived home at my *pension*, no one came out to comment on my lumpy tutu of parcels. The conflicting currents of whispered voices capsized my lightweight shopping mood. I tiptoed in as far as the living room couch, which was piled high with unfolded laundry, but was repelled by Mireille's hissed invective: "Do you plan to ruin Lena's life as well?" After stowing away my purchases upstairs, I joined Lena, who was playing Sega in the room next to mine, oblivious to her parents' argument. Ten minutes later, Alphonse summoned his daughter: "A la soupe!"

Straight away I noticed the bloodstained dishcloth *pansement* which bound two of Mireille's fingers. I reasoned it would be more impolite not to ask what had happened.

"A glass broke." Mireille continued to serve up the macaroni, although her cumbersome bandage obviously made the ladle's handle difficult to grip. "I was drying dishes ... Alphonse distracted me ... It just all shattered."

Usually Mireille topped the macaroni with gruyère and pepper, but today the dish was *blancmange* in the insipid French sense, and served with chewy bread. Lena didn't seem to notice, as she regaled me with strategic video-game manoeuvres. Anchored at the foot of the

heavy table, Alphonse didn't touch the pasta. He peeled an onion, then ate it slowly, slice by slice, unaware of how the knife's strokes were threatening his thumb. He glowered intermittently at his wife. Mireille, rigidly poised opposite him, looked at no one, did not eat. She merely shifted the things in front of her, the salt and pepper, the water jug. Realigned her placemat with the table's edge, worried over the linen in the bread basket. Even Lena soon grew quiet.

"You should get that seen to." Perhaps I should have spoken in English to tell Mireille about options to endurance. But I knew Lena was learning English and I didn't want to risk entangling her further in the adult world.

"It might be better by tomorrow. In any case, I don't want to postpone the pain with medicine any more." Perhaps she knew her options.

Mireille never answered the letters I sent - via Montréal - for the first few months. Every now and then during the past six years I have wondered what became of her and her family. *Comme il faut*, I have tried to maintain my French skills. I placed a book order for the most recent *Prix Goncourt* recipient's *chef d'oeuvre*. The review in *L'Actualité* said the novel is set in Saint-Pierre and explores the way insularity affects people's minds. One of the characters takes in boarders for years, then ends up at the nearest psychiatric facility in Newfoundland after her daughter leaves for university in France. I'm trying to quell my uneasy eagerness.

TROJANS

"Steve has decided to come down for the break. Is that okay, Helen?"

"Oh. When is that?"

"Second weekend in October."

"Sounds great. We'll have to take him to Junctions."

"Sure. You don't mind him staying here?"

"Not at all."

The idea of Steve coming all the way across the country to see Leah for a few days actually makes Helen quiver. It sounds like something her parents would have done before settling down made it unnecessary. She finds commitment erotic. During the past month, Helen's beer-wandering mind has beaten down a footpath, a short-cut to happiness. She always pictures Steve and Leah together when she ends up in her room, lying on her hands, thinking. Leah is adored by a passionate, understanding man who actually writes her letters. Steve seems a defender against panic attacks and an assuager of menstrual tension. Framed photographs of the couple are stuck on the fridge, above the t.v., even next to the mirror in the bathroom. Helen has convinced herself that, on first meeting her, a perfect man such as Steve could only have overreacted to her customary mock advances.

Across a sea of cowboy hats bobbing in time to the music, she finds it unsettling, the way Steve looks at her.

When Helen first moved into university last year, residence life wasn't as she had imagined. Although many moving hassles had been avoided and new friendships were soon forged, after a few weeks she made the ten-pound discovery that the meal plan didn't agree with her and decided she would find a place of her own for the next September. For now, the contract deadbolted her into Hatcher until May. A Come From Away, Leah was one of the last people Helen got to know. Instead of eating her suppers with everyone else in the dining hall, Leah would cart her tray through the tunnels back to her desk. One night in early October, Helen was revising an anthropology paper on traditions of sexuality and fertility in Africa. Her prof had read her first draft and recommended that she watch a special news report about AIDS within a non-Western paradigm. At 10:30, she rushed to the lounge at the other end of her floor. Startled to find Leah there, Helen traded a "hey" for a "hi" and sat down. *The National* had already begun. "You're in chemistry, right?" Each resident got a printout listing names, addresses, and other pertinent information. When Leah just nodded without smiling or lifting her gaze from the screen, Helen got thinking, "Well, excuse me, prissy little mainland bitch. I'm not taking any of that crap from anybody. The girls on the floor are going to hear about this one." Helen didn't take in much from the first few news items.

" ... sexual practice called kunyaza involves a mutual, uninhibited flow of secretions. Thus the 'blockage' caused by a condom is connected to images of infertility, contagion, and drought. Instead of turning to condoms, then, amid increasing anxieties about AIDS, 71% of the sexually-active women surveyed chose to practise abstinence or fidelity. When we return, we will investigate implications of this worldview for Western health-care professionals and care-givers in Rwanda."

But as soon as the cottony-soft ads began at the quarter-way mark, Leah said, "Actually, I'm in biology. You're anthropology and classics, right?" Familiarity bred flattery and Helen forgot about hating her. Leah said she always watched the news to see if they'd say anything about home, which turned out to be Calgary.

"How come you came to Memorial?" Helen already figured it was the result of the usual process of elimination; Leah couldn't get in anywhere else.

"Oh, I'm actually doing an honours degree in marine biology. This is a great place for whale research."

During the next two long strings of Can-con promos between flashes of news, Helen decided she liked Leah. You had to respect her. She admitted to Helen that she thought of her university career as an investment. Since her student loan was a symbol of the government's belief that she deserved it, handing in less than her best work was inconceivable. Leah rarely mentioned men in her own context, except to say they weren't worth losing marks over. Likewise, it seemed to Leah that the only thing worth watching on television was the news. *The National* brought the pair together every night.

Helen finally convinced Leah to go down to Junctions with all the girls.

Steve's thumbs rest on her hip-bones, hers on his neck, as they waltz into each other's eyes to the tune of a country ballad.

On a Friday night almost a year ago, Leah became acquainted with Helen's dance numbers. The Hatcher House girls stopped, as always, into Big Ben's, home of cheap pitchers

of local beer, just across the street from the university residences in the middle of St. John's. Leah was joining them for the first time. Helen felt unduly ashamed that she herself was "trashed" by the time Leah had just started to unwind, to smile without joke-prompts. An hour later, they tumbled out of their cab downtown onto Water Street, survived the line-up at Junctions, and flew into the lights. Seventies' music whose popularity tide was high when they were in playpens now made them cheer.

As soon as they touched the dance floor, Helen was swarmed by men. She swayed with her eyes closed half the time, but with an assured and sensuous grace. The unwitting vortex of attention, she seemed unconscious of impressions she was creating or that men were struggling to make. During slow songs, Helen played dirty, a rub-up game. When she grew tired, her admirers followed her back to non-rhythmic ground, past sprightly girls in spandex strips. In her t-shirt and jeans, Helen was aloof. Hers was not the aloofness, though, of those women who sit poker straight with their legs crossed, peering down at the dance floor over their cheekbones. But neither was it the enforced aloofness of anonymous longing. She was resigned to indifference. Helen kept losing Leah in-between strobe-light flashes.

After last call, Helen made it to the bathroom and saw Leah through the lost-tooth gap between door and frame in a cubicle. Her new friend was seated, all-dressed, leaning forward, elbows on knees, head on hands, having a bawl. Helen took it as a judgement, but left the room without a word in self-defence. They met in the porch ten minutes later and decided the walk home would sober them up. There were several silent minutes.

"Helen, do you believe in premarital sex?"

"What do you mean, believe in it? That sounds so religious. I believe that it happens,

if that's what you're getting at."

"No, I mean, would you actually do it? Or, what do you think about girls who do it?"

Helen looked at the stars.

"It's just that you seemed so hot and cold out there tonight. I was just wondering."

"Listen, Leah, I'm not a virgin. Does that shock you?"

"No ... but ... do you protect yourself?"

"God, I'm not suicidal."

Steve stands directly behind her at the bar, pressing into her back with heat that should have disappeared with the cadence of the last song.

After final exams in May, Helen invited Leah to stay at her parents' house for a week. They walked down to the Parish Hall for the monthly dance. Helen was surprised to see Leah so excited.

"It's no big deal, Leah. I wouldn't even call it a cultural event. They have dances every week in the summer. And there's always some kind of lovers' quarrel that everyone ends up knowing about."

"Hey! Then there's a climax and a resolution, right? Like a short story!" Helen can't understand Leah - drunk enough to allude to intercourse without blushing, but not enough to forget everything she had learned since kindergarten.

It seemed a trope of Helen's town that married men should flirt with younger women. The Hall was just a big room, the band at the far end, the bar behind a canteen counter. The

church secretary doled out the basics, Blue Star, Black Horse, Screech and coke. A space for dancing had been created by compressing the multi-purpose bingo or church-dinner tables against the periphery of the room. Most of the older people were sitting down near the back, away from the music, closer to the bar. Helen was greeted right away by her parents' friends.

An older man with his shirt half-unbuttoned grabbed her arm. "I was just tellin' your old man here how good-lookin' you're gettin'. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-one."

"Ah, yes. Twenty-one. Clara was tiny like you when she was twenty-one. But a woman keeps her babies with her." He pats his gut, then points to his good-sized wife, who's playing darts in the back corner. "That's what marriage will do to you, if you're not careful. How about you? Surely a beaut like you is hearin' the wedding bells."

"Not yet, I'm not."

Helen believed the Precious Metals Mutual Fund offered more guarantees than most relationships did. Men of all ages asked Helen to dance, pawed at her, proposed toasts and marriage. During the inevitable "Bird Dance", Helen and Leah freshened up in the bathroom. Helen sat on the counter by the sink while Leah tried to redo her French braid.

"So, what do you think?" Helen was eager to gauge Leah's reaction to the dynamic of her small town.

"I'm having a ball. This may sound silly to you, but I love the sense of community. You know? I don't even feel like a stranger here."

"Yeah, we're a pretty friendly crew, I suppose. Did you happen to see that guy out by the door?"

"Which one?" Leah poked her head out of the bathroom and looked towards the porch, holding her half-completed *coiffure* with her other hand.

"With the poppy eyes."

"Oh, yes. I see him. What about him?" She returned to the mirror.

"He was my first."

"Your first boyfriend?"

"No, my *first*." Helen stands up again and readjusts her brassiere.

"Oh."

"The summer I turned fifteen a bunch of us were out at the club, listening to The B'ys play. That was before they went to Toronto and changed their name. I spotted my aunt by the bar and ran into the bathroom to avoid her. Apparently, my boyfriend - he was my first boyfriend, but he hardly even counts - apparently he and his buddies took off to get stoned in no one remembers whose car. It's probably not what you're used to, in the big city and all. No mirrors and blades or syringes and bleach out here. Not yet. It was always just a pin-pricked coke can passed around in a hurry. Someone told me later that they all went over to the park then to toss around the eight ball from the club. Real mature. Well, naturally, I had to get back at the jerk for abandoning me, so when that guy out there by the door asked me to go with him, I said 'Sure'. In the church, Leah. Can you believe that?"

Helen wasn't sure if Leah's frown betrayed scorn or envy.

As she turns to face Steve, his unmoving hand slides across her stomach.

Helen and Leah managed to find summer jobs out west in their rent-free home towns, Helen across the province in Pasadena, Leah back in Calgary. The government paid Helen to dole out fat crayons and dodge balls to local kids. When her Parks and Rec group won the provincial popsicle-stick jewellery box competition, she was appointed Newfoundland representative for the national title in Calgary. Helen arrived at Leah's on the ninth of August. Ordinarily, separated friends have chatted away the skin of distance within a couple of hours of their reacquaintance. But instead, Helen already felt she had overstayed her welcome only minutes after her arrival. An unprecedented and impenetrable aura of secrecy seemed to numb Leah to Helen's enthusiasm, making their previous intimacy unattainable. *The National* brought them both relief.

"In the news tonight: Rwanda. The UN condemns international delays. Our first report is from Kigali.

"On July 18, the civil war ended with the unilateral declaration of a ceasefire by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front. Four days later, the UN shifted its focus away from tribal genocide. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali then warned the world of what he described as a 'new kind of genocide - by hunger, by thirst, by disease.' Tonight, a press release from the UN Commission on Human Rights' Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities places some of the blame for the continued humanitarian crisis on the international community, for providing only what it calls 'tardy and insufficiently effective intervention' in Rwanda."

"Can you believe that, Leah? You'd think a roadblock made of corpses would curb a tendency to procrastinate, wouldn't you?"

"I know. What frustrates me is we only get snippets of what's going on. We don't seem to have any control over what we know about ... Oh God, how I despise douche commercials!"

"Tell me about it. But, since we're sort of on the topic, I feel really out of touch with *you*."

"Really?" Leah's surprise looked genuine.

"Really. Maybe it's partially my fault. Email hasn't made it to Pasadena yet and I couldn't afford to be calling all the time."

"Don't worry about it. I haven't been online myself in a couple of months."

Helen fondled a stray thread on her shirt. "So, why didn't you tell me more about this new Steve guy you mentioned in one of your letters?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't want to jinx it."

"Yeah, that's me: Helen, the black cat." Her lips slid into a pout.

"Helen, don't. I only meant I wasn't ready to tell you about our, you know, *intimacy*. I didn't want you to think that's all there is to it."

"Leah, you know you can confide in me about anything. I've probably told you more than you need to know about me."

"Well, I don't know *what* to tell you."

"You could start with what he looks like ..."

"He's sweet and charming and funny. And fun, Helen, is he ever fun! He really brings me out of my shell, you know. I'm changing, going out more. It's so hard to believe that someone so perfect actually likes *me*. I mean, he really likes me."

"And cute?"

"I wouldn't say cute ... he's handsome. But I'll let you see that for yourself when you meet him later on tonight, at the Stetson. We're going to introduce you to a real 'country club' milieu."

Steve's eyes close as their lips meet. The magic melts away.

Leah was unable to convince herself to skip the last class before the long weekend, so Helen is obliged to entertain Steve alone for the afternoon. They set their sights on killing time at the usual places. Up to Signal Hill, then past Mile Zero on the way out to Cape Spear. School, family, weather, politics - the conversation rapidly travels the circumference of the unsaid. Helen takes him to her usual diner on Duckworth Street, not to one of those pretentious mainland-style *cafés* with their \$4.20 slices of cheesecake. She is not without provincial pride, though. All the cutlery has been shirt-polished by the time Steve returns from the bathroom.

"Do you know they've got a machine in there for glow-in-the-dark safes?" Steve is aglow with delight.

So much for avoiding the topic. Sex is the last thing Helen feels she should start talking about with Steve. But it seems as though he wants to reach right up the skirt of the issue. "Oh, really?"

"Personally, I stick to Trojans. What's *your* pleasure?"

Helen, pouring too much molasses on her toutons, doesn't look up, doesn't answer.

But Steve doesn't need a reply: "I'd only try something as gimmicky as that if I knew I was in a monogamous relationship."

Helen pokes at the sticky run-off from the side of her plate, then ventures, "Surely you know by now that Leah would never sleep around on you. She's *so* crazy about you."

"I know."

Helen thinks about meanings and meanness. She thinks about Leah and decides to rearrange the topic. "I don't get that anyway."

"What?" Steve's honour guard is up.

"Do you know anything about the Trojan War?"

"I know generally what happens ..."

"So, the Greeks get into Troy because some of them hide out in that horse, right?"

"I guess so."

"So, I guess the condom would be the horse - you get inside it so you can penetrate the 'fortified walls'."

"O-kay ... So what's the problem, Helen?"

"Well, why that name? According to my Ancient Mythology prof, the Trojans were supposed to be brave, confiding, patriotic, and truthful. But most of them were slaughtered by the Greeks."

"Some people think too much. Geez, girl. Don't try so hard to make everything work out perfectly. If you said the Greek horse, no one would know what you were talking about, now would they? Sometimes it's all right to bend the truth a little."

UNSUNG

"And then a great big squirt of goo shot straight up and hit the ceiling."

My uncle began to make weekly guest appearances in 1984, after he retired to St. John's from the pulp and paper mill in Corner Brook. Sunday solemnity was displaced by Uncle Jack. He would come in from outside and slowly remove his boots in the porch. Then he'd sit down at the table in the after-dinner warmth of the kitchen with his unbuttoned parka on, his scarf still crossed over his chest. Inevitably, Dad would disappear into the back porch and, without a word, would come back with a scarf wrapped around his neck and a woolly hat resting on the top of his head. Then he'd bow before me: "Excuse me, miss. I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting you. We're the Nut brothers. I'm Ches and this is Wal." Gesturing towards my uncle, he would continue, "Cup of tea, Wal?" Sometimes Uncle Jack would then take off his coat.

Dad used to cool his brother's tea with milk to overflowing every Sunday evening. Once, improvising a reaction to Uncle Jack's habitual half-hearted protests as milky tea soaked into his place-mat, Dad served him a litre of tea in a plastic ice-cream container.

Feeling slightly lost amid the joyful uproar, yet fearing even then that my inquisitiveness be mistaken for what Dad called "sauce and impudence", I didn't ask about the genetics of the Nut family or the background to the tea flood.

During the first few years, I wasn't always appreciative of these visits. Sometimes I didn't even bother to have one cup of tea with the grown-ups. In fact, when the now famous "goo" hit the ceiling, I probably plugged my ears, then left the kitchen, retching. It would have been a good cue for me to come out of my shell to play Hazel (Nut), as I sometimes did. But I don't

remember ever listening to all of Dr. Fisher's tale when Dad was around.

If I found their playfulness embarrassing, I couldn't bear what replaced it as the evening wore on and the erstwhile glow of lightheartedness grew dim. Conversations generally stemmed from commentaries on *Cross-Country Checkup* and developed into discussions about human nature or the inhuman nature of politicians. It was during these chats - which I considered highbrow - that I would make my presence melt; I could normally endure only ten minutes once the talk turned serious. Rather than feign comprehension or interest, I would take off upstairs.

But occasionally something - what? perhaps a mere avoidance of my homework - prompted me to stay in the kitchen. I'd wash the dishes slowly, drying them instead of letting them rest in the drainboard, then would sweep the floor. Only rarely would Uncle Jack and Dad talk about their childhood, and then almost exclusively about small pleasures such as going into the woods on Saturdays, for rabbits, trout, and berries. It seems I never heard tell of their parents.

In this way, I eventually learned the origin of their tea-time ritual. They were down in the woods once and Dad served up a cup of tea to Uncle Jack. Since the cup wasn't quite full, Uncle Jack exclaimed, "I wanted a cup of tea, not half a cup." And Dad didn't ever scrimp on the tea again.

Later in the evening was also the time for that one great hunting story which they took turns re-enacting:

All four of his brothers called Uncle Jack Mr. Magoo; legend has it that he's not the best shot. This one time, Uncle Jack spotted a moose over near where Dad had been squatting in wait. Dad had ducked in behind a tree for a brief spell and the orange flash of his cap had

disappeared, so my uncle couldn't risk setting his sights on moose stew. Since the pristine silence of the natural environment had to be preserved until the beast's final moments, Uncle Jack couldn't summon my father with the hollered profanities he says sprang to mind. Finally, having returned to his post and begun again to scan the area, Dad noticed his brother across the pond, jumping and gesticulating frantically with his arms. He'd make antlers at the back of his head with his hands for two beats, then he'd tip both "antlers" forward and point twice with them towards the woods near Dad. When Dad retold this story, he'd imitate Uncle Jack's moose-step, revealing the animal's position not only with his fingers, but also with bulging eyes and a tilt of the head. In the version edited for me, the climax came with the beckoning. No shots or tempers were fired.

As far as I was concerned when I was a teenager, Dad and Uncle Jack were always going to be talking in the kitchen after supper on Sundays. Since my uncle diverted my parents' attentions from me, his visits often provided surreptitious phone time.

My uncle earned his French degree when he was sixty-eight, five months after his fifty-two-year-old brother passed away. After the death of Dad's spilt-milk laughter, my uncle's visits continued, although they lasted only until the end of *Cross-Country Checkup*. He always removed his cap, in deference to my mother, who excused herself frequently from the kitchen, overtaken by the pain of seeing and hearing her husband in his older brother. Over time, I became more attentive, as Uncle Jack poured his own milk with a slightly shaky hand and introduced me to characters I'd never meet. Back then, I didn't have the courage to ask him directly about himself or his baby brother; I had been warned about the myriad manifestations of grief. So, I didn't drag out the oldest of the photo albums during his visits. I only turned the

stiff black pages until I came to our earliest black and white pictures of Corner Brook when I was alone. The tape in the photo album is no longer sticky, and the photos are edged with brittle yellow. The picture is of my dad at seven or eight, leaning to one side in the doorway of their old house. He's wearing a dark sailor sweater with thickly-rolled cuffs, faded midget corduroys, and sawed-off rubbers. His right leg is bent slightly, his right knee pointed towards his left one. He looks vulnerable, almost frail, rickety as the house behind him.

During the Great Depression and the Second World War, frequent nutritional disorders made the complaint of "bad stomach" universally prevalent in outport Newfoundland. Children of impoverished families often had a poor physique.

I remember only one story my father told me about his childhood. Uncle Jack was still living in Corner Brook at the time and Dad was easing me through some childhood trauma. Either the kindergarten teacher told him to sit still when he asked permission or his imploring raised hand went unanswered. Perhaps he was too shy even to raise his hand. The teacher only acknowledged his discomfort after he was short-taken. He was rapped across the hands with a ruler and sent home. I imagine him running to his mother, whom I can't picture, though Uncle Jack sometimes says I resemble her; Dad cries into her apron, fearing reprisal. My grandmother wrote a note to the teacher - could she write? - or perhaps, then, she went in to see the teacher. But I do remember her words: "Please excuse Richard whenever he asks to be excused. It would save me a lot of trouble." I knew I'd never hear that story again; even if Dad's siblings knew what had happened at the time, they wouldn't have the right shades of perspective. Besides, Uncle Jack preferred to conjure up Dr. Fisher.

"At first, I thought it was just Old Joe Lundrigan getting on with his old foolishness

again. But years later, I heard it on the radio in Corner Brook."

I tried to glean details about Old Joe Lundrigan, but my timid questions never got me any higher than the rubber boots. He used to go visit my father's family, down at the house on Greenings Hill. Uncle Jack says Old Joe told the story about the doctor at least sixty years ago. It was a folk tale. My uncle was only a very young boy at the time, so I'm not sure if Dad ever heard Old Joe speak. Unlike the hunting stories which were granted dual air-time, Old Joe's tale about things he witnessed in Bonne Bay was related exclusively by Uncle Jack. It wasn't until Uncle Jack reached the end, the disgusting part he made funny, that I realized the story wasn't new to me. Old Joe's story had eclipsed the old storyteller. Apparently, he lived in Bonne Bay before he moved to Corner Brook, but Uncle Jack hasn't expressed any interest in checking out *his* lineage.

When Uncle Jack built a house for his mother around 1950, the family moved from Greenings Hill to a new subdivision, on Empire Street. It must have been such a change to move to the four-bedroom Cape Cod from little better than a shack on Greenings Hill. All the same, the new place, like the old, was located on the West Side of Corner Brook, which had grown up higgledy-piggledy, unlike the gridded Townsite. I'm told my grandmother, whom I never met, was particular about her surroundings. She was quite proud of the new house, especially of her new kitchen with its white floor tiles. This is probably where such visitors as Old Joe Lundrigan, respected but not considered superior, would have sat when he dropped by and decided to stay for tea. On Empire Street, for the first time since she left England, Ada had a separate sitting room. This room, reserved for scheduled visits from the doctor or the minister, was accessible only by crossing the tiles of the kitchen floor. If it wasn't my grandmother's place to request that

those distinguished gentlemen remove their boots, she wouldn't have had to ask the respectful Old Joe Lundrigan.

"The Fishers settled in the Bay of Islands from Nova Scotia. This man Caines was a sickly man. He was young at the time, probably in his thirties. So, too, was Dr. Fisher. Dr. Fisher probably met Caines in a clinic up there. He probably held clinics up there, addressing all at once a whole plague of complaints, just as the travelling ministers held group baptisms. By this time, Caines had never worked a day in his life. He was sickly, pale, white. No energy. They had sent him away to Boston."

"Who had?" My small interjections seemed to provide the necessary lubrication.

"Oh, probably the Orange Lodge. He would have been a member. The specialist there told him he had tuberculosis. They x-rayed him and everything.

"Then Dr. Fisher met with him and talked with him. He was suspicious because Caines was living so long with T.B.. He had all the symptoms; he used to spit blood and everything. But with T.B. you could expect to live a year or two at best. 'I don't believe that you have got T.B..' Dr. Fisher asked him if anything had happened to him as a child.

'No.' Caines couldn't think of anything.

'Think now.'

'A horse kicked me and knocked me out. When I came to, I was all right. But, come to think of it, it was about that time I first got sick and was diagnosed with T.B..'"

This casual revelation made me wonder if Uncle Jack was up to his old foolishness. But I sat still, hoping for more about the storyteller.

"Dr. Fisher made a special trip by boat down the coast to Bonne Bay. He operated on

Caines on his kitchen table without anaesthetic. Probably only ether was available at that time, especially in Bonne Bay. And ether was unbearable if your lungs were bad. Ether gave quite a hangover. When he opened Caines up, Dr. Fisher found that the horse had splintered his rib and it was going into his lung. It was infected, poison. Old Joe Lundrigan said a squirt of corruption went up and hit the ceiling."

"Pus?"

"Yes, I suppose. Pus and corruption. Old Joe said you could smell the stench in that kitchen for the next two weeks. Dr. Fisher did what he had to do. Disinfected it. But did he use peroxide? Iodine? That's something I'd like to find out. He cleaned the infection up. During the operation, Dr. Fisher asked Caines, 'Are you all right?'

"'Yes, doctor, but hurry up,' he said, 'cos that saw is getting on my nerves.' Caines got on the mend and lived to be almost eighty years old."

"The story Old Joe told was just a folk tale. He said that a horse had kicked Caines. But there were no horses at the time, especially not in Bonne Bay. The real story is that he fell off a dog team."

Since my father died, and especially in recent years, Uncle Jack has alluded to this story dozens of times. Our grief has scabbed over and I find it easier now to ask him questions.

My uncle spends his summers, from early May until mid-September, in Corner Brook, salmon fishing and hunting. Although his mother died twenty-nine years ago, Uncle Jack didn't stay in her house on Empire Street, in a newer section of Corner Brook West, until last summer. After a seventy-five minute truck trip, he weathers the twenty-minute ride on his four-wheel tank

down to his little shack on Harry's River.

The phone rings as I'm washing the supper dishes on a Sunday night at the beginning of June. It's Uncle Jack. Without letting go of the receiver, I stretch off the rubber gloves, silence *Cross-Country Checkup*, and reach for a chair.

"What's all the news?" His usual question booms into my ears. I sit down.

"I've got no news, " I tell him, although I've been spending some time in the library. I'm not sure how he'll react to my research on his story. "How about you? Do you have any news?" I hold the phone six inches from my head.

"No. No news." This response, too, is expected, although I don't believe it.

"What've you been up to?"

"I'm getting the J-5 fixed up. Getting ready to go down to Harry's River."

This is the first year I've bothered to look it up on the map. The river runs to the southwest of Corner Brook. "Hoping to catch a few salmon?" Our conversation begins with necessary miscellany, as though we were reading out a newspaper from the back page.

"Yes. But not for a good spell yet. The season doesn't open till the end of June."

"What sort of preparations do you have to make?" I know he's had his flies tied since just after Christmas.

"Well, I've been checking up on a few things."

This, then, is what I've been waiting for. "Oh? Like what?" The "Notes" page at the back of the phone book is filled with the addresses of my relatives, so I cover its margins with my jottings.

"I've been asking around about the Fishers."

"That doctor?" I am cautious not to let on I know just what he's talking about. If I thus encourage him to start at the beginning, perhaps he'll send out a new spate of digressions about his own family, like runners from a strawberry plant.

"That's the one. One time, he fixed up a man in Bonne Bay. This is what I've come up with so far. The Fishers, you see, were a pioneer family in Corner Brook. They came from ..." I can tell my uncle is reading, as he pauses to pick out a word. "... from Curling in the Bay of Islands, and before that from Nova Scotia. Dr. Franklin Fisher died in the '30s or '40s. He was a thin, spare man, with a white moustache and hair. They say he drank like a fish, that he couldn't operate without drinking.

"Dr. Fisher must have died around 1935. It was in 1939 that I tore up my hand at the mill. And Dr. Fisher was dead by then. Otherwise, I would have seen him in the hospital."

Uncle Jack never mentions any hazardous conditions at the mill where his pointer finger was crushed. The base of the finger is twice its original width and the tip is much narrower. The joints are seized up or broken. I used to find it frightening, but now I think the permanent arch of his finger would project a perfect shadow swan on a wall. I've read that safety conditions at the mill, the exposed, high-speed machinery previously "ready to grab and mangle an unwary papermaker", had greatly improved by the '30s. Accustomed to hardships, Uncle Jack uses his crooked finger only to point towards another story.

"Once Townsite was constructed, Dr. Fisher lived in Cobb Lane. I used to lead a blind man around, selling aprons made by his wife. Mrs. Fisher always used to buy one. But this time, the time I remember stopping at Dr. Fisher's house, she didn't buy one. It must have been hard times then, even for the doctor's family. They say the Great Depression came late to Corner

Brook and didn't hit it so hard. Like the tail end of a storm, they figure. But I don't agree with that. Those were hard times."

Apparently, the people who didn't live in Townsite - that is, everyone not sporting white or at least royal-blue collars, including doctors and higher-ups at the mill - were ashamed to live in older surrounding areas like Curling and Corner Brook West. Bowater's bought a fair bit of the land for Townsite from Christopher Fisher. A company construct, the new section of Corner Brook was well laid-out and fitted with amenities - dry pavement, running water, sewerage. They say that the very best houses were situated on Cobb Lane. I wonder if Uncle Jack joined other people from Corner Brook West in dubbing Fisher's road "Snob Lane". He seems so proud of this doctor he lionizes, though, that I doubt he would bad-mouth him in any way.

"Cobb Lane, did you say?" I'm sure that Uncle Jack has perceived my burgeoning interest and knows I'm writing down as much as I can.

"That's it. The houses up there were for the company executive. There's a walkway by the Glynmill Inn. In behind it is Corner Brook House. That's where the manager of the company lived. He needed a special place for entertaining visiting dignitaries and so forth. The house is shaded with trees. They even had a gardener ..."

"Really? Isn't that something."

"Oh, yes. They probably had all kinds of other servants as well, but I know they had a gardener. I know that because he drove us out of it one day. We went up the wrong way from the swimming pool at the Glynmill Inn and ended up in that garden. 'You go out that way,' he said. He wasn't very pleasant about it. The funny thing was, the gardener's son and me, we were pals. Arch Sheppard was his name. That's the son's name. I don't know what the gardener's

name was. There's every kind of thing I could tell you about that place.

"One time I was down in the beer tavern - as was my wont. I was sot down, minding my business with a bottle of beer. Ish Mathews - he might have been part Indian - he was a trapper ... The minute he got out of the mill - he worked in the wood room - he went trapping. He had these leather boots - boy was he proud of them - he kept 'em waterproof and shiny. He used to rock back and forth and play the accordion. Boy could he play the accordion! He used to sing too. He couldn't sing very well. He was deadly Protestant. He was probably an Orangeman. Anyway, Ish came in and plunked down across the table from me. There was an awful clank of chains and metal.

'By, Ish. What's that racket? Are you planning to kill someone?'

'I'm going over to Mr. Lewin's,' he told me. Mr. Lewin was the general manager of the mill at the time. So he lived up in Corner Brook House. 'I got to try to trap a 'lynk". He didn't say 'lynx'. 'He's killing all of Mr. Lewin's 'peasants'.' He couldn't say "pheasants".

I said, "Good luck with your trapping."

"Now, later on, it might have been a week or two later, he came into the tavern again. I asked him, 'How'd you get on? Did you get the lynk?' I couldn't say 'lynx' - he wouldn't have known what I was talking about.

'There was no sign of a lynk,' Ish told me. 'I checked the fence - there was a little hole. Then I looked at the tracks. It was a dog that was getting in there. So, what I did, I filled up the hole. I told Mr. Lewin, 'I didn't think it was a lynk', I told him. 'A lynk is a wile animal.' 'Wile,' see Martha? He wouldn't think of saying 'wild'. 'There's a road there across from the house. A wile animal - he wouldn't have crossed the road.'

"Yes, that's Corner Brook House. I was never in there as a guest, but I was in there as a trespasser."

"Driven away like a dog or a lynx," I think.

My uncle doesn't stay long in the tavern. "But the Fishers, they lived on Cobb Lane. That same family had a sawmill on Corner Brook. It burned down around 1930. The mill - Bowater's pulp and paper mill down where I used to work - replaced it. You've heard of Sir Richard Squires, of course."

"Yes." Well I *have* heard the name. I'd read that his passion had been salmon fishing on the Lower Humber. "Wasn't he a premier of Newfoundland at one point?"

"No. He was the Prime Minister of Newfoundland for most of the '20s. Newfoundland wasn't a province with a premier until Confederation."

"Of course. I know ... I was just testing you." I hope my ignorance won't prevent Uncle Jack from sharing stories with me.

No. He continues, "Squires used the promise of pulp and paper in Corner Brook in his election campaign. They call him 'the man who put the hum on the Humber'. The Humber River, you understand, is where they get the power for the mill.

"There's a Fisher Institute or a Trades School now in Corner Brook which has a picture of this old mill up in the lobby. In 1923 and 24 was the construction of the mill. It must have been 1925, then, before the mill was going. The company built a hospital.

"Norman Fisher had a big store on West Street. Where Woolworths is now. Maybe it's not Woolworths anymore. Josiah Fisher was head of the mill. They were brothers of Dr. Franklin Fisher. And Christopher Fisher. Yes, he was another brother. And Dr. Fisher's son,

Jack Fisher, was the electrical superintendent at the mill. Yes, they were a pioneer family in Corner Brook. They were Presbyterians.

"There was a tiny Presbyterian church on Park Street or West Street, one of them. In Corner Brook. It was tiny, white, with a spire. It's torn down now, or burned down. There weren't many Presbyterians at the time, but they had their own church. Come to think of it, the Fishers' mill burned down, too, during the Depression. Ran steady for seventy odd years before that, though. Dr. Fisher himself only lived to be sixty-six. I suppose he burnt himself out.

"So Dr. Fisher set out from Curling. Now Curling was the capital of the west coast at the time. He went up the coast in a motorboat. He took a special trip up to see Caines in Bonne Bay, at Woody Point. Dr. Fisher operated on him on the kitchen table. Caines stood right up when the doctor made the first incision.

"Caines was supposed to have T.B.. That's what everyone supposed was wrong with him. Before Dr. Fisher saw Caines, a warship came into the harbour at Woody Point. They took Caines on board. The ship's doctor told him he had T.B.. The captain wouldn't permit the operation on board his ship. Caines was just waiting to die.

"There was another doctor, a Dr. Green at Deer Lake. He could only get up the coast by dog team. There was no road, so, naturally, he couldn't service the coast. He couldn't have saved Caines. But Dr. Green was good. He used to do everything. He even yanked some teeth for me. You used to see doctors going around on horse and cart. Dr. Cochrane had a car, but he couldn't go very far. There wasn't much in the way of roads, just some wheel ruts with grass in-between. It didn't do him much good.

"Mother had a bad leg once - it was probably from malnutrition. There wasn't much food

then, but people made do, they were determined. Her leg was all swollen and red. Dr. Cochrane, the head doctor - old bastard. Was he ever fausty! He used to frighten me to death. He gave her a prescription.

"I went with Cynt down to the drugstore. We did all the work, see. Cynt bought the groceries. I used to go to the company store where there was a pump and lug water home. All clothes were washed with the board back then.

"The prescription cost a dollar and ten cents. The old lady couldn't get it. She didn't have enough money. She told the doctor. 'Okay', he said, 'buy two packages of epsom salts and mix it up in a quart of water'. Two packages of epsom salts cost about five cents."

"But we always got along all right."

"Your family?" I eagerly intercept.

"No, Dr. Cochrane and I. I suppose he hardly had time to shave. There were epidemics then, every kind of old thing. Dr. Fisher helped out Dr. Cochrane at the new company hospital in 1925 when typhoid fever broke out. The water over on the West Side was contaminated, you see, by raw sewage. No sanitation, you know. And doctors had to contend with malnutrition, too. It wasn't malnutrition, *per se*, but more or less. We didn't go hungry. But we filled up on bread ..."

"And molasses?"

"Yes. And when your teeth went bad, they'd fall out. There was no such thing as getting teeth filled back then. The so-called dentists would just haul them out. The diet wasn't the best. There were a lot of parasites on the go, too. Cockroaches, bedbugs, especially bedbugs. And there was head lice and body lice. I suppose just about everyone had 'em. Certain things could

cure it, but you couldn't afford it. Now, Dr. Fisher, he was a natural doctor. He cured a lot of people. I suppose he never had anything only a screwdriver and a pair of pliers to operate. It was hard times, Martha."

"I guess you were a lot worse off than the doctor's family."

"Oh yes. But that's a different story altogether. Now, I've heard there's a woman out here, maybe in the old folks' home, who is the daughter of Mr. Caines. She's supposed to have some information about this story. Someone told me there was an article written up about it in *The Western Star* in 1946. I'm hoping to get my hands on it."

If I can somehow help Uncle Jack finish the research on the Fisher story, he might get it out of his system. And maybe then I can flesh out my father's photograph and the skeletal picture my uncle has given of his own life. But for now, he redirects all of my questions towards Dr. Fisher.

At the archives, I end up with the Vital Statistics ledger from the Parish of Bay of Islands (Presbyterian). The first birth recorded in Volume 96 is Franklin, born to Christopher and Janet Fisher in Corner Brook, 2 August 1874. He wasn't baptized until 24 May 1876. Almost two years passed before a minister came to honour Fisher's name. I jot down a list of Caineses from Volume 93, not knowing if I am nearing "that man Caines" or not.

At the front of the archives room in the old Colonial Building in St. John's, I sift through the list of available resources. Maybe I could find out more about the Fishers in descriptions of Corner Brook or in the Census reports. I'm not sure what district they would have been in. I check out Volume 9 - the 1945 Census for the St. George's district. The microfilm reader is

manual, so I hand-pedal my way toward official information. Before I come across any Fishers, the cold hand of recognition brisks its way up my spine. What a slew of Wellses! They're working on the Newfoundland Railway or at Pulp and Paper. Stationed between age and religion is the question, "Has this family a radio?" I wonder when it was that Uncle Jack heard the story about Dr. Fisher on the radio and started to suspect Old Joe Lundrigan of telling the truth.

Once the census takers moved from the outports into the more urbanized areas, street names appear in their charts. I'm suddenly on page 97, in Corner Brook West, at number 10 Greenings Hill. The house is owned, but would be valued at \$1500, if rented. The family group which occupies the five rooms of the house includes George W. (55), Ada (52), John W. (23), Cynthia P. (20), Hector P. (16), Carlyle R. (15), Robert (10), and Richard (8). My grandmother, Ada, was born in England, yet her "Nationality" and "Racial Origin" are filled in as "NF".

I roll my father's family by from right to left. When my eight-year-old father's age at leaving school is given as sixteen, I realize something is awry. The family also has three religious denominations. I think of Uncle Jack knowing the details in common currency about the Fishers' Presbyterianism. The screen flaunts some of the questions I want answered under "Social Condition": "Had T.B. in Last 5 Yrs.," "Have Tuberculosis Now," "Ever Had Chest X-Ray." Someone had told me - was it Dad? - that four of the brothers had shared a bedroom for years, sleeping head to toe. One of the studies in the library reported that overcrowded sleeping conditions and malnutrition provided the perfect home for tuberculosis. But as far as I know, no one in Dad's family ever had T.B..

I must find a better way to bring life to bare-boned statistics. Other family members might provide the hook to help me reel in Uncle Jack from his forays into medical history.

"I won't bide long. I only just stopped by to see how you're getting on."

"Why don't you come in for a cup of tea, Uncle Jack?"

"No, I can't stay."

"You won't have one cup of tea?"

"Oh, okay. But just one cup and then I've got to go. I only just wanted to see how you're getting on."

The conversation upon Uncle Jack's return to St. John's from Corner Brook in October begins in the usual manner. He has brought a bottle of bakeapples, a bottle of caribou, and all the news of our West Coast relatives. I've got my notebook handy, just in case I can get him talking about the family.

"I picked these bakeapples out behind the Salvation Army Cemetery in Deer Lake. Boy, it's hard work bending down to pick them. There's only one berry per bush, you know. They were selling them along the highway on my way back across the island. Fifteen dollars a jar. It might be hard work picking them, but that's criminal."

"I've only tasted bakeapple jam a couple of times. Did you have it often when you were growing up?" I've vowed to be persistent.

"Whenever we found the berries, we did. Mother was partial to gooseberries. She was from England, you know. She had bushes out behind the house. But these bakeapples I picked out behind the Salvation Army Cemetery on High Street in Deer Lake. I drove out there to see the tombstone of that man Dr. Fisher saved, a Mr. John Caines. He's buried there with his wife. They tell me the date on the tombstone is wrong. He lived to be good and old, did Mr. Caines,

but Dr. Fisher, he died fairly young. It's always like that. The doctors don't know how to look after themselves."

I know Uncle Jack will be pleased with my research. "Dr. Fisher studied at Dalhousie, McGill, and at a post-graduate med school in New York. That's quite a bit of education. I think you mentioned one time that Dad wanted to be a doctor. What's that all about?"

"Yes, when he was young."

"Why didn't he study medicine, then?"

"It was hard times, Martha. He was considered very fortunate to go to university at all. He was the youngest in the family and the other five of us never got the chance."

"But if he got to go anyway, why didn't he do medicine?"

"Oh, the government was providing some sort of bursary at the time for teacher training. He could only have studied sciences for three years in St. John's. Then he would have had to leave the island to attend medical school."

"And there just wasn't any money?"

"Right. Before your father's time, the government used to send young people overseas for medical training, if they agreed to serve in Newfoundland for a number of years. But that whole thing got fouled up after the war. You don't mind waiting here for a minute, do you, Martha? I left my notebook out in the truck. I've got some more information about that story for you."

"Sure thing." I flip the partition of my exercise book away from Dr. Fisher and start reading through the set of notes from my other relatives.

At the end of the war, by the time my uncle was twenty-three, he had been working at

the mill for seven years. The high-school teachers had considered him to be brilliant and he had graduated with honours by the age of fifteen. He aspired to be a doctor, but had to postpone his university career to support his family, giving every cent he earned at the mill to his mother. When the war started, his father had gone to Stephenville.

Unable to find permanent employment at the mill, it had been necessary for my grandfather to look for work outside of Corner Brook. During World War II, he built a place in Stephenville. It seemed like a smart move, since the American Base at the Harmon Air Field brought business. The first tenant opened a restaurant there and made a dose of money at it. But, although he was a good cook, he was far from a businessman. All of the money had soon been spent. The bank manager contacted my grandfather and the place was then rented to another man; if the restaurateur didn't have a head for business, this one was a sleveen altogether. He turned the place into a hotel called the Little New Yorker, paid rent for a while, then started to renege on it. My grandfather eventually had to sell the property. He did okay out there, but didn't earn enough to support the family back in Corner Brook which he'd visit occasionally.

Acting as a surrogate father, Uncle Jack made sure that every one of his siblings finished high school. By the early 'fifties, he had earned enough to build a house for his family, which moved from one side of Corner Brook West to the other.

In September of 'sixty-eight, half a year after his mother passed away, Uncle Jack took a leave of absence from the mill and moved in with my parents in St. John's to do pre-med courses at the university. He did well there, but left after Christmas because they were insisting at the time that he take German. If it was French, he argued - he had taken French in high school - he would have gladly taken it on. But he couldn't see the relevance of German to pre-

med. Maybe it was too big an adjustment for him to make.

He didn't come in again to university until he retired from the mill. His studies took him to Saint-Pierre, to Trois-Rivières, and to Tours in France.

While Uncle Jack is taking off his boots, I venture an innocent question: "Do you miss working at the mill?"

He sits back down across from me at the kitchen table. "What? Miss The Vale of Tears? I used to call it The Vale of Tears, see Martha? No, I hated it from the first day."

"Really? What did you do there?" I can't believe my luck.

"I was a machinist. At first, I served my apprenticeship as a machinist and then worked as a machinist for a number of years. When I got older, I went roll grinding. There was more money in roll grinding, and more hours. In some ways, it wasn't as hard as being a machinist, but I got more money for it. Now those rolls, they were fifty or sixty tons, some of them. I was a first-class machinist, then a first-class roll grinder. That's the bluff I ran for years."

"Bluff? What do you mean?"

"That's the kind of thing we were all up to - well, you had to produce something in the end. If they said they wanted a roll, you had to produce a roll. I also worked a bit at the milling machine. But, I'll tell you, the most satisfying feeling I ever got was for a job I did for a fellow outside.

"One day, I was working in the roll grinding room and a man came in and said, 'There's someone who wants to see you outside, by the gate.'

"Is it the police, I thought. But there by the gate was a man with a gearbox. He had a movie house projector up in Daniel's Harbour or somewhere up the coast. The projector was

broke down, that was the gearbox. He told me one of the gears was broken. The teeth were all stripped out of it. I asked him why wouldn't you send to the manufacturer and get one - it would be worth it. Then you'd know exactly what you were getting. He told me, 'I can't get one. They can't do it up to the trade school. They don't have the equipment. The fellow up there said to see you.' That was me, see. I told him I didn't think I could do anything. But he looked so woebegone that I said I'd have a look.

"The next week, I was on night shift. I took it down to the shop and cut the gear for him. The watchman was a good friend of mine and he wouldn't mind me going down to the shop. I fixed it up and left it with the night watchman for him.

"The next day, he brought by a big bottle of rum, all done up with a ribbon and everything. I told him I don't drink now, but thank you very much for the bottle of rum. I told him what I should have charged him, what with sneaking out into the shop, figuring out what had to be done, spending all that time on it. But I told him I can't charge you any money, because it would cost too much. A lot more than if you could buy the gear. So he gave me a bottle of rum.

"That's the best experience I can remember down at The Vale of Tears. To see how happy I made that fellow. His livelihood depended on it, see Martha?"

"That was awfully good of you, Uncle Jack."

He takes a mouthful of tea while he finds the spot and begins to read. "Now Dr. Franklin Fisher started up his first medical practice in the Bay of Islands in 1906. That's the year he saved the life of that fellow Caines in Norris Point."

"Didn't you say Caines lived in Woody Point?"

"No, Norris Point. I might have said Woody Point, but a woman over that way tells me that wasn't so. They're both communities in Bonne Bay. The Fishers were a pioneer family in Corner Brook. Dr. Fisher's son, Jack, was the super at the mill when I was there." Uncle Jack pulls out some papers from the inner pocket of his coat. "Dr. Fisher first examined Caines in Norris Point. Now Caines had been sick all his life. He always had trouble breathing and couldn't endure any physical strain whatsoever. Everyone figured he had T.B..

"Caines was a Freemason. They tended to look out for their own. He was actually living in Halifax - I'm not sure why - when doctors first diagnosed him as incurably tubercular. The Freemasons shipped him off on a cruise to South America for a couple of months. The warm weather didn't cure him and all of the specialists he saw concurred with the diagnosis from Halifax. So Caines more or less resigned himself to suffering out his last years of pain back in Norris Point."

"Wait now. This was years before he ever saw Dr. Fisher, right?"

"Yes, probably three or four years before. Dr. Fisher was one of the last doctors Caines saw about this. About a year after Caines moved back to Norris Point, a warship docked in Bonne Bay. John went aboard and saw the ship's doctor ..."

"... 'and came away bewildered?'" I cut in.

"Yes, he was shocked. But ...?"

"I found that article you mentioned on the phone in *The Western Star* over at the university. But it sounds like you have it already, do you?"

"No, I don't have it. I saw it now, but the woman, Caines' granddaughter, wasn't willing to part with it long enough for me to make a photocopy. So I just jotted down some notes while

she was talking. Do you have a copy of it there?" He looks at my notebook.

"No." I'm not exactly lying; the article is upstairs somewhere. I'm more interested in seeing where the story goes naturally. "I had a hard time figuring out how to make a copy from the microfilm. But I've got some quotes right here." I tap my notebook.

"We should go over and see about that. The article did appear in 1946, right?"

"Yes, in March. It took me some time to find it because the microfilm hadn't been rewound. But I made my way back to March twenty-second: 'Local Resident Tells How Major Surgical Operation By The Late Doctor Fisher Saved His Life.'"

Uncle Jack smiles and leans back in his seat. "That's the one. But it was really the ship's doctor who first told Caines that he didn't have T.B., you know. He claimed instead that an abscess had contracted the tissue around Caines' lungs. When the captain wouldn't permit the operation for fear of liability, the doctor suggested Caines go up the Labrador to see..."

"Wait now. I have that here somewhere." I scan the pages of my notebook, eager to find the spot before Uncle Jack continues. "Yes, this is it. I liked this: 'he suggested John visit a doctor at Battle Harbour with an enviable reputation as a surgeon - *a certain* Doctor Grenfell.'"

"It's understated and a bit facetious, I suppose, Martha, because everyone knows about Grenfell. You say 'the Dogsled Doctor' and pretty well everyone knows who you're talking about. But the hero of *this* story is another doctor. Dr. Fisher worked with a dog team, too. I think he should get the recognition he deserves.

"Grenfell blew it up a lot, too. I don't know if he did good for Newfoundland or did bad. He exaggerated. He'd go down to Boston and give big speeches about how poor off the people were - they were probably not as poor off as he said. He got a lot of credit for yakking. He was

lord and master down there and that's what he wanted to be. He was even magistrate. He was a good talker, but I don't know how good a doctor he was. He came over from England. He was no better than Dr. Olds down in Twillingate and certainly no better than Dr. Fisher.

"Well, Caines didn't go straight up to Battle Harbour. Perhaps he found the figure of Dr. Grenfell a bit daunting, even then. Or maybe he feared the effects on his health of a trip down north. He sailed for St. John's instead. The medical conditions there must have been the best on the island. They x-rayed him and everything, but they were still diagnosing him as tubercular."

"Didn't worry about what the x-rays would do to his health?"

"No, x-rays were a new thing in Newfoundland. He considered himself privileged, I suppose, to be able to get a cutting edge diagnosis. Anyway, as soon as his hospital bed was needed, they shifted Caines to a hotel."

"He mustn't have been very well off, was he? I mean, you said he hadn't been able to work because of his lungs. And the government only instituted some sort of health insurance scheme in the 'thirties, right?"

"Again, one of the Freemasons showed up with a sum of money and a steamer ticket back to Norris Point. There were no paved roads, no expansion, you understand. When Caines went to the clinic back home, Dr. Fisher said he didn't have T.B., but that the operation he'd need to get fixed up would be very delicate. Fisher was reluctant to embark on the surgery under the primitive medical conditions at the Norris Point clinic. But Caines made Dr. Fisher promise to operate if the doctors could do nothing for him in Battle Harbour.

"Caines got aboard a northbound schooner by hiring himself out as ship's cook. At Battle

Harbour in Labrador, Dr. Grenfell's Mission was short a cook. So, the doctor said he'd have a look at Caines in the spring, if he stayed on at the Mission as cook during the winter. As you might imagine, Caines wasn't too fussy about these medical conditions and he returned to Norris Point."

"Grenfell couldn't provide shelter for the reindeer, either."

"What's that?"

I know something you don't know; I hope my uncle will be impressed by my digressive research. "The year he tried to make your sick man Caines sing for his supper was the same year Grenfell introduced Lapland reindeer to Newfoundland as a potential source of milk and meat for the locals. Maybe he wanted to be seen as a Saint Nicholas figure. Anyway, the herd dwindled and was later seized by the foreign Canadian government. Just a cute little anecdote, I thought."

"Well, isn't that the damnedest thing. But that's another story."

"Know what else I read?" I ask, pleased to add to the conversation. I pinpoint the spot in my notes. "Listen to this: 'Perhaps some of the pioneer spirit has gone out of the medical profession, but in a sparsely populated district where the literacy standard, not to mention the literary standard, is low, where there are no other professional men and no hospital facilities, doctors often deteriorate in morale and professional skills.' Maybe that's why young Dr. Franklin Fisher left Norris Point for Corner Brook after only a year. Maybe his father's 'pioneer spirit' didn't rub off on him."

I can tell Uncle Jack isn't pleased with the ironic discordance I'd let appear in my voice. I ask him if he'd like another cup of tea. "No, thank you. I've got to get going soon."

"Can't you tell me a little bit more?"

"Well, there's one thing for sure: Dr. Fisher never got the recognition he deserved. No, never. A friend of mine down in the Mill - he was a pioneer in Corner Brook, too - he told me about Dr. Fisher. He even mentioned the man's name, but I can't for the life of me remember it now. The man had the venereal disease known as syphilis. It was a different story with drugs then. There were no wonder drugs. My friend told me Dr. Fisher cured this man and he never had a twinge after."

"Oh."

"It's true. Now I also got a hold of Ian Fisher - that's his nephew. And Ian Fisher told me, 'When I was a young fellow, I had an awful pain in my side. Uncle Frank came down and looked me over. Then he gave his diagnosis: 'I can tell you one thing. It sounds like appendicitis, but I'm not going to take it out.' ' And Ian Fisher is about seventy-five years old now. Ole Fisher was a natural, see.

"And Dr. Fisher, Martha, didn't go back on his promise. Within a week of receiving John Caines' letter, the doctor landed at Norris Point in a motor boat. He performed the operation on the kitchen table, which a couple of Caines' friends had dragged upstairs. I think Old Joe Lundrigan said Dr. Fisher performed the operation in the kitchen, but I think it was really upstairs, with lamps. Dr. Fisher could only administer a local anesthetic because of the state of Caines' lungs. As soon as the doctor made an incision, Caines sat right up to see what was going on. Dr. Fisher upbraided him. It was a very delicate operation, you see, Martha. One slip and Caines would have been gone. The doctor told him as much. When he had isolated the rib and was beginning to saw away at it, he asked Caines how he was getting on."

"I've got this!" Sorry to have criticized the doctor, I've been following along in my notes. "Here it is, straight from the newspaper: "'Hurry up and finish,' came forcibly from the patient. 'You've got my teeth all on edge with that sawing.' Doctor Fisher's eyebrows went up. He finished the operation in silence.'""

"Yes, Martha. And Caines lived to be good and old, too. Dr. Fisher died in 1940, six years before that article came out. Mr. Caines survived him by twenty-six years. He ended up working as a cook in the logging camps."

"Dad used to cook when you went hunting, didn't he?"

"I suppose he did his share, yes."

"Wasn't there something about him giving you too much tea out in the woods?"

"Yes, because I cursed at him for only giving me half a cup."

"Is that it?" The story definitely loses something through condensation.

Uncle Jack is quiet for a moment, as he looks into his empty mug. "But that's another story. Now the story about how Dr. Fisher saved that man Caines, that's a *really* story. It's part of the folklore of the West Coast."

BEST BÊTE NOIRE

"What'll it be, girls?" The woman who is pushing plump speaks like a seasoned smoker. She unzips the collapsible cooler at her feet. "Canadian or Canadian?" Her short blonde *coiffure* is whiplashed by the force of her laugh.

The southbound train has just left Brantford station.

The petite blonde across the aisle from the first woman chuckles gently. "I think I'll have a Canadian, Sandy."

The beer woman, Sandy, looks like a caricature of the other one. She speaks louder, takes up more space, has brasher lipstick and more darkly-ringed eyes. "I can always count on you, Gloria. What's *your* fancy, Nicole?"

The third woman, in the seat next to Sandy's, answers reluctantly, "I think I'm going to pass on that one."

Sandy looks as though her whole family just died. "You don't mean to tell me you're going to be sober when you get off this train do you, Nicole? Not me, let me tell you." She reaches down and fishes another beer out of the ice. "How about you?" She looks at the outsider next to Gloria, me. "You wanna join us? There's plenty to go around."

Judging from the first half hour of my ride, I know that these women are not going to drift off to sleep. And I probably won't be able to either. When I got aboard at Aldershot, the sole empty seat was beside three women travelling together. They had only been in motion for thirty-five odd minutes from Toronto, but they looked as though they anticipated a wild ride through farm country to Windsor. "Really? Thanks a lot." The woman named Sandy, who

looks a bit older than the others, maybe mid-thirties, passes me a beer. She isn't someone I'd want turned against me, even for just three or four hours.

"C'mon, Nicole. Even ..." The bright lips turn back towards me. "What's your name, darling?"

"Tracey."

"Well, hello, Tracey. Nice to meet you." She shakes my hand. "I'm Sandy. And this here's Gloria. We were up to Toronto for a little getaway this weekend. Just the girls, you know. A little shopping, a little culture, but mostly just a lot of drinking, smoking, picking up, and gambling."

"Oh. That sounds like fun. Are you guys from Windsor?"

Sandy nods her head, slowly, then faster in realization. "I get it. You're probably wondering why we wouldn't just stay at the casinos in Windsor. Right?"

It's my turn to nod, then to shrug indifference.

"Well, we're not really *serious* gamblers. We just do this thing once a year. The serious gamblers - now they don't smoke, they don't drink, they don't even talk. I've even heard that some people wear those adult pampers in there so they won't have to leave the slot machines for days. That's sick. We'll never get like that. *We* just want a break, a bit of fun." She looks to her right, then points back at me. "Even Tracey here is having one, Nicole. It's only polite to have a drink with your guests. You should know that."

"Maybe in a bit."

"What's with you? The weekend's not over yet, girl. We've got a few more hours of freedom."

"Okay, then." Nicole helps herself to a tin of beer from the cooler by their feet. I think I'm the only one who notices she doesn't open it.

Sandy has already moved on. "Say, Gloria. Let's bet on when we'll reach the next stop. What is the next stop, anyway?"

"I think it might be Woodstock." I take this corridor a dozen times a year.

"You sure?"

"Yah, I think so."

"Tracey says it's Woodstock. Okay ..." Sandy doesn't bother to hide her excitement as she tears a paper towel from her purse into bits and passes them out, along with three pens. "Everyone write down what time you think we'll get to Woodstock and give me the slips."

I guess wrong because I don't want to draw too much attention to myself. Sandy is the scrutineer. In a little while, the conversation stops with the train. "Wait now! Look! Woodstock." She unfolds the bits of tissue. "Nicole said six-forty, me and Tracey said six-twenty-five, and Gloria said six-forty-five."

Gloria checks her watch. "Nicole wins, then. Six-forty-two."

"I don't know about that." Sandy waves her wrist at us all. "Look. I've got six-forty-seven. Gloria gets the prize. What *is* the prize, Gloria?"

No one bothers to argue about the five minutes Sandy has picked up.

"I don't know, Sandy. But it had better be good."

I watch Sandy's eyes dart around as if she's playing "I-Spy". "How about Frank? Let me tell you, his look is the only thing that goes soft when you come by our place. Says he can't understand why a woman like you isn't attached. He always did love a challenge."

Gloria pouts out lips full enough to be silicone-injected. "I want a *real* prize, though."

"Well, I know he's not Billy Ray Cyrus or anything, but that doesn't mean you can just ..." She stops as the meal cart is wedged in-between her and Gloria.

When the last of the carry-on beer is gone, during the five minute halfway stop at London - they bet on the length of the stop, too, Sandy winning this time because of my poker-faced hand signal - Sandy asks the attendant what she has left in the way of brewskies. The attendant checks her cart and the cupboard near the baggage rack, but can come up with only seven tins of assorted beer.

"Well, I guess we'll have to take those for now," says Sandy, disappointed, disapproving.

Half an hour later, as the train passes unnoticed by Glencoe, Gloria is struck by inspiration. "I wish we could have cocktails. Let's see what they have in the way of liqueurs."

Sandy is as agreeable as ever. "I'll go see if I can get us some liquors out of that lady." And she's off down the aisle. Her new faded jeans fit like Saran Wrap and her feet look a bit swollen, the tops coming out a bit over the strap of her black pumps. She's down there talking to the attendant for a few minutes. When she turns around, I see that the bulb of her belly is popping out under her cinched waistline. "They've only got vodka," she tells Gloria when she returns. "And they don't have any orange juice or anything to mix it with. So I didn't get any."

"I thought married people always got some." Gloria looks past Sandy and winks. "Isn't that what you told me, Nicole?"

"Gloria!" Nicole looks so shocked and innocent that I have to wash down a laugh with the last dull sip of my beer.

Sandy elbows her way back into the winning side. "Really, Gloria. We all know Nicole

doesn't talk about that stuff."

There are a few seconds of skintight silence while Sandy rummages in her purse but comes up with nothing. I assumed that Gloria and Sandy were the friends from way back and that Nicole was more or less a tag-along. But now it seems Sandy is trying to get her foot jammed in the door of the others' friendship. When Nicole excuses herself and walks away behind us, Sandy leans right across the aisle and touches the arm of Gloria's seat. "Little Miss Prissy, eh? Her and her perfect little husband. Charles." She sits back in her chair and repeats the last word, imitating what must be Nicole's breathless mentions of her husband. "Yes, *Charles?* I love you more each day, too, *Charles.*" Sandy rolls her eyes, then whispers to Gloria, "I'll bet the sex is shit, they're so god-damned sickly."

Gloria grins. "From what she says, though ..."

"Gloria, Nicole wouldn't know an orgasm if she sat on one. Remember, we're talking about a woman who wanted to walk to dinner last night because she thought the subway would slow us down." Sandy shakes her head in disbelief. "I don't have much time for naïve people."

Gloria nods in agreement, then looks down the aisle. I am sitting elevated on my bare heels and I can see Nicole smile back as she approaches. She is wearing a dark burgundy silk pantsuit, and looks like a swan gliding towards us. Sandy looks away toward the front of the car and mutters, "What's she wearing, pyjamas? No, I bet she wears flannelette to bed."

"Sandy!" Gloria whispers.

Sandy steps into the aisle to let Nicole back in. "I was just telling Gloria here that I have no problem 'getting some', thank you very much."

Nicole looks like the poster child for the exclamation mark. "Gosh, Sandy. I never

would have guessed otherwise. Especially seeing how many men came around you this weekend. Isn't that right. Gloria? You were like a ..."

I can tell Sandy is beginning to forgive, but she still asks roughly. "Like a *what*, Nicole?"

"Well, what came into my head was 'like a dog in heat', but that's not what I meant, at all. I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm not good with words. But ..."

Gloria saves her. "What she meant to say, Sandy, was that you were one hot bitch out there the past couple of days. And if you ask me, if Frank can't see that, you should kick him the hell out of there."

I have no idea what's going on, but Sandy looks far more taken aback than Nicole does.

Gloria backtracks. "What were you saying about vodka, Sandy?"

Sandy is biting a hangnail on one hand and inspecting the nails of the other one. If I was her, I'd take off for the bathroom right about now. But she probably realizes that backbiters are fickle. "Damn fingers get so ragged when I travel." One last bite. "Yah, they've only got Smirnoff's. Is that any good?"

It would seem that Gloria's the gourmet of the trio. "Do you know if they have lemons? Oh, here comes the lady. Ask her if they have lemon juice, Sandy." It's late in the day and they've got no mix and no fresh fruit. I see Sandy pinch herself for suggestions, but all she gets is reality; Gloria is more cultured.

"Hey!" Gloria has turned to face me. "Let me see that bag of candies again." I can tell she's trying not to look too smug as she pulls out half a pack of lemon Starbursts from among the train candy I'd offered in exchange for the tins of beer. "I've got it! We'll make lemon drops. Is there still ice in the cooler? We've got to chill the vodka."

It turns out to be a simple drink; you just let the candy soothe the burnt path of the vodka.

After a while, Sandy erupts in laughter again. "Remember last year?"

The smile lines in Nicole's face - which seems as if it's made up to look natural - are decreased by disappointment. "Ah, guys. You're not going to talk about Vegas again, are you? The one time I couldn't come."

Sandy snickers and comments softly to Gloria, "I don't believe she's ever come, do you?"

Gloria doesn't even falter. "It wasn't even all that spectacular, Nic. We only talk about it because it was so bizarre."

"Now don't be greedy with the details, Gloria. Sorry, Nicole, but it was a friggin' excellent time. Except for mommy dearest."

Nicole's face again wrinkles into a smile. "What? Tell me!"

"Okay. You know how Dad passed away last year, right?" Sandy doesn't even look towards Nicole for an answer. "Well, I told my mother she could come, but that she couldn't say a word about us smoking, or drinking, or talking to strange men. She agreed. It was either that or stay home all alone with the people from her church calling her day and night. So she came. And she was good, but she doesn't smoke or drink. And she can't go out in the sun, neither. She came looking for us one morning - thank God we had separate rooms - and found us sitting at a patio table in short shorts and tube tops, each of us with a cigarette and a beer. I knew she was trying to be lighthearted when she said, 'Isn't it a bit early in the day for beer?' It was probably around seven o'clock then, wasn't it, Gloria?"

"I have no idea what time it was. I didn't know then, either."

"Well, exactly. So I said to her, 'Early! This is the latest we've ever gone.' She took off

into the restaurant then for breakfast. All alone. I think she felt bad. I think she felt kinda left out."

We're nearing Chatham when Sandy falls silent and squints down the aisle. Apparently, Gloria misinterprets. "The lady's gone down to the other car. She probably won't be back for a while."

"Huh?" Although Sandy flashes a smile, the glaze from her ceramic stare has already melted and gathered noticeably in the corner of her eye.

Gloria reaches across the aisle and squeezes Sandy's forearm. "Hey! No thinking! The weekend's not over yet."

"I can't help it. I'm wondering if I could take my daughter on the train."

"You have a daughter?" I ask. "I never would have thought it."

"Why? Do I look unfit or something, like a criminal? Thanks a lot, Terry. Just ship me off to Kingston, why don't you?"

Gloria gently corrects her. "It's Tracey, Sandy. Not Terry."

I pretend I didn't notice. "No. It's not that. I guess you just seem more young and alive than most mothers. But what do you mean if you *could* bring your daughter? How old is she?"

The brash determination to have fun in Sandy's face has dissipated. Her features are hard now in what looks like bitter resignation. "She's six. I was just wondering if a wheelchair could fit between these seats."

Even though I'm a bit curious about why her daughter's in a wheelchair, part of me really doesn't want Sandy to explain. So I'm relieved when Gloria gives her a reminder: "Sandy. You weren't going to think about that, remember?"

"I can't help it. I don't think I could ever just get away with her."

"Hey. We're not back to Windsor yet, San."

I see Sandy wince as she swallows what must be a massive lump in her throat. "No, you're right. I'm a mom for three hundred and sixty-three days. I'm not a mom this weekend."

Gloria leans back in her seat again. "That's more like it."

Nicole, who has been silently listening, joins in. "Here here. Now, who wants to bet on when we'll get to Chatham?"

The next leg of the journey is pretty smooth, until Sandy starts thinking again. "I'll bet you any money Frank makes a pass at you in the parking lot."

"He won't live long if he does." Gloria somehow makes this threat sound sexy.

"He's only human, I suppose. You have no real right to be angry with him anyway, Sandy. Remember what you said last night before you kicked us out of the hotel room for a few hours: 'What's good for the goose ...'"

"Nicole always has to ruin my fun. There's nothing like fighting with Frank. It makes the sex much better. Oh, shit." She snaps her fingers. "You know what I completely forget until now? It's Frank's birthday today. Well, at least I asked Mom to look after Leanne so he could go out with his buddies. But he'd better be at the station to get me, drunk or not."

Gloria flinches. "Frank is not a happy drunk, Sandy. Would you mind if I called a cab?"

"Ah, c'mon. You're used to getting hit on. Besides, I'm his wife. I'll be the one he ends up with tonight. And you know what? I don't even need to give him a birthday card. I'll just give him a blow job. He's easy enough to please."

"Does he do the same for you on your birthday?"

Sandy looks horrified that a question like that would come out of Nicole's mouth. But she's got a quick recovery time. "If I remind him often enough."

Pretty soon, we've reached the end of the line. A few people are waiting near the tracks. A string of taxis is visible on the other side of the station. Sandy has dumped the ice water from the cooler onto the floor at her feet. As "the girls" gather together their carry-on bags, Gloria spots Frank outside. "Hey! Look, Sandy! He's got flowers!"

Sandy's face softens for the second before she says, "I suppose he wants to make sure he gets his tonight. We'll make him take *all* of the luggage."

APPLICATION

"Look into your heart and ..."

Right. Sure. I'll just start. No sweat. I'll try out that "freewriting" business that's supposed to unleash everything buried in my soul. Easy as pie. All I need is some idea for a story worth passing in. Surely I'm not that far removed from excitement or imagination, am I?

A little girl on the cusp between childhood and adolescence has to do a science project on electricity. She approaches her father timidly, tugs on his sleeve as he's washing the dishes. He tells her she shouldn't have left it until the night before it was due, but agrees to help her in any way he can. They make a circuit with the flashlight bulb and the battery from the smoke detector.

How much of this garbage would I have to write to get my word count? It only has to be five hundred words. That's nothing. They ask for thousands in their contests. 500. That's bigger than my paycheque will be if this gets me the damn job. Now, what else?

To show her the different types of circuits - parallel and series - he drags out the Christmas trunks from under the basement stairs and finds the strings of indoor Christmas lights. Now would be a good time, too, to replace burnt-out bulbs with new ones, to save time on Christmas Eve. Most strings light up the living room carpet right away.

When they plug in the last strand, nothing happens. They have found the series circuit. He asks her what would be the best way to treat the problem. She suggests they take a bulb they know is good and try it in each socket until they find the dud. Yes, he says, that's one way of going about it. But what if the problem is more advanced, if several bulbs are blown? She

doesn't imagine there's anything they could do, in that case, except to throw the whole set of lights into the garbage. He tells her she mustn't give up so easily. When she begins to cry in frustration, he suggests, "Why don't we try out each of the bulbs from the bad string in a good string. That way we'll be sure."

They find two baddies, but the old string still won't light. They decide to get rid of it: he says it was always a nuisance anyway. They unscrew all of the bulbs and put them in a shopping bag, then shove the whole works back underneath the stairs. "That's that," he says. "But you do understand now about the different types of circuits?"

"Yes," she says. "You shouldn't have anything to do with the sick ones." She is embarrassed about including uncalled-for information in the project. He spells out "parallel" for her. Parallel and serious.

Where am I going with this? This isn't a story. Oh. Let me think. Let me think. The da-dit, da-dit of the birds is the only thing in my head. On and on. All they really want is a secretary, a typist who will edit as she goes. Someone who can outwit the computer speller.

The part she has saved for last is the question her classmates said was the easiest. They just have to copy down the map from the fuse-box. But her family has always relied on experimentation. Since a fuse only blows when they are in the middle of something - cooking, ironing, a favourite t.v. show - they haven't ever taken the time to work out the central nervous system of their house.

The girl and her dad unscrew a fuse, then run around flicking switches to determine which part of the house has been obscured. They work their way down the fuse box methodically. Her father can't just fill in the spot on the fuse-box family tree because her house

is not wired in the normal way; one fuse sometimes intimately connects both sides of a wall separating two bedrooms. So he is filling an entire scribbler, drawing the whole fuse-box and shading in a different bulb on each page. Sometimes a wall has only one, unused socket and it's hidden behind a cumbersome piece of furniture. The little girl says they don't need to bother with it, but her father insists that if they're going to do this at all, they'd better do a good job of it. The finished product looks like a foot reflexology manual, providing easy cures for ailments in any room of the house.

Cusp? Foot reflexology? I have *definitely* been living with Laurel too long.

The chrome chair inhales relief through the rip in the vinyl pad as the cushion regains its shape. Gently pulling the screen door shut towards her, Charlotte backs into the kitchen from the verandah.

"You forgot your pen."

The unexpected voice shreds her solitude. Charlotte worries that Laurel has overheard her conversation, although it occurred only in her head and in whispered scratches across the paper. As she reaches out to snag her pencil from atop the hibachi which, in turn, is perched precariously on the ledge, Charlotte changes modes. "Strange to see you up and around this early, Laurel," she comments to the roommate she now faces. "What's up ... besides you, I mean?"

"They let me off at eleven last night - place was dead - and you were already in bed when I got home. Couldn't believe it. Do you always do that? You're as bad as my parents. Or worse - they at least keep busy for a while in there."

"Laurel!"

"I'm serious; I've heard them. Why do you think I moved out? So, I get home and you're gone to bed, and I decide to check out that alternative medicine book for things to tell Edward. Knocked me right out!"

"There you go, Laurel. A natural remedy for insomnia!"

Charlotte's comment goes ignored. "But this," Laurel stretches her arms out to the sides, her palms upturned, then lifts them slightly, as if to encourage the congregation of jam jars and breadcrumbs before her on the table to rise and join her in a hymn of praise. "This is all right. I'd forgotten how enjoyable breakfast could be." The brightly-attired young woman seated at the table folds a piece of toast in half, dunks it into her tea, then crowds the whole thing into her mouth before it can drip onto the madras tablecloth. "Help yourself to tea," she offers, her hand held before her still full mouth.

Charlotte picks up and sniffs the pottery teapot. "Chamomile?"

Laurel nods. "Great for what ails you."

"I don't know. I think coffee might give a bigger kick to my imagination."

"Caffeine just makes you nervous. Peppermint tea might be just as effective, and less toxic. I think it's in behind the other stuff if you want some."

"You're like some kind of pusher ..."

"What do you need your imagination stimulated for, anyway?"

"I'm trying to write that story I was telling you about. I must say, it's driving me ..."

"You're *still* working on that job application? Charlotte, it's been weeks!"

"Uh huh. I've got no choice anymore. It's due in tomorrow. All done and ready to go,

too, except for the story. Reference letters, transcripts from the college, the whole bit. But the story ..."

"I still can't get over that. It's seriously bizarre, having to write a story to prove you can be an editor."

"That's typesetter-proofreader."

"Whatever. Holistic approaches might work in most situations, but I think those guys are taking it a bit far. It's like if they made me get really drunk to get my job at the bar."

Wincing doesn't help Charlotte unravel Laurel's logic. "Not exactly. More like if they asked you to distil the liquor you'd end up serving. Isn't it?"

"Maybe that is closer." Laurel is unwilling to make full concessions.

"Anyway, what can I do about it? I don't think contesting their application procedures will score me any points with them. I even went to the library yesterday, looking for hints."

"Get any?"

"Actually, I did get lucky. They still haven't taken down the big huge display from that prose-writing course last summer. Remember Edward was thinking of taking it?"

"Oh yeah, right. Can you imagine? He's not exactly Mr. Eloquence, is he? I think his talents lie elsewhere. Too bad *you* didn't take the course, though."

"Too bad Little League Press didn't have a job opening before now. Besides, I had just started on at the watch counter at Sears and I couldn't exactly ask for a week off. Do you think people who can write - I mean *really* write - need to go to those things?"

"Sure. For inspiration maybe. And you *can* write. I remember the essay you read out in that assembly. Didn't you win a big prize or something?"

"Laurel! That was in grade ten!"

"The best artists start young ..."

"It was a tirade against smoking, wasn't it? Not exactly creative writing."

"Ironic, hey? Just a year before your dad ..."

"Two years." Charlotte glances at her watch. "But he never smoked ... And who are you to talk?"

"Hey! I take care of myself. I think I'm careful enough to counteract that one small vice."

"So you don't consider all your ..." Charlotte's tongue pushes out her cheek as she smiles naughtily, "*entertaining* to be sinful?"

"So? I know how to keep my body happy. What's so wrong with that? Gee, Charlotte. I didn't know you had such a problem with my little pleasures."

"Problem? God, no. If anything, I'm a bit jealous. You've probably got a pile of stories you could write. What would you write about now, say ... if you had to?"

"To tell you the truth, Charlotte, I would never find myself in that situation."

"What, unemployed?"

"You're too quick for me, Charlotte. I was talking about trying to squeeze in with the artsies."

"You mean to tell me you don't consider yourself artsy?"

"What's artsy about me? I've got no talents. Like I used to say in high school, I couldn't sing to save my life and all I can draw is a smoke." Laurel twists around in her chair to see the clock over the stove. "Look at that! I've been up for ages and I haven't had one cigarette. If

you'll excuse me ..."

For a long time, the girl made herself believe her father was on a business trip. He had been detained by the foreign authorities during his last meeting away. They'd only release him if he let them snatch and kill his daughter. He had decided to keep her safe and wanted his family to think he was dead, so they wouldn't always be wondering where he was. The authorities had taught him how to act out his sudden illness, so advanced and pervasive that there was no time for the question of bone marrow transplants to be formulated by his siblings. They even devised complications for his night in the i.c.u..

His business trips had always filled her with fear, since she had no control of what happened to him out there. She didn't know his very cells were conspiring against him.

It was a dark and stormy night, dark because she was faking a power outage and had turned the lights off in her room and laid her bathrobe along the base of her door to block out the cheery glow from the hallway. Her father was due to arrive home from Denmark, after what would turn out to be his last meeting. The flight had been delayed, but not cancelled. She imagined the jet being swallowed up like Jonah by the cold mouth of the Atlantic Ocean. His life and identification had been engulfed by the briny depths. She sat at her desk, leaning forward on her elbows, and stared at the snow blowing in front of her street-light. She pictured the airline authorities sitting back on the cold plush benches in the waiting room of the small local airport, discussing how to break the news to the families.

Or maybe her father had been the only one to be gunned down while saving everyone else from hijackers. The other travellers had been so shocked by the incident that they forgot who

they were. Authorities had to rely on families and friends to claim people and luggage. So it would take some time before her father's absence was validated.

The girl only played these films in her head - spitting and crackling like old silent movies - to keep her mind occupied during his transatlantic flights. She imagined the worst so it couldn't happen.

Or maybe the flight was about to land safely. He would walk off the plane only to discover that no one awaited his arrival at the airport. He would try to call home to tell them not to risk driving, but the phone lines would be out. Finally, fearing the house was burned down with his family trapped inside, he would venture to take a taxi home. The car would hit a patch of black ice and would spin out of control. A telephone pole would act as an emergency brake. The cab driver would be spared.

To imagine him dead was her way of getting him home safely.

Or he is in Denmark, under stress and overworked. He trips on the step outside the little shop where he has just chosen treats for his little girl. After thirty-six hours, the pain in his back and his wrist has grown so much that he gives in and goes to the hospital. The doctor takes several x-rays, but doesn't find out until the next day that the machine is malfunctioning, leaking radiation. The x-rays reveal nothing and that pain soon subsides.

But maybe they don't like fantasy.

Laurel comes back inside fifteen minutes later and challenges Charlotte, "Do you really think I'm an artsy?"

"You can sure tell a mean story when you're feeling up to it. And besides, you *look* the

part. Just look at you!"

Laurel smooths down her batik sarong with her ring-laden fingers, then glances beyond it to ankles dark with hair. She smiles. "C'mon. This is one hundred percent me. Don't you agree?"

"You're right, of course. But you're also an artsy-fartsy, kind of ... different."

"I told you I take care of myself, and I don't mind letting that be known."

"What are you talking about?"

"Breast cancer. If anyone is offended by my appearance, if someone doesn't find me 'uplifting' enough, he can bloody well reach over and prop them up himself. It's unnatural to inhibit the flow of lymph with elastic and underwire."

"You *are* a freak. Tell me, is there anything that's not carcinogenic, Laurel? And that - knowing what might cause cancer - doesn't mean you won't get it."

Laurel shrugs and says smugly, "Every little bit helps." She is checked by Charlotte's sudden crestfallen look. "Or it might help ... Man! I wish I knew what to say to you sometimes. I feel like you're holding something back. Maybe I shouldn't complain; we do talk about *almost* everything under the ..."

"What *were* we talking about, anyway?"

"I ... You were going to tell me what you found at the library."

Charlotte smiles, too brightly. "Wow! That was quite a digression, wasn't it? Well, what kept coming up in the guidebooks was 'Write what you know.'"

"Makes sense, I guess."

"But what do *I* know? Besides the fact that I'm having trouble writing this story?"

"Sure, wouldn't that make a cool story?!"

"Maybe you're right ... But nothing would happen, would it? Besides, I'd only have the same problem again. I couldn't even write that because I'd be caught up in the ending."

"Oh." Laurel replaces the lid on the honey bottle and licks her fingers. "Wait now! Why couldn't you have it end when you get the job! Trick them into hiring you. Make it seem like the natural thing to do."

"Or they might just think it's too cute. I get the feeling those artsy types wouldn't appreciate anything so straightforward. But you'd know that better than I would." Charlotte winks. "Anyway, can we talk about something else before I go cracked? What's up at the bar?"

"I don't know. Same old thing. Drunks and sluts. Speaking of which ... Edward hasn't been around in a while. Have you seen him?"

"No."

"After our last little game of pass-the-parcel, I'm *sick* of him, if you get my drift."

"Gross, Laurel."

"I sure got his drift! The prescription cost me twenty bucks!"

"How can you treat it so lightly? Not everything can just be whisked away with a few pills and a couple of laughs, you know."

"I guess we all have our own defense mechanisms. Besides, you're not immune. Say, why don't you write about what happened that night Edward won *you* over?"

"That would probably be the perfect story, but I have no idea what happened. I was blitzed! That's one bad dream I'm trying to forget, no thanks to you for bringing it up again. I haven't spoken to him since the morning after. He actually woke me up for cab-fare."

"Couldn't you write about not knowing what happened?"

"Wouldn't that be interesting: one minute he's passing me yet another sweet drink and telling me something about his father and the next thing I'm waking up with this guy in my bed. I don't think so."

"It could be a twist ending! You wake up and discover it's *not* a dream!"

"If only ... Maybe I should try to read his mind ..."

"It's worth a shot. Anyway, I'm going to soak apart my ills in the bath."

I always was partial to the artistes. Not even a pinch of inhibition. Look at her leaning over the table for a long shot on the eight ball: she wants it. Any woman who's a pool shark like that has got to be wild in bed. That little leopard-print skirt - her legs never stop.

"Rot in hell"? Hell, I didn't want that thing anyway. She wants me to get lost? It's her loss. I'm not fazed. I'm resilient. She probably saved me. Who knows what kind of weird shit she'd be into? Poor thing. She's so ugly, she can't even lose weight to look good. Starving artist, all bones. She's so hungry she's delusional. Doesn't know what she's saying. Get her away from me. I can't make out a word that one says.

Ha! When her friends tell her what she's missing, she'll come crawling back to me. Guaranteed. What's that joke again? Oh yeah, why women have legs. "So they don't leave trails like snails." Ha! Hilarious. Definitely not for mixed company. Forget the wacko. What else is available?

Hell-o pretty little thing by the bar. Ain't she prissy, though, all matching and tucked in. Best kind, I'd say. They always do it right, at least. Think they know what they want.

Always totally in control. But I can make them squeal. They don't know how good it can be until I get a hold of them. Just watch me unravel that lambswool exterior.

Look at me. Just look at me. That's all I need. Bingo. I got a smile. She hit the beer bottle off her front tooth as she swallowed down the thought of me. Green light, if I ever saw one. She's tenderloin, primed, ready to go. Better butter her up first, though. Precautionary measure. Just about the only thing the old man is good for, nowadays: sob-story routine. Here's my chance. That friend of hers is off to powder her honker.

"Any progress?" When Laurel reappears, she is fully dressed - in black this time - and her dark wet hair is plaited down her back.

"I gave up on Edward. It might be worse, though, if I *could* get into his head. This is so depressing. How am I supposed to produce something when nothing ever happens? You know what I mean?"

"I guess there's not too much on the go these days. But writers write about everything, don't they? I read on one of the tea boxes that some guy in France got off on staring into his teacup."

"You couldn't understand. Your life is like a t.v. movie."

"Yeah, that bar is home to some strange exchanges. But I couldn't write a story to save my life."

"Right. Like you wouldn't try anything if you thought your quality of your life would improve."

"Shoot." Laurel snaps her fingers. "That reminds me, Charlotte ... Someone told me the

other night that the reason Edward's not around these days is because his father is sick."

"Big deal."

Laurel gasps.

"I'm sorry, but his father has been sick forever, hasn't he? It never stopped Edward from going out before"

"They say he had a relapse. He's in the hospital and everything. This time he's getting the whole shebang - surgery, radiotherapy, chemo. He almost made it to the five-year mark in remission, too. That's when some doctors will say it's cured."

"Oh. I didn't know." Charlotte has neutralized her voice.

"And a possible side effect of the radiation is leukaemia. Isn't that unreal? A side effect." Laurel looks into Charlotte's eyes and swallows some coffee. "People do write about drinking, though. They must. Take it from me, it's a big part of life. Some of the regulars stay in the bar pretty much from noon until two in the morning. It's kind of gross."

"Well, they did mention that American writer, Hemingway, in one of those guidebooks. Remember *The Old Man and the Sea* from high school?"

"*The Old Man and the Sea*? We didn't do that one. I can't remember ever seeing the Coles Notes."

"Not important. But apparently he used to drink a lot. It seems he took their advice to the extreme. So that he could write what he knew, he fought in wars and went to the bullfights in Spain. He even wrote about fishing. Can you imagine anything so boring?"

"Well, there you go. Didn't your dad used to tell you about his hunting trips?"

"Yeah."

"Could you write about that?"

"I don't think so. Maybe I'll be able to write about the reading this afternoon. Or I might just get inspiration there. It's my last hope."

"Where exactly are we going anyway?"

"It's at the LSPU Hall. A bunch of writers are hosting some sort of open-mike thing called 'Under the Grill: Writing Processed'."

Laurel screws up her face. "What sort of name is that? Will they be serving sandwiches?"

"Laurel! You said you'd *go*"

"Oh, I'm going. What time did you say it started?"

Charlotte looks at her watch. "Five o'clock."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I'll walk up to the Hall during my break. I'm entitled to it ... You don't think they'll go on longer than an hour, do you?"

"You can always slip away if they do."

"You wouldn't mind?"

Charlotte shakes her head.

"Okay, I'll catch you later."

Charlotte and Laurel meet in the corridor outside the Second Space at the Hall. The mid-size art gallery and multi-purpose room has been set up cabaret-style, with a podium opposite the bar. They quickly join a table near the door.

When the first speaker passes them on her way up to the podium, Laurel turns up her

nose. "Know what that is, her perfume?"

Charlotte inhales deeply. "No, but it's nice. Musky."

"Woody, actually. Sandalwood. I'm not too fussy about it. Too thick. It practically chokes me."

"I feel the same about cigarette smoke." Charlotte doesn't catch the death-rays she knows Laurel is zapping her with because the room has fallen silent and all other eyes, including Charlotte's, now face the podium.

The reader says she's not great at speaking off the cuff, so off with the cuffs! She pulls a pair of sewing scissors from her fringed suede satchel. Then she proceeds to pull the long sleeve of her boxy woven shirt down over her fist. With her exposed hand, she snips away the first few inches of the sleeve. The process is repeated with the other sleeve. "I will not be hemmed in! That's the title of my performance piece today." She finally begins the main "text", her exaggerated hands kept busy the whole time:

I start with a little black ball of unformed thought and pierce it, sprawling, with the safety pin of language. Then I turn its phrases slowly over the Bic flame of inspiration until finally the whole thing crumbles. I spread this dust over the paper. Finally, I roll up my creation with the glue of commas and capitals. Now, I set it ablaze and release it into the world, so that everyone can feel as creative as I do.

"These people are so flaky," Laurel proves she's not the whispering kind, as the writer smokes up at the podium and the audience applauds. "I wonder if they'd be making you edit something if you were applying to be a writer. If you were editing this scene, could you cut her out?"

"Sure." Charlotte doesn't want to encourage conversation that will dispel the atmosphere of reverence.

"Like a tumour!"

"Laurel! Shush!" Charlotte can't suppress a giggle.

The next guy won't let the poem speak for itself.

"I have a hard time advising young writers. What can they have to say? They have not lived enough to discern the meaning of their experiences. My advice to writers young and old would have to be get out there and enjoy life. You can think about writing later. Don't go to a wedding and jot down the number of sequins on the bridal gown. Ask the bride to dance. Eat, drink, be sick even. Make every day a Midnight-Madness-at-the-Mall day."

Charlotte recaps her pen.

"Maintaining a critical distance doesn't mean you sit and think how foolish everyone is. Leacock said only idiots 'sit and chuckle over it all'. Don't separate yourself from the world ... Besides, you can only write what you know if you've let a year elapse. "

Laurel yawns, then leans into Charlotte's ear. "He's sure separating himself from the listening world."

"There's probably *some* truth in what he's saying."

"That you shouldn't sit in the corner at a wedding reception? Yeah, that's big news. You want my opinion, Charlotte?"

"Maybe ..."

"I think you should write about your dad. You should be able to write about it now, after all. It's been almost ten years, hasn't it? That's nine more than you need, according to this guy."

"It's not that simple ..."

"You haven't even told *me* what happened. Do you think you'd be able to remember it all?"

"Laurel! I may not go on and on about it, but I'm not callous! Of course I'd remember. It's in my head all the time. Only I've got a sort of retaining wall put up to keep the memories back."

"You put it up; only you can take it down. Well, I'm off. Won't be back before two. Good luck with your story."

"See ya."

Little red dots around his ankles after a week-long flu. Throat too sore to swallow the puréed strawberries and milk. Rushed to hospital in the grey station wagon. Acute, they say. Unstoppable. I sprint around intensive care. Nonono! Nonono! NoNoNo! I pass the nurses' station again and they're statues, their home-made white cardigans mocking me neatly on their shoulders. "DO SOMETHING!!!!!!" Not even their faces move. Back to his room. He stands, pushing his I.V. pole with his right hand. Walks slowly to his bathroom, too slowly, not keeping up with our racing minds, our racing hearts. We're circling his bed, watching him hold up his pyjama bottoms with his left hand. His body is shrinking. I'm running again. Find the public bathroom. Search for myself in the mirror. Back to his room. Mom says, "Say goodbye to your father." No big bear hugs. He's unconscious, slipping away from us. The forehead I bend over is weird, slick, covered with little red dots. This isn't him. This isn't happening. I can't do this. I can't do this.

I just can't do this.

It's 12:30 when Laurel bustles into the apartment, pausing to snuff out her cigarette on the outside step.

"You're home early."

"And you're up late. Charlotte, you look like death warmed over. Are you okay?"

"Thanks a lot. And no, I'm not okay."

"Judging from your bloodshot eyes, I'd guess that you stuck around all night with that whacked-out writing crowd. Did you ... get anything written?"

"I tried to write about Dad tonight, Laur. It was too tough. I just couldn't. I'm wiped out."

"I'm sorry, Charlotte. How are you supposed to put all that emotion on paper anyway?"

"It's not even that part. The writing would be easy, I think. At least there's a definite ending, a series of events. God, it might even make a *good* story. But I don't think I could survive the memories. You wouldn't think every detail of it would be so clear after all this time, would you? It's like I'm skinned or something. I sting all over. But that's sort of what I wanted to do by forcing myself not to think about it. I wanted it all to be there, preserved intact."

Laurel attempts to lighten the mood. "Yeah! It all fossilizes and eventually you'll have a geyser of pain ... like an essential oil."

Charlotte rolls her eyes. "And you say you're not poetic ..."

"That might overwhelm you altogether. It might actually be therapeutic if you wrote about it for yourself, in small doses."

"I did that back then, right after it all happened. But I can't even make myself open that diary."

"Oh, Charlotte, I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was still so hard for you. Listen, I'm always here if you want to talk about it. Okay?"

"Thanks. You know what I just remembered?"

"No, what?"

"Over at the library, I read about this writing thing called 'The Transplant'. You make one of your characters have a feeling you can't deal with."

"That sounds a bit like one of the alternative therapies I'm going to tell Edward about. It's called visualization. Mind over matter, you know."

"You just *imagine* cancer away?"

"Charlotte! I can't stand it when you use that tone. They tried this treatment in a group of patients they were calling 'incurable'. And twenty-two percent of them went into full remission. It's simple. You relax, loosen your clothes, close your eyes. And then you start to imagine ... Every step you take down a flight of stairs makes you more relaxed. At the bottom of the stairs is your favourite place, where you feel special and safe. Only then are you allowed to think about your cancer, to focus on it alone. Picture friendly, healthy cells meeting up with the mutated ones, killing them with kindness. Think, believe that you are cured. Now, you climb back up those stairs and reintroduce yourself to your environment before you even open your eyes."

"It still sounds simplistic, juvenile."

"Ugh. Scepticism will get you nowhere but Ulcerville, Charl. That's how I'm afraid

Edward and his dad will react, too. I don't see how people can just dismiss natural methods without even trying them. They can't hurt you - God, your thoughts are more toxic than these treatments." When Laurel continues, she has lowered her voice to its normal tone. "That's it for my diatribe. Sorry, Charlotte. What were you saying about the writing technique?"

"I guess writers can pretend to change things in their lives, make them better. Maybe kill off all of the should haves."

"And you're going to try it?"

"I think I will. The ultimate revision would be to make Dad well, to make him live forever. But I think I'd settle for chronic leukaemia."

"It's worth a shot. You've got all night to come up with something. Listen, why don't you try some myrrh? It's excellent for helping you meditate and for uplifting your mood."

"Did you say 'myrrh'?"

"Yeah, like in the Bible - the three kings."

"Only you, Laurel. It didn't even occur to me that myrrh might exist."

"Well it does, and I have some. Here, grab a glass of wine. I'll mix you up some."

"I don't know about this ..."

"It's all natural. Tell you what: if you try it and don't want it, don't throw it out. I'll have it. See? You just drop a few small pieces of it into a glass of red wine. It's best to rotate a swizzle stick between your palms, but in a pinch, you can just hold the stem of the wineglass and agitate the mixture until the myrrh dissolves. Notice how the smell changed?"

"Can't hurt, right?" Charlotte accepts the glass of whirling liquid.

"Right. I'm going to get ready. Edward's coming over."

"I can't see why you want anything to do with him, Laurel. You said yourself you caught something from him ..."

"Don't you have any compassion? He's been upset. His whole system is thrown off kilter. Please don't give me flak about this." Laurel disappears down the hall.

Dad has been sick for as long as I can remember.

He's around every day. He's still there making pancakes when I wake up late every Saturday morning. He still spends Sundays ironing and laughing at t.v. evangelists and professional wrestlers. He still sings as he washes the dishes. He still reads for hours in the bathroom. He's still late for work, after he drives me to school. He still helps me with math.

Some day it will catch up with him and he will be stilled.

Weeks pass and I don't think about it at all. Then I feel guilty. Sometimes I go give blood. When he feels dizzy, it's cancer that's rushing to his head. Death is filling him up.

Maybe this isn't so easy.

When Edward appears in the kitchen doorway, Charlotte looks up from the table before he has a chance to duck down the hall to Laurel' room. He speaks first. "How's it going?"

"Hi." It's one of those "hi's" with the laugh on the end. "Would you like some wine?" She extends her glass towards him.

"No thanks. Cutting back." He takes the seat across from her.

"Oh, right. Laurel should be out in a second. You can wait here, I guess." Charlotte starts to leave, then stops in the doorway. "Edward?"

"Yeah, Charlotte?"

"I heard about your father."

"So did I."

Charlotte tenses. Not wanting the topic to be so easily dismissed, she adds, "How's he doing?"

"He's pretty sick from the treatments, but they say he's in remission again."

"Thank God." Charlotte's breath fills the room. "Edward, I want to tell you something."

"What's that? Everyone's got free advice."

"I don't want you to take it the wrong way."

"What is it?"

She can't say it. Some things can't be taught.

Cherish every minute. Spend time with him. Make videotapes. Write it all down.

SKUNK

"This is it ... There you go ... After you. At the top of the stairs."

"Thanks." Real men hold doors. If only Mom could see. The last thing she said as I left was, "He's nothing like your father." I didn't tell her our t.v. plans, or that I was going to his apartment. Not much decoration for an artist. Just one plant on the coffee table. Flowering maple? Oh no. A geranium. Don't much like geraniums.

"Go on in. I know it's not much, but I manage to survive. The artist's garret, don't you know."

"It's quite ... nice ... I'm just taking it all in ... I always do this."

Go in. What will he think, you standing there on his snow mat? The tiniest sponge could have absorbed it all by now. Go in!

"Don't worry about your boots. I'll just toss your coat over here, if you don't mind. I'm afraid hangers are few and far between these days. Have a seat, make yourself at home. Turn on the t.v., whatever. I'll get us a little something to eat."

Take a seat. Don't hunch up your shoulders. Stop fixating on the plant. Sit down!

Oh no. That smell. He must have let my coat-sleeve nudge the plant. It was shortly after the funeral, the end of December. The geranium just seemed to appear as soon as the quiches and casseroles had been devoured or thrown into the gum-bucket. Leftovers at the back of the fridge get contrary if you leave them too long. Within a few hours of our return from the hospital, the neighbours had started filling our oven and our fridge. I couldn't take it in, couldn't get it down. Salad saltier than tears, quiche filled with warrior onions. Dad used to say, "Real

men don't eat quiche." He must have borrowed it from some movie; he never turned down food.

It took a few months for everything to settle down. Mom was back to work, overtime, keeping busy all week. But Friday nights, we'd be sitting at the table after supper, Mom doing the crossword, me putting off washing the dishes. The smell never crept in gently. It jolts me away from the window. On the table, Mom's bifocals are rocking, like an overturned beetle with its legs in the air. Her head is down on her arm. "It's no good. What's the use?" Her whole body convulses, shaking the table. The geranium gets more defensive. The odour overpowers me and I leave Mom, unconsolated, in the kitchen. It was always hours later I'd hear her slippers cross the linoleum, hear her plodding up the stairs to her oversized bed.

"Hey, what are you doing way over there? I only had one bowl free for the veggies and dip. Would you mind coming over to the couch so we can share? ... I don't think I smell."

Go on. You find him attractive. You like him. He's intelligent and creative. Besides, he'll be offended if you don't. You already told him you were starving. You'll be making a scene. Go on!

"It's just that ... I think I'm allergic to geraniums."

"To what?"

"The plant."

"Oh! You should've told me right away. I'll just stick it in the other room. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it. And thanks."

Easy ... Easy ... No. He shook it up again. It eats into my nostrils, like hot vinegar. That first autumn, Mom took to making pickles, relish, and chutney. The smell kept me out of the

kitchen for weeks. I couldn't believe that this - or any - crop of zucchini, rhubarb, and scarlet runner beans would grow without Dad. Why wasn't life stopping? All the same, instead of baking the usual autumn muffins and pies, Mom was bottling preserves. Wanting to make something survive the first winter.

They planned an Edenic retirement in the backyard. They would have scoffed at suggestions of a condo in Florida. I never could get it: both of them out there in frozen-solid April, wearing rubber boots and worn winter coats, standing exultant before thirty-three garbage bags full of manure. A truckload delivered fresh from Paradise. I thought they were fools and sheep dung was their gold. When my friends came over and didn't mention the smell, I was comfortably embarrassed.

How did Mom manage to plough on? She retired, on schedule, alone, two and a half years after we got back from the hospital. I've mown the lawn twice. I can't even look at the flowers in daylight while Mom's out there doing the work of two people. Sometimes, at night, I go wade in the perfume bath behind the iris bed.

"There. That better?"

"Oh, yes. I think so. Thanks."

"Good decision. I think you'll find you can see better from over here. Oh! The movie's about to start. Shall I flick over to the right channel?"

"Sure."

"This is one of my all-time-favourite movies. Leslie Howard is brilliant - 'Sink me ...'"

"I've never seen it before." Does Mom want me to replace my dad? No, not now, not after all this time. But she did say, "There's a movie coming on at 9:30 that your father and I

saw at the Nickel Theatre for thirty-five cents. *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Why don't you stay in tonight and watch it with me? I'd even pay for take-out food if you'd go pick it up." Only I don't want to see her cry again. She doesn't break down much now, but the movie might be too painful.

"In case you're wondering, the food should be ready by the first commercial. Chicken cacciatore."

He says it so Italian. Dad always used to ask for a *liberal* serving of catch-a-tory. Everything had to change. I hated the new tasks that came from my helpless freefall into the adulthood I had been fighting for. Before the hospital, I used to butter up garlic bread, dry the dishes, sweep the floor. Now Mom wanted me to help prepare food. I had to rip the skin and fat from the half-thawed pieces of chicken. The end of one varicose vein would always pop out from under the pearls of fat. I'd grab the end and try to pull out the bad blood.

I gave up eating meat at home within a year of our return from the hospital. Not for health or ethics. With toast, I was out of the kitchen in no time at all. Too much work, too much bother. Even for Mom. Several times a week, she'd warm up a cookie sheet full of chicken nuggets - they used to be a rare treat Dad called "chicken lumps".

Don't use allergies again. Just force yourself to eat it. You can't leave now. He went to all this trouble. Do you want to be alone forever?

"You know what? I'd better go. I'm not feeling that great."

"Oh ... It's not my cooking, I hope. You hardly touched your dinner."

"No, no. The food is delicious. It must be those allergies."

"You don't *look* stuffed up ..."

"Oh, it's not that type of allergy."

"Well, that's too bad. I hope this doesn't mean you won't come back ... I'll nix the plant."

"There's no need ... to go to extremes, I mean. I should be okay if it's in the other room.

It just got stirred up tonight."

"Do you want to walk down the street to that jazz café?"

"Nah. I'm just going to get my medicine and veg out with my mother."

"I think it's excellent that you two are friends."

TUNNEL VISIONS

The Trans Canada simply disappears in my rearview. Whenever I return from visiting my only cousin around the bay, a late-night forest of darkness chases me back to town. Chris has lived alone in my grandparents' house ever since he moved back to the province a few years ago. Although I had rehearsed a careful wording on the way to see him today, I couldn't find my voice when Chris mentioned his mother, my Aunt Colleen. He still hasn't forgiven her. I'm twenty-eight years old and I still haven't been able to tell him - or anyone - how I was forced to appropriate her story. As I drove home, disappointed again by my own reticence, the past twisted out of sight behind me. My future lay in the high beams.

Nothing distinguishes tonight from any other. The nightmare tunnel silently twists and tapers off behind me. In dreams, the past always threatens to catch me, to slide its arms around my waist. I always wake with a start, a head start, dizzy. A false start, I am alone and safe. No matter how smoothly my daily adult life seems to flow, these tunnel visions keep pulling me back to childhood.

I can't remember a time before our post-church visits to my grandparents' house. I used to look forward to the games of "I spy" along the way, my eyes peeled for the familiar landmarks of the scrubby terrain - "Jodi luvs Todd" writ large on a rock-face at the halfway point. Suddenly, though, when I turned six, the afternoon trips began to turn my stomach. During the hour-long drive out there, I'd have to close my eyes and concentrate to dispel nausea. My parents assumed this weekly malaise was carsickness and assured me that Aunt Colleen had grown out of it. Thinking about my grandmother's food was the only successful method I'd found to suppress the tide of my fear. The sweet dissolving meringue on top of blueberry squares. The

salty greasiness of bay buns. The strands of long-roasted beef. Sometimes, though, the other thoughts would creep, unbidden, onto my tongue, acrid and indigestible. "Stop the car!" Dad would get out with me to hold back my long hair. Every week for two years.

Lunch became dinner on Sundays. Before every meal out there, we used to say grace. When it was my turn, I might risk chanting "Onyermarketsetgo", but not without being reprimanded. After grace, we would all silently join hands in a circle over our plates. I always had to sit next to my grandfather at the table. It might have been a lovely ritual to celebrate family unity. Chris' family used to visit on Saturdays. None of us went around the bay much after Grampy died.

The second damming of blood to his brain was a stroke of impotence. Using Grampy's carpentry tools, Dad patched together a wheelchair ramp leading away from my grandparents' rarely-used front door. There's a photograph from twenty years ago of the family perched at the top of the ramp, most everyone's face a tense battery of potential energy. But I am leaning across his wheelchair, grinning. I remember that Aunt Colleen cooed then in Grampy's ear, right after she snapped the photo, "She doesn't understand." Eight years old, I understood that he would no longer take me on his lap and call me his Angel. It was when Aunt Colleen delivered Dad's copy of the picture that she began to talk about her childhood. Dad went through a quiet spell; I couldn't tell who he was mad at. But no one was suspicious of me. And anyway, I had nothing to tell anymore.

When I was five and about to start kindergarten, Dad had called me out to the kitchen. His stern look frightened me. I thought my napkinful of inedible Brussels sprouts had been discovered. He told me I was precious to him; he'd kill anyone who laid a finger on me. Feeling

invulnerable because nobody ever hit me, I shrugged off his offer of retribution. He probably hoped his words would act as my survival suit among strangers, as he released me into the world.

"I used to blame that wheelchair for ruining everything." During my weekend visits, Chris only indulges in memories after he's emptied the silver flask Grampy left him in the will.

"The wheelchair? Weird. But I guess kids are like that; they'll find an object that did them wrong somehow. Why the wheelchair, though?"

"Well, that's when my mother started to talk."

"She's entitled to speak, you know." I could only side with Chris up to a certain point.

"Sure, but isn't it a little too convenient how she only came up with that garbage when Grampy couldn't possibly tell his side of the story?"

"You're not still on that kick, are you, Chris? I can't believe you still think she made it all up. Didn't it ever occur to you there was a reason those memories got repressed? That maybe she was just too scared to tell before that? I can't get over how you won't believe her. She's your mother, for Christ's sake."

Chris' jaw was rigid. "She could be the god-damned Queen of England. She's still a liar. As if it wasn't bad enough that he couldn't talk and couldn't move." The muscles in his face gave up the fight and relaxed. "I don't know if you knew this, but me and Grampy used to talk a lot. And we did things together."

"Like what?"

"Well, like that time we helped Uncle Joe Mullins rebuild his house after the fire, that's what. And then, suddenly, Grampy was still there, but trapped in that chair. We couldn't *do* anything anymore. Didn't you find that?"

In dreams, I am being chased in a tunnel in front of my grandparents' house. The sole of my shoe catches on a horizontal bar, like those fastened to the ramp to prevent my grandfather from rolling too quickly into the driveway. My palms take my weight for the moment before I'm up and running again. The tunnel has a sickening smell, like their root cellar.

My grandfather kept his tools down among the carrots, turnips, and potatoes. It might have been magical, like in that book by C. S. Lewis Aunt Colleen used to read to me, the double doors opening to reveal a subterranean playpen within its spine. My grandfather used to take me down there. My parents would laugh and call me Grampy's Little Helper as I followed him out of the kitchen. No one knew what a good help I was. Down in that dark, musty place, he told me Aunt Colleen used to help him a lot when she was a little girl. There was nothing wrong with following in the footsteps of my favourite aunt. So I did what I was told. I thought there was something wrong with me for not enjoying it as Grampy said Aunt Colleen did. My assistantship lasted eighteen months. Then I started to give those cellar doors a wide berth as I passed them in the driveway. I started to leave that house to wander on the hills as soon as dinner was finished, before dessert and the inevitable weekly plea for aid. Remembering his threat to would-be violators, I couldn't really explain my rapid exits to my father when he asked. I didn't want him to be put in jail for murder, especially if Grampy wasn't the one to blame. I think Dad was pleased I had come to love the countryside of his childhood.

I suppose I can understand the associations Chris makes between wheelchairs and injustice. Although I'd never tell Chris, Jack, my old rag doll, was my favourite boy. I could trust him not to change. After school one day, when I was seven, Jack fell off my lap and got engaged to the front wheel of my Winkie. The bike jarred and I fell too, onto the sidewalk in

front of my aunt's house. My cousin pointed and laughed while I liberated Jack from the spokes. As I cried to Aunt Colleen about the streaks of grease in Jack's bright yellow woollen hair, she busied herself removing the bloody pebbles in my elbow and knee. Christopher was soon crying beside me. I turned towards him, red-faced and disbelieving. When I tried to tell Aunt Colleen that he had just laughed at me, my aunt merely consoled us both with large glasses of milk and blueberry squares. I couldn't believe that Christopher would actually pretend to be sad. In spite of my indignation, the real possibility of untruth began to tilt my world.

Last night, while we were lying down somewhere up in the hills, talking and looking at the stars, I asked Chris, "Remember that time when I wiped out on my bike by your house?"

He paused for a few seconds. "No."

"You know ... The doll's hair got caught in the wheel. And Aunt Colleen ended up making a wig for it."

"Oh yeah. That stupid doll with the stringy hair. You were such a sook, always crying." Chris smiled.

"But I fell ... what'd you expect me to do? I fell right off the flipping bike! I was bleeding and my doll got all messed up; I don't think I cried half enough!"

"Mom always did pay more attention to you." The gentle humour had drained out of Chris' voice.

"Are you serious, Chris?"

"Nah." He sat up suddenly and looked down toward my grandparents' house in the distance.

"Chris?"

Nothing. His thoughts had changed trains.

"Never mind."

"Do you realize how respected he was?" Chris continues even now to pay his respects to our grandfather, as if to blunt his mother's barbs.

"Grampy? I've heard people say he was a fine carpenter."

"I remember after the funeral, Mom saying, 'Your grandfather was a shut-in long before he was paralysed.' But what's the big deal if he didn't spend his time down at the lodge? People around here knew he'd help anyone out."

"You can't really think he 'helped out' Aunt Colleen?" I don't doubt, as Chris does, my aunt's account of her childhood experiences. But sometimes I question her "repression" and wonder if she could have foreseen and prevented my torture. All the same, I still feel bound to act as her advocate.

"Come on. You know his family was the most important thing to him. I wonder how he felt when Mom turned her back on all of us."

"Turned her back? What she did was turn to face him ..."

"Don't you wonder what he was thinking? Imagine a smart man like him, fully aware of what was going on around him, but with no control of his body, whatsoever."

"So you don't see how you turned against your mother?"

"What?! You expect me to stand by a woman who'd prey on a defenceless man? Her own father!"

"Her own father."

While I sleep, the tunnel reappears and keeps on turning. I'm divided, unable to make

my thoughts reach my body. Hovering above, my mind perceives my actions in the labyrinth as if they're appearing on a screen. My body rushes towards the blurry unknown, propelled by a fear-churned stomach. Aunt Colleen, my forerunner, unravels a ball of yarn behind her. An untiring kitten, I chase the bright yellow wool in circles along the ground. But the lifeline she offers remains just out of reach. Almost. Almost. Almost. I mustn't stop, even though the repast wells up in my body. I always wake up at this point, nauseated, unwilling to fall back into dreams.

We got engaged the year before Jack's accident. Christopher was seven and I was almost six. They told us it was against the law, but the law did not appeal to us. We knew each other's favourite colour, although sometimes I'd forget mine. When we showed Aunt Colleen how we used to "kiss" on the lips - with a hand sandwiched between our mouths - she laughed for only a few seconds. Then I saw her crochet her eyebrows and pout. She told us we shouldn't be playing that kind of dirty game. I learned to keep some family secrets from the family. We continued our nuptial preparations.

Almost two years later, we laughed and carried on in the porch of the funeral home. I loved our place in the margins of grief. But when the men began to lower Grampy into the cemetery ground, Christopher cried. "He didn't know this was going to happen," my aunt whispered to me, in answer to my befuddled look. I judged from her unsmudged makeup that Aunt Colleen must have been well acquainted with funerary procedures. Dry-eyed and suspicious that my cousin was again mining the sympathy potential, I despised Christopher's infidelity and showiness. I *never* knew what was going to happen.

For months after Grampy died, I dreamed that he had come to visit me as I lay sleeping

at home. Never mind that when he was alive he didn't ever venture into town, much less into my bedroom. But I would wake up within the dream, and there he'd be, floating about two feet above my old dark green carpet. Wearing only long, hospital-green boxer shorts, with his usual suspenders, and smelling of vinegar, he would want me to hug him. We both understood that this potential embrace would bring him back to life. Dreams and death seemed equally tangible to my eight-year-old self, but I wished to caress neither. Guilty by free association, I never did tell anyone about my missed opportunity to be a saviour.

Until I turned nine and Chris' family moved to the mainland, I'd go to Aunt Colleen's house at lunch and again until Dad got off work in the afternoon. Dad had told me his sister used to be sick all the time, like me, when she was my age. Sometimes, when she'd stare right at me and not say anything, my tummy would do a cartwheel. But since I was getting expert at quelling nausea, I'm sure she could sense no fear. Her unwavering focus made me uncomfortable, but I didn't say anything. She hadn't diagnosed her own childhood ailment until long after she had grown up.

"Does she ever call you?" I had gorged myself on the past and needed a change of topic to settle my stomach.

"Who, Mom?"

"Yeah."

"She used to call all the time, but I haven't heard from her now since Christmas."

"Did you exchange gifts?"

"I haven't felt up to it, but this last Christmas she sent me a photo album. Old pictures of herself and your dad when they were kids. She doesn't look too happy in any of them ... You

know, she's wearing that kind of face you used to put on ... Like that time when your doll got dirty."

"Any pictures of Grampy?"

"Yah. And you know what?" His childlike enthusiasm had been restored.

"What?"

"He looked a lot like me when he was young."

For the first time, I can't stay awake. And then there's liquid rushing into the tunnel; a bilious torrent knocks me down. My consciousness crashes down into my shell of instincts, finally allowing a spiritual and corporeal fusion. Not prepared to abandon my emigration from fear and memory, I begin to swim. A late-model Noah, my pockets are laden with little children. The bottoms of my feet keep touching fear as I whip-kick away from the turbine. The flood of memories soaks apart my numbness at its foundations. Then the flow ceases. The muck of the past begins to suck on my feet. My knees ache from the evasion effort. Finally, I am immovable, undone. I face Aunt Colleen, who has changed direction and now refills her yarn-barn as she approaches me. I twist my torso to look away from her, back over my shoulder. The wheelchair. When I again face forward, my aunt reaches out for me and I cry, relieved, accepting her apology. Maybe now the dreams can stop.

My parents were right; I did outgrow carsickness. This weekend, I'm going out to see Chris again. I've decided not to tamper with his memories by sharing my stories of sexual relations. On Saturday morning, as he sleeps off the night before, I'll go wandering up in the hills. Maybe I'll pick a few blueberries for squares on my way to the cemetery. It will be my first time up there since the funeral. I'm going to look right at that headstone.

ADMIT IMPEDIMENTS

Something like this always happens at The Alley on Thursday nights:

"Hey, Pam! Do the accent!" It doesn't matter who makes the request.

Pam closes her eyes like a weary mother. "Which one?" Although only one person speaks to Pam at a time, a battalion of voices assails her.

"Do the Newfie and I'll buy you a pitcher!"

Pam pauses for a moment, collating snippets of CODCO footage in order to produce an accent her mainland friends will recognize. "Lord tunderin' Jaysus! What I wouldn't do for a feed of fish -n- brewis. Put on the kettle, Nanny, and we'll have a mug-up in no time a'tall."

"Oh, don't get her started about fish!"

"Do that Victor guy we saw here last month! Please, Pam. It's really hilarious."

Pam is a regular jukebox of impersonations. It takes a few seconds for her to change the disc. "You are most beautiful woo-man! Your eyes! Your smile! I say to you, these men here are so lucky to see you every time. They can swim in your beauty. These Canadians, they don't know how to treat you like woo-man. If someday we meet again, we go deep, deep, deep ..."
Pam makes a diving motion with her hands, pushing imaginary water out to either side. "... deep down into the coral reef."

They're all laughing again. "How do you do it, Pam?"

Pam decides on Monty Python. "Diligent practice will get you anything, chum. And now, if you'll excuse me, I must go check out the facilities."

"Oh, Pam! One more?"

She is already standing up, smoothing down the legs of her jeans. "Like what?"

"Do the retard!"

Her back is to them as she leaves through the door at the rear of the bar. "Please ... (moan) ... teach me ... (moan) ... to use ... (moan) ... the toilet."

Eventually the conversation spirals back to the other side of the table.

Every week, the grade fours would learn about a new animal. During the first class on each species, Becca would ask, "Do they pee?" Pamela and the rest of the class would roar like mountain lions, snort like Tasmanian devils, or howl like hyenas, depending on the unit being covered. The teacher always smiled indulgently. On the first day of the fifth unit - the penguin - Pamela squirmed with eagerness in her seat. She had a redemption plan. When question period began, her hand shot up, waving, enough seconds before Becca's that the teacher had to acknowledge her first.

"Pamela, stop waving your arm like an imbecile. Do you have a question?"

Merely asking to go to the bathroom made Pamela blush, but now she was vermilion. She pulled her arm down in slow motion and began, "Uhm ..."

"Don't dilly-dally, Pamela." The teacher looked towards Becca, sitting calmly with her right elbow on her desk, the elbow of her still raised arm cradled in her right palm. "Other people have questions too, you know."

"Do penguins pee?"

It seemed as though the class held its breath, everyone waiting to see how Becca would react to losing the serve. Her hands now folded on top of the proper page of her textbook, Becca looked affronted by Pamela's stupidity.

The teacher was unforgiving. "Really, Pamela. Of course they do. You know better than to waste our time with foolish questions like that."

Since everyone considered her bovine for parroting Becca, Pamela searched for a better way to spell success with her peers. The class had a different teacher for language arts, a woman who praised Pamela's verbal acuity out loud. But Becca, who had misspelled "friendship", spent the rest of the week as head jeerleader:

"Hey, Brainiac!"

"How do you spell 'suck up'?"

"How does it feel to be the teacher's pet?"

From that week onward, Pamela always managed to bungle one word on the weekly quizzes. Becca had the highest scores in spelling for the rest of the year.

Since Pamela lived right across the street from the school, she had to go home for lunch. Becca, Tara, and everyone else got to eat in the art room. Near the end of one lunch period, Tara and a couple of the other girls were playing the bingo jumping game with a loop of skipping rope when Pamela got back to school. Because of her height, Tara had already advanced to waist-high jumps. When she finally lost her turn, she told Pamela that her father had built her a triangular clubhouse and there was even a baby fridge in it. Pamela was invited to become one of only a few select members of the club she was starting. There were so many unofficial "clubs" which excluded Pamela on technicalities - parents too old, hair too long, too short, too curly, too red - that she was thrilled. She continued to watch the jumpers from the sidelines because it was too late to join the game; she wouldn't have gotten above ankles before the bell rang. When Becca came around, Tara motioned her aside and asked her to join the club.

Unseen, Pamela overheard.

"Is Pamela in it?" Becca spat out the name as if it was a rotten nut.

Tara replied, "Yes," but she didn't sound so sure.

"I'm not being in it if Pamela's in it."

Thinking no one realized she had heard, Pamela slipped into the school and ran down the corridor to the bathroom, the tear bladder bursting by the time she passed the big, round sink. She closed herself into a cubicle and climbed onto the toilet seat, sobbing quietly. Three of the bingo players came in, calling her name. Pamela didn't answer, but hers was the only locked stall. They knelt on the floor and talked to her under the door. One of them said that Becca hadn't been very nice and that she wouldn't join the club if Becca did. The other two girls reluctantly agreed. Pamela didn't hear anything else about the club.

Tara called Pamela one night. The phone was never for Pamela, so her mother asked her what the other girl had wanted.

"Nothing much." Pamela revelled in her own casual tone. "Tara just told me she doesn't really like Becca."

"Maybe her mother didn't tell her not to say anything you wouldn't want everyone to hear."

Pamela later overheard her parents talking. "You should have seen her eyes. She's so happy to have an ally. I don't know about this Tara ... Amelapay isway isteninglay."

The next day, in a voice loud enough for the whole class to hear, Becca told the cutest boy, "Pamela is telling everyone she hates me."

Pam has a great group of friends on campus. During the week, they might "do" coffee or lunch occasionally, if she happens to run into them in the library. But every Thursday night, they drink till their tongues get fat and their ankles get thin, then they crash at Pam's place. Although they ask Pam to accompany them on Friday and Saturday nights as well - "She's a riot!" - she ritually refuses. Then they tease her about secret weekend lovers who must be occupying her time. Pam's encouragement of such an interpretation is inadvertent: "Trust me, I'm not good with secrets. Besides, you don't really want to know how I spend my time." And she's right. In the evenings, to absorb the courting and quarrels of the other *clientèle*, she often takes a newspaper to the little *croissantérie* near Park and Fairmount. Sometimes she is privy there to *tête-à-têtes* between best friends; these are her favourites. Such intimate friendships remain strangers to her.

Pam noticed Cathy sitting alone in the McGill student centre during the first week of classes back in September, but has since completely avoided that corner of the upstairs cafeteria. She feels quite certain that her sometime friend won't be pleased to see her.

There were no swings, nor any other playground equipment near Massey Elementary School. Instead, the children had free reign of a large hill that sloped up gently behind the school. A wild goose chase was standard practice during recess and lunch, the boys chasing after the girls, goosing them. One day, Becca installed herself in the middle of the field as a decoy. When the boys started to encircle her, she introduced a new strain of torture, a natural predator to control the goosing problem: wedgies. No one speculated about her doubtlessly unpleasant initiation to it by her older brother. Instead of resenting Becca's rebellion, the boys seemed to

yearn for their underwear to be taken too far. And they had no problem borrowing tactics from the other side.

The grade threes and fours shared an entrance. While sixth-grade prefects were supposed to separate the children into parallel lines which would simultaneously enter the school through the double doors, the grade fours always managed to push their way in ahead of the other children. Pamela had a favourite poncho, a hand-me-down from her cousin. Everyone else, even Becca, had a bald poncho with plain, well-integrated wool. But Pamela's poncho had long piebald hair, and was as silky as a well-groomed Newfoundland. Everyone admired it. Whenever Pamela wore her poncho, though, the third-grade boy whose head she thought was full of impenetrable cotton wool would grab for her. Pamela couldn't imagine what would happen if he ever caught her on the hill. Would she catch his sickness? She didn't know if he even knew her name, since she had only ever heard his voice as he moaned, open-mouthed, those times he had almost caught her. At first, she tried to secrete herself among the skippers or marble rollers. But he discovered her after a week and then Becca noticed Pamela's plight.

"Pamela's Lassie! And that guy is the dogcatcher!"

The next day, Becca beat her own record of humour: "The hound and the pound!" Everyone cheered on the boy whose name no one seemed to know.

Pamela began to stay home later during lunch hour, to amble back just in time for the last bell. The man who delivered her tormentor to school each morning rang Pamela's doorbell one Saturday afternoon. A representative of the city council, he was promoting the planned metamorphosis of the neighbourhood swamp known as the Frog Pond into the hoity-toity Conway Glen. Pamela couldn't explain to her mother why she was sobbing under the bed. Her mother

asked if Pamela knew who the councillor's little boy was.

"Uh-huh."

"He's a sick little boy. He's what they call autistic. That means he lives mostly within himself. Sometimes autistic children get very attached to one person. But there's no reason to be scared of him."

The knowledge didn't stop the chase or Pamela's terror of the autistic boy. It took a couple of months for her to discover the motive for the hunt. She hid her poncho at the bottom of the garbage bag of Hallowe'en costumes.

In mid-October, a new girl, Cathy Popovic, was due to arrive from away. Pamela overheard Becca talking to Tara, who had already met Cathy at church. "Popovic! What kind of name is that? Is she one of us?" Pamela was horrified to hear Becca acknowledge and enunciate her own superiority.

"I don't think so." Did Tara sound more apologetic or relieved? Pamela couldn't decide.

"What? Is she a *retard* or something?" Although Pamela didn't understand the meaning, she knew Becca was using a bad word.

"Not exactly, but they told Mom at the PTA meeting that her little brother is *slow*. And you know what they say."

Not knowing what they said, Pamela leaned forward on the toilet.

"Gotcha." She should have known Becca would understand.

When Cathy did arrive, she didn't even try to be accepted by Becca. While she was cheerful and responsive to anyone who approached her, she couldn't seem to be bothered with playground games. And if Cathy had anything interesting to say, very few people teased it out

of her. In fact, Pamela was fascinated that Cathy wasn't teased at all by Becca's crowd. No one could find out why the gym teacher let Cathy have a snack before gym class. But that apple or Girl Guide cookie or slice of ham seemed to make her inviolable. She was permitted to do her own thing during lunch and recess.

Pamela didn't react well to being chased. If someone followed her as she ran up a flight of stairs, she had to stop, unable to breathe. The boys soon stopped tickling her, since she always cried instead of giggling. During recess period on a clear day early in November, Pamela was running around the crest of the hill to avoid being pinched or having her underwear dislocated. Having evaded the goosers as far as the lonely summit behind the school, most girls would then swoop down again into the herd of perpetrators to make their presence felt. But Pamela was so relieved to go unnoticed that she stayed up there and walked along the outside of the neighbourhood fences, surveying the ground for something which would make her absence excusable to Becca.

What she came across was Cathy, sitting on a boulder, reading. Pamela hoped her "hi" didn't sound too timid. Distracted, Cathy looked up, squinting, then shielded her eyes with her book. It was as though the sun turned benevolent as its light was refracted from Cathy's eyes to her smile.

"Hello, Pamela. What are you doing way back here? Come on up." She shifted to one side of the two-seater rock.

Conversation with Cathy was easy. Pamela was accustomed to hearing her classmates talk about other people, but she and Cathy talked about books, mostly about which fictional characters they'd most like to be. They were both careful to eat their recess snacks at the same

pace. On Thursdays, they both ordered Dixie Cups from the canteen. Cathy's family had been transplanted eastward from Toronto, to Montréal, to Halifax. Not knowing how long they'd stay in St. John's, Cathy had been reluctant to make fast friends. Pamela had grown tired of hearing how Becca's family had been the first to go to Disney World. But, Cathy! She used to take the subway to kindergarten! The idea of movement unperceived by those above you appealed to Pamela.

Sometime after Christmas, Cathy said Pamela could look inside her special second pencil-case, if she promised not to tell anyone. The needles and vials of insulin were terrifying, but Pamela taught herself not to think about the illness. They were best friends, after all; no one else got to see the medication. All she had to do was pretend Cathy was healthy.

The basement washroom of the McGill student centre is down the hall from The Alley, past the student newspaper office. Pam begins "freshening up", her drunken pallor re-masked by a healthy glow of blush and lipstick. She sighs at the opportunity to tuck her thoughts back in, to hear her own voice in her head. Clutching the counter in front of her, she closes her eyes and begins the count to ten, her standard reassertion of self-control.

"Pamela? Pamela Bishop?"

"Yes?" Pam opens her eyes to the face of a familiar stranger over her right shoulder in the mirror.

"My God! I thought it was you! It's been so long!"

Pam nods, darts her eyes towards the toilet stalls, wary of allowing eavesdroppers access to her past. She and Cathy are alone. Nonetheless, Pam pretends not to recognize the woman

she now faces. "I don't ..."

"Oh, you must remember!"

"Cathy?"

"Yes! Well, actually, I go by Catherine now."

"And everyone calls me Pam. What are you studying here?"

"I'm working on my Master's. French lit."

"Félicitations!"

"How about you?"

"I've finally settled on communications."

One of those nodding silences ensues.

Catherine smiles. "The way you were carrying on out there, I had you pegged for a theatre major over from Concordia."

Since she's already in the washroom, Pam can't rely on her usual excuse - having to pee - to extricate herself from social discomfort. "Where did you go after Massey? You were only around for half a year. I don't think I saw you at all after school let out for the summer."

"Actually, we moved back to Toronto and stuff. Gosh, that's right. I remember. That was one long summer. We stayed in St. John's until Labour Day." Catherine pauses to make sure Pam is really listening, then continues pointedly, "My mother got sick of seeing me reading. She said I'd get depressed if I read too much."

A memory smiles across Pam's face. "You always did love reading out on that rock behind the school."

"Exactly! I tried to tell her books were my most faithful companions. But she was

adamant. So I volunteered at the Rehab."

"Really? Why there?" Pam remembers the one time she had stepped inside Cathy's house.

"Well, you know, my brother and everything. Pamela ... er ... Pam, I can't help feeling bad for poor Henry and the rest of those children with their thoughts trapped inside."

Feeling gouged with the shame of her last impression in the bar, Pam asks, "How *is* your little brother doing?"

"Oh, he's doing well. He's in a wheelchair now."

"That's hard. So," Pam keeps the words coming, "what are you planning to do after your Master's? Do you want to teach?"

"Well, a Master's can't be terminal anymore. I'd have to do teachers' college or a PhD. But I don't know. I used to think the civil service was an option. How about you?"

Pam lowers her voice. "I've always dreamt of being an investigative reporter on t.v.."

"Like the little girl in that book you loved!"

"God, I can't believe you remember that!"

"We talked about it often enough. Although I can't see how we ever managed to speak, we were so busy trying to synchronize our eating. Remember?"

"Wasn't that insane, Cathy?" Pam checks the laces of her Doc Marten's. "But fun."

"I think you'd make an excellent spy, Pam."

Pam's head jerks up. She's relieved that the conversation is coming up for air. "What do you mean?"

"Whenever someone else was talking out there," Catherine points in the direction of The

Alley, "you *seemed* to be listening, but your eyes were darting around everywhere."

"You were watching me?" Suddenly suffering from exposure, Pam glances at the mirror to make sure she's still dressed. This time she sees a familiar pigtailed brunette penetrate the silent washroom behind her with a yell.

"Pam! There you are! We're doing shots! Are you in?"

Pam plunges her thumbs into the front pockets of her jeans and thrusts out her groin. "I sho' ay-am." While her cowboy drawl isn't quite that of a Texan dude rancher, it certainly isn't Pamela's. "Woncha join us, Cathy?"

Every fine day during the summer, the children from the Rehabilitation Centre were wheeled or walked down Pamela's street toward Conway Glen Park. The problem for Pamela was that the time of their procession was not fixed. Pamela feared being caught outside of her house when they went down to the park. Unlike the kid in "Araby" who measured time between glimpses of his friend's sister to discern when it would be most propitious to pop out and cross her path, Pamela used to kneel on the carpet in front of the big living-room window, believing the sheers obscured her completely, until the disabled children had passed. Then, she'd play in the living room, reading or "teaching" her pretend class, unable to move again before they were led back up the street. Assured that their excursion was over and immune to their difference, Pamela could then join Becca and everyone down at the new playground.

Pam and Catherine start to hang out together on a regular basis, initially matching each other drink for drink. Pam's words per minute increase with each gulp. Once she surpasses her

limit, as she inevitably does, she becomes incomprehensible. Her tongue licks the hard edges off her words and cushions the remaining phonemes. Catherine doesn't question Pam's public personae and Pam is genuine when they are alone together. Catherine is one of those calm drinkers, drinking and drinking, yet talking normally until, finally, she stands up and is forced by dizziness to sit down again.

One night after Pam's class, they meet with the group, as usual. Since both young women have deliberately worked three-day weekends into their timetables, Thursday is usually a drown-your-tomorrows night. Pam doesn't realize her friend is drinking her coke straight up until the end of the night, when Catherine's steps are unwavering as they walk down the hill towards Peel station.

"Whasup?"

"I saw my doctor last week."

Pam winces. "Howdago?"

"Not the best, actually."

"Whadeesay?"

"Well, when a person has had insulin-dependent diabetes for twenty years or so, the chances are great that something will go wrong with her eyes or kidneys. When I saw the eye doctor a year and a half ago, he found the start of a problem. But he said he'd noticed it early enough that measures could still be taken for it not to get too bad. At the time, I said, "Hooray! Something's wrong with my eyes; that means my kidneys are safe. Only about 9% of diabetics get problems with both."

At first, Pam feels a twinge of irritation. Catherine has broken the unspoken rule about

boundaries. This is definitely a daytime, coffee-shop conversation. Pam lacks the advantages of sobriety and familiarity with illness. It has long been her Thursday-night boast that she never gets sick, no matter how much she drinks. But she has an unpleasant gut feeling about what Catherine is telling her. Although the words that match her emotions are stuck inside, she expresses her reaction to the news, after a fashion, into a garbage can just outside the subway station. Catherine rubs her back as Pam leans over.

"It's okay, Pam. Let it all go. We don't have to talk about this. I shouldn't have brought it up." She passes Pam a small packet of Kleenex.

As summer approached, Becca decided to be Pamela's friend. Not only was Cathy abandoned on the hill, with her books, but Pamela was tricked into further betraying her.

"She only told *me* what's in that black zippered case," Becca bragged.

Pamela was devastated to lose exclusive rights to Cathy's big secret. "No she didn't," she protested. "She told me, too."

"No she didn't."

"Yes she did. She even *showed* me."

"Betcha can't prove it. Betcha can't tell me exactly what's in the case."

It was years before Pamela realized she had been duped into divulgence. At the time, she revelled in finding out, for her part, what was cool to eat, to wear, to say. She didn't mention her annoyance about how slowly Becca ate her Oreos, always flaunting the food left over when Pamela had finished eating.

One Friday night, Becca asked Pamela to sleep over. She was bombarded with every

detail of Becca's mixed party, which she hadn't been allowed to attend. The next morning, the girls walked down the block to Cathy's house. She couldn't come out to play bingo because she was babysitting her little brother. Pamela followed Becca into the porch, both of them uninvited. The house smelled like egg sandwiches. Cathy stood in the inner doorway the whole time, talking so much she almost blocked out the sound of her little brother's moans. Pamela could see him under Cathy's armpit; he was picking toys up at random and laying them down heavily. Becca and Pamela left as soon as Cathy knew what a good party she'd missed.

Becca didn't mind much about hearing range. As soon as they hit the sidewalk, she exclaimed, "My God! It smelled like *shit* in there!"

Although she never heard bathroom language at home and feared the reprisals should her mother ever learn she associated with a curser, Pamela just laughed. Becca's invention of the f-word was legendary among their classmates.

"Did you know the kid is seven years old and he's still in diapers? Disgusting!"

She knew he was only six, but Pamela kept laughing.

Then Becca started moaning. "Please ... (moan) ... teach me ... (moan) ... to use ... (moan) ... the toilet."

Later that day, Becca and Pamela were watching t.v. when a plea for donations to the Children's Rehabilitation Centre came on the screen. With the crook of her arm, Pamela shielded her face from the images of the disabled children.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I don't like this commercial. Retards scare me."

Becca was appalled. "That's a bad word. I'm telling your mother. They're people too,

you know. How would you like it if someone in your family was in the Rehab?"

By the middle of the summer, Tara had returned from her grandparents' in Cape Breton and Becca had again switched allegiances.

Pam's offers to atone for childhood sins are spurned by Catherine, who asks for nothing more than present trustworthiness. But now an enemy far more sinister than Becca threatens to separate the two friends. Since she is sickened by the notion of sharing with death her renewed closeness to Catherine, Pam secretly resolves to duplicate instead her friend's sacrifices. During meals in which they eat identically small portions of protein, Pam probes Catherine for further details. She probably won't need dialysis until she's thirty. Pam marvels that Catherine can speak about her illness so naturally, so optimistically. Appreciative of her ally in teetotalling, Catherine does not question Pam's sudden sobriety. Her friend will never have to read alone again, Pam vows to herself. She's bound to prove that friendship will survive alteration.

CONNED FUSION

The guy on the airwaves is not grounded in my reality. I've landed in the air-pollution capital of Canada and you aren't here. You can't hear the hour after hour of industrial music that shouldn't be listened to this late at night, after a pot of coffee, or was it tea? It's always late when I remind myself I was a misconception to begin with. No wonder you rewrote the future I'd scripted for us.

Back in St. John's, where sea vessels and effluent enter the harbour from opposite ends, the *ships* squeezed through the Narrows, you are way beyond listening range. This is the first time you were the one to break our circuit. You were supposed to follow *my* pattern, to lose strength and come around again after a number of weeks. There's no way I can connect with your machine. Its irritating ditty feels like mockery. You should be here grasping the back of my collar, suffocating me to keep me on this side of the edge. Why do I want you here? They say never sound dependent or emotional. Honesty needs to be allowed to seep out or the sheer force of it will drive the man away. Love me and my lies. If I had lice, would you pick them out like the monkeys on t.v.? Prime mates. Yet they resent that, I bet, only having the bad moments depicted, the way I only talked about you to Elaine if we'd had a fight. She was surprised you were not a gorilla when she met you.

The next cut on the album is scream music. They say primal scream therapy is the future wave. I'm afraid to try because why would I ever stop, all the voices blocked out. No, I don't really hear voices. It's just from those movies on t.v. where the woman always goes mental and ends up smearing lipstick all over her face. I never told you how I did that last year and my

sister took me for a drive to figure me out. There were, are, no real problems. I had brought you to the dump and wanted you back. It was the bright orange lipstick Elaine brought me from Toronto as a joke, but after I got weird or artsy or whatever in high school, nothing was funny. Thousands of days before I ever met you, I forced myself to wear lipstick and blue eyeliner to school. Some guy in the drama club looked at me for once and said to Elaine, "She has on makeup today." He didn't ever speak directly to me, but it was okay that he said it because I was only me and no one important. His hair was long by then and his mouse face was no longer discernible.

Although I had scoured my mouth before she whisked me away in the car, my sister still asked what was the orange stain that made me look like a messy Kool-Aid kid. We drove for half an hour out to Pouch Cove where the "baymen" who got the bus to school lived. They hated everyone in the drama club, I was sure. I had to keep my mitten up to my mouth so everyone staring into the car couldn't see the stain. My sister said no one was looking. My lips were really sore, the top layer scrubbed away. We edged down a narrow road where houses pimpled the face of a cliff: the end of the schoolbus line, Bauline. We couldn't get out of there for a while, didn't know where to turn the car around. My sister couldn't drive up hills in a standard, let alone in reverse. After we finally got down to the wharf, I took the wheel. If I'd been alone, I might not have headed back up, away from the water. I forgot the stain driving home. That time I spilled wine on you at your cousin's wedding and you said I look gorgeous when I cry, it was not "I love you." I took interpretive liberties. You are not here.

A rumbling, rainy noise is coming from the potpourri pot. They say that writers like you need to spend all your time soaking up life. That probably means having a slew of impassioned

lovers and leavers. You brought up, months later, that I had acted weird on that first date and I never did say how you act is weird. The three cups of coffee didn't help my nerves. I figured that you were writing down in your head all the weird stuff I was saying. But I thought silence would have been my fault, too. Maybe you're too normal for me anyway. Once you'd snagged my interest, I stopped going to cafés and to hear the bands. I blamed it on the Friday-night movies and t.v. shows, on the unfinished nachos and salsa, on the endless one thing leading to another, on your bed. But I was the one who wanted us to stay in, together, alone.

Elaine and I grew apart. No, it's never that natural, never like those climbing trees that happen to bifurcate into divining rods. It was a Thanksgiving party, a celebration of our work-free day. I was talking to her and her new boyfriend, who was listening, laughing. I told lewd stories, then exaggerated how I had dumped you. I didn't tell them I wanted you back. I guess I must've started saying weird things because Elaine saw fit to define me: "You're a fucking weirdo." Maybe I had told them about my first sexual experience, the dream where I was rooting through my brother's garbage bucket and found his limp genitalia in a baggie. Grab bag. It looked like the packet of turkey giblets you haul out before making the bird turgid again with a fistful of savoury bread-crumbs-and-onion innards. Eviscerated by her tongue turned scalpel, I thanked Elaine and left the party early.

On our second date you had asked me to meet you at the fourth Station of the Cross at the Pope's Grotto in Flatrock, just outside of Pouch Cove. Then we hopped somebody's fence and crossed a field, you bounding ahead of me, my short legs making me lag behind. Now, if you'd take me there, to the top of your secret mountain, I'd go down without hesitating. But back then, as I hovered above your coaxing voice, the begging tide, I thought I wouldn't be able to get

back up, that you would leave me there. I've since learned a few things about scale and mountains.

You could barely walk the fourteen steps from your bedroom to the back porch. Blue balls, you said. I know how to rack them up now: the two ball, the lowest of the low balls. By the end of a month, you couldn't even get off the bed to see me to the door. The squash balls were blue, two in the box. You were sure I'd tire of squash. After you went to see lap dancers for a stagger party, you told me about a neat trick they do with ping-pong balls. Spectator sports. Squash balls. They warned me it would hurt; I didn't know they were talking about you. Anyone *could* hurt a fly, but you knew I was no sadist, was saddest when I had accidentally inflicted pain. There was nothing you could do to help yourself, you said. Now they ask me why I believed you. You gave me the power, made me your nurse. And by that time, on cue, I no longer wanted to stop. My reservations were cancelled. I helped alleviate your discomfort, to move your belt out onto a new notch. You've become bloated by experience.

I was making plans to travel ninety minutes back in time to Ontario. After three years, you told me you didn't know if it was love. "Oh, you'd know." At least that's what they tell me when I ask about orgasm. But I did love it anyway, every minute of intimacy, of love. I'd recross time zones and other zones to convince you, only I'm sure there's someone else. Your answering machine offers only stock responses. You're out somewhere with Miss New or she's there with you, the phone unhooked. I'll bet she's better adjusted, on station, in focus. She hardly even hears when you mention former Great Loves. They say it's natural to feel jealousy, but not right to express it. After a while, I couldn't keep it in. When you said something about your ex's endearing clumsiness, the sewer backed up. I yelled and kicked and punched. You

seemed almost calm as you tucked both my wrists into one hand and covered my mouth with the other. We both vowed to forget the little incident.

Windsor is level-headed and you are not here. Alone in the dark, in the rain, I move forward. I am chasing my mind to the early-bird swim. The ground is fascinating, disgusting. The rain worms have found the rough skin of the sidewalk. When the night rains washed off the clay mask, the earth's pores opened up and released the crawlers. Out they came, unearthed; *a worm will turn*. I squint now in concentration, the way I lean into myself in the mirror, pinpointing, pinpricking, pinching a pimple. I am intent on the sidewalk, sidestepping. They aren't this long in Newfoundland, where there's less soil before rock bottom. Size does matter, they tell me now. You filled me in with statistics about how long men were erect. *Homo sapiens*. You, the man wise about men, the bookworm, you said you, like all men, were average. I wondered about you, on your bed, measuring, calculating. My friend had to break up with a man who would have broken the spine, probing too deeply into an open book. The ground has been left porous, holey. The worms don't know the sun will suck them dry by this afternoon. Out of their element, they are stretching their way to the other side of the sidewalk. They'll never reach the greener grass whose fingers they can run their hair through. Cilia. Maybe you're home now; I'll call again.

Damn you! A worm-slide and now there's black mud all over my white track pants. I may never get all the stains out.

REVIVAL

The crowd climbed with the actors from the visitors' centre - half-way down - up to Ladies' Lookout, the summit of Signal Hill. The ascent was supposed to give everyone an idea of the strenuous walk the sailors' wives and hopefuls would make daily when the men were due back from sea. They called it living theatre because the audience had to participate in the set changes, moving from one area of the national historic site to another. There was a promenade of icebergs just offshore, spectacular in their turquoise and emerald skirts, treading water to keep their heads up. Across the way, Cape Spear was asleep under fog, undisturbed by flashes from the recently-automated light and the occasional snores of the foghorn. These "Breathtaking!" accidents of geography and climate added to the pathos of the play in May and June. On fine days when the coast was clear, the ice broken, the troupe would produce a comedy instead. With the relentlessly morbid settings of the first two scenes - Deadman's Pond and Gibbet Hill - this was quite an undertaking.

Like tea served with tiny cakes and crumpets in the afternoon, Brenda's mind was steeped in the genteel traditions of nineteenth-century novels. In the books Brenda fancied, it took a woman endowed with "considerable strength of character" - usually amounting to stubbornness and a lack of concern about the good or bad opinions of others - to trek across muddy fields towards love. Brenda, wondering whether a flat countryside actually could have been considered a challenge, found local instances of romance much more tragic. Nonetheless, it was apparent that the ladies-in-waiting who frequented the Lookout would be pining away from love and not hunger. Any woman who could take hours off work every day to scale the hill obviously had few real worries. Or at least that's what Brenda could picture her mother saying, scrubbing rag

in hand, hair tied out of the way with a Boy Scout neckerchief.

Some of the houses out home had widow's walks surrounding their top floors, which served the same panoptic purposes. When Brenda had mentioned the rumour about her great-grandmother - who some said still walked around and around her house forty-four years after her death (and fifty-eight after the death of her husband) - her mother had told her that to engage in that sort of daydreaming was to waste your life away. But did Brenda know that the widow's pension had been hiked up so much she could give Christmas gifts? Where Newfoundland had given her \$15 a quarter, she started getting \$40 a month from the new federal government. "I got a navy blue box of Kleenex. First tissues I had ever seen."

Perhaps inspired by the players, in the dramatic gesture of an aside, his right hand touching the spot where his nose met the left side of his face, the young man in the yellow rain slicker whispered to Brenda, "I'll bet they didn't need aerobics classes, what with walking way the hell up here every day." He was winded, and maybe long-winded, Brenda thought. Or maybe just personable, affable. He looked back at the actors, then turned towards her again. "Hey! I remember you. Didn't you used to do some typing for people at the university?"

"Occasionally." Blood filled Brenda's cheeks and ears.

Either he was unmoved by tact or didn't notice her embarrassment. "Maybe you remember my history paper."

"No, I ..."

"Wait now. What was it again? Oh yah, 'Newfoundland Since Confederation'. Quite a grandiose title for such a flimsy paper. But do you remember it at all? I'm almost embarrassed to ask about it."

Brenda was baffled by his audacity. "I don't actually *read* what I type. It's more of an automatic process ... if the handwriting's good. Though sometimes I end up picking out words from their context."

"I hope mine wasn't like that. One time I had a teacher say I might as well write with my feet. Maybe I should have done medicine."

Brenda laughed, then said, "I don't get it."

"Haven't you heard that? Pharmacists are the only ones who can read their writing."

"Oh! Say, that's pretty good. 'Should have done medicine'; I like that." Maybe this guy was okay after all, if a bit forward. "Wouldn't it be neat if we could get our handwriting analyzed sometime in high school?"

"Yah! Then we could figure out what we should be once the real world hits us."

"Neat." Brenda was impressed again by his wit, but this time kept her response - "the real world hits us": not bad" - in her head.

"Anything would be better than those standardized aptitude tests. Did you do those with your guidance counsellor in school? I have a friend in engineering who was supposed to be either a crane operator or a landscaper."

"No, I never did do one of those." No guidance, including sex education, had been provided by Brenda's school around the bay. The school board left such matters to parents and priests. "What did *you* do in univ ... oh, history, obviously. Right?"

"Yup. Finished up in December. You're some sleuth! I'll bet you did criminology!"

"No. I won't be finished until next December. Are you working now?"

"With history?" Her brothers had also perfected the indulgent sweet-little-dreamer smile

he gave her. It had a knee-pat effect.

Brenda was flushed, her voice raised. "Surely there's something, what with this whole tourism racket and all." Recent years had seen a revaluing of the region's history. Local music groups and theatre troupes had begun to thrive by way of revivals and reenactments. Five hundred years of innovation was lauded, or at least four hundred and fifty. History made interesting was *in*.

Only now did he pick up on her discomfort. "To tell you the truth, I'm just trying to decide what to do next."

The fourth part of the "theatrical event" was lost on Brenda, her mind at sea. They all gathered at the site of the cholera hospital, now a paved parking lot, and watched while some of the actors fell ill and died between a minivan and a trailer. The surviving actors - one of the ladies who had just about gone crazy waiting and her man, who had appeared overland from the walking trails just in time to prove that love can survive a hostile climate - headed for Cabot Tower.

They had reached Scene Five, pink with the exercise of getting there ahead of the rest of the audience. "These actors are pretty good, aren't they? I mean, there's such a lot of talent on this island we could be mining. Damn rich ground for superstars. Don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. I definitely agree." Brenda finally looked straight at him and did a swan-dive into his intense gaze. Now she remembered the guy's paper. She had read it while curled up in bed, not to decipher the writing, but to search for a clue to what made his iceberg-green eyes shimmer. It had been all about economic ruin and culture in decline, and was pretty well-argued, as far as she could tell.

Brenda was pressing a floor-length taffeta when the phone rang. She picked it up with her free hand, kept ironing. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's Colin."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You have the wrong number."

"Well, I'm looking for the gir ... er ... the woman who does the typing?"

Brenda sat the iron on its rear. "That's me."

"It's Colin here. From the pageant the other night."

"Oh!" She instantly regretted her exhibitionistic enthusiasm.

"I'm sorry I didn't get your name the other night."

"It's Brenda. But how did you get my number?"

"I have my ways." He must have come across her posters in the Thompson Student Centre. After tearing down and crumpling up any signs of competition at the beginning of each semester, she posted brightly-coloured advertisements for her typing services all around the university campus. And so, although he initiated the ritual romantic prelude, asking how she was doing, if she went home often - where did she say she was from again? - and if she had any strong connections there, it was a business call. He asked if she did résumés, said it was about time he updated his. He wondered if he could drop it off later, maybe at ten? She decided not to tell him she'd be busy working, or sleeping. Instead, she claimed to have already made plans with friends. Could he please just drop it in the mailbox? Despite her ostensible indifference, by the end of the call she had made it clear that her ties back home, apart from familial ones, were mainly to the land.

Brenda still preferred the old Underwood on which she had taught herself to type, using Gregg's endless drills: fff jjj fff jjj. But she knew that students and professors would only accept laser quality, so she paid five cents a sheet at the university computer lab. Although such a practice defied her self-imposed work ethics, she scrutinized the three pages of Colin's life's work. After all, when he'd chosen a c.v. for her to type, he might have guessed she'd note his accomplishments and work experience. Finally she could place the upper-crust townie accent he shared with his impressive set of references, from business tycoons she often heard in sound bites on the radio news. She was in the lab typing away when he greeted her.

"Say, my sister Allison was in the car when we dropped off my résumé last night. She got all excited, said you made her grad dress. Just about saved her life, she said."

Dammit. "I wouldn't say that."

"Go away with you, Miss Modest. She got a prize for it and everything on grad night."

"Really?" She quickly chased down her excitement with self-deprecation. "Actually I'm not at all surprised. She had a good pattern."

"C'mon. Allie told me you've got a lot of skill at dressmaking."

"Oh, really." Brenda knew a display of modesty was uncalled for; skill, unlike talent, was decidedly lower class, associated as it usually was with "worker".

In early February, Brenda had received a call and then a visit from Allison. When she came in, her skin was white as paint, Brenda thought. "A friend of the family recommended you to me. Do you think you could make this?" She flaunted the pattern and described the fabric being shipped in from Montréal. As a disclaimer for future reference, Brenda began to suggest

the difficulties inherent in sewing lace and satin. There was no way the young woman would relent, however; she intended to shop around until someone was willing to risk it, she said. Although her high-school graduation wasn't until the end of May, Allison wanted her gown made good and early.

Although it was a designer pattern, the only intimidating thing for Brenda was the name. She almost said, "It looks pretty basic," but stopped herself. Allison was surely not interested in the dimensions of the toil Brenda had to face. Money, it seemed, was equally unimportant to her. When Brenda finally mentioned her fee, as Allison headed out the door, the client dismissed it with a short wave of her dainty hand.

Brenda quickly finished her typing jobs, then checked her email before leaving the lab. There was usually something from her best friend back home. Her Inbox held a message from Colin. She spun around in her seat and he smiled up at her from the back row of the lab. The message was an invitation to go see whoever ended up playing the Folk Arts Council concert that night at the Blarney Stone. Brenda mailed back that she'd have to check her schedule, but it sounded delightful, and why didn't he give her a shout after supper. As she left the lab, she waved at him in a manner she hoped was dainty.

They arrived at the pub early enough to get seats at one of the six tables towards the back. Brenda hadn't been there before. The stage or performance space was little more than a ledge in front of a floor-length bay window. The window itself was partitioned in three, each part covered by a vertical blind - the green, white, and orange of the Irish flag. The dance floor was also tiny. In fact, the whole place was compact, certainly a much more intimate setting than

that of the play the other night. Interspersed among familiar images of the peaceful, lush, Irish countryside were maps of the province, with FREE NEWFOUNDLAND printed across them, their bars of longitude coloured in pink, white, and green stripes. Figuring they were outdated promotions for another historical drama, Brenda asked, "When did they put that one off?" She pointed to the wall beside their table.

"Huh?"

"That play - when did they stage it?"

He laughed loudly enough to get the attention of the bartender. "Haven't you ever heard of Newfoundland nationalists?"

"Of course ... I just never saw the logo before."

"What do you make of all that?" All traces of mockery had left his voice.

"I don't know. I guess I never really thought about it one way or the other."

"Forget what you *think*. How do you *feel* about it?" His passion was evident in his gesturing hands. "Wouldn't you be prouder of your heritage if we were independent?"

Brenda shrugged, not with indifference, but pleadingly. "I just don't know."

"Well, put it this way: didn't you feel a hundred percent better when you moved away from home?"

Brenda didn't want to burden him with her student loan, estrangement from her relatives, and frustration with public transport in the city. So she shrugged and gave him a cheeky smile.

"Not till I met you."

Allison was among the crowd which streamed in to save her. The fact that Allison said nothing but "hi", as to a stranger, made Brenda uncomfortable. Maybe Allison didn't want to

make a big production out of a newcomer to her scene.

Colin was so kind. On his way up for another beer, he started to ask, "What can I get you?" and realized she had only taken a few sips of her Guinness. "You're not too fussy about that, are you?" She smiled wanly. "That's okay. It's a man's beer." Brenda was relieved she hadn't taken to it. But what were the ladies drinking? "We wouldn't want it to go to waste, would we?" When he had finished her beer, Colin asked again, "What can I get you?"

By this time, Brenda had a ready answer. "I'll just have a vodka and cranberry, if it's not any trouble."

The next time she came for a fitting, Allison looked quite different. Brenda asked if she had been to Florida or anything. "No. Oh, God, it was such a drag this year. They all took off without me, all my friends. Daddy said I'd better do my driving course during Easter break if I wanted to be driving by the summer."

"Oh, I see." Brenda weighed the safety of her next question before she uttered it. "Did you get your license?"

"Yah, I got it. But you wouldn't believe people. I mean, just because I have the car, all my friends figure I'll drive them everywhere. Them and their tans. You know?"

"People will do whatever they have to to get what they want."

"Anyway, maybe we should get on with this. I've got a solarium appointment at four-fifteen."

The first few songs were far from rabble-rousing. Some people sang along, trying to pick

up the pace, some even clapped their hands, but no one was dancing. Allison kept trying to drag her girlfriend out onto the floor. But her friend was seized with self-consciousness after a few seconds and retreated each time. After a particularly slow rendition of "Dirty Old Town", Allison zigzagged up to the lone performer on the stage. It seemed to Brenda that she was talking to him for a long time, for Brenda had to participate in conversations during the resulting lull in the music.

"You like that better?" Colin asked, pointing down to the pinkish ice left in Brenda's glass.

"Oh, yes. It's quite nice."

"A real liquor drinker, eh?" Her flushed face took on an even darker hue as she squirmed. "No, no, don't worry." He reached out and touched the cool, wet fingers she had quickly unwrapped from her glass. "You know what they say in those ads: all drinks are equal - a glass of wine equals a cocktail equals a beer. So don't sweat it. It's best to figure out what you like. And you did like that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Perfect. Hey! You never did tell me your take on the renewed Confederation debates we have around here."

"I've got a feeling that all things aren't equal when it comes to that." Brenda rolled the ice around in her glass.

"C'mon. Either you think it was a good thing or it wasn't."

"I know a bunch of businesses out home went under pretty quick. One man out there, Mr. Peddle, I think his name was, went from being the wealthiest man to depending on family

allowance cheques and the goodwill of his relations."

"Yah, and what about all our resources making big money for the mainlanders who are ripping us off? I agree with you; we've really suffered."

When her grandfather had died several years ago, Brenda's mother grieved only as long as it was proper. She told her father's story just once as she held his cold hand in the funeral parlour. The time had come for the referendum. He was working twelve-hour days as a carpenter for Mr. Peddle, who owned at least half of the town. Peddle told his thirty-five-cent-an-hour workers that they shouldn't expect to have a job to come back to if they voted for Confederation. The kind of products they specialized in - windows, doorframes, and staircases - would be shipped in from Canada at a fraction of the cost. "I can tell him whatever the hell he wants to hear," Brenda's grandfather had said, "but, by God, on voting day, I'll be the one marking my ballot."

When he lost his job, her grandfather didn't fall into step in an assembly line at one of the factories the government set up - making rubber boots or chocolate bars or gloves - but chose instead to start his own woodworking shop. Although Poppy Kelly would never concede it, Peddle had been right about the competition from Canada; Kelly had to diversify. "You couldn't say he wasn't industrious," Brenda's mother boasted. "He used to say, 'I work in development, projection, and cultivation.'" From the black-curtained cubbyhole under the stairs, black and white photographs started appearing. On Tuesday nights the back wall of the Parish Hall would be crawling with Hollywood stars brought to life with the movie projector he had ordered from Toronto. And every inch of his land was devoted to root vegetables and rooting pigs.

"Colin, can you do me a big favour?"

"Sure."

"Can you take this," she handed him a fiver, "and get me another drink? It always takes me years to get served."

"No problem."

Finally the singing recommenced just as Colin regained his seat. Allison inspired many people to dance. She held her arms in the air, clapping the heels of her hands together above her head in large circular movements, as if she was a cymbalist. The song - "Rattlin' Bog" - always reminded Brenda of a song by The Count on her baby nephew's Sesame Street album. The little boy got as excited as Allison now was when the music accelerated.

At what was supposed to be the last fitting, Allison panicked. "Oh, God. The neck is too high. It's not this high in the picture. Where's the picture? Show me the picture! And why is it so tight around here?" She grabbed at the torso, but couldn't get a hold on it. The velvet seams were as strained as her voice.

But Brenda was sure she hadn't strayed from the measurements and the pattern. "I don't understand it. I'm very careful with these things. This has never ever happened before, let me assure you."

"Dammit. I should've gone to one of the established places. Maybe I just won't go to the grad. Great. I'll be left out again."

"I'm really sorry. This doesn't make any sense. Didn't it seem to fit when I pinned it together last time? Don't tell me I misjudged the seam allowance."

"Do you think that could be it?" Allison actually smiled now. "Just take my

measurements again, will you?" She put her hands around her waist.

Brenda would never have allowed herself to err. But business was business. "That must be it, Allison. Your measurements are just about the same."

"Thank God ... But there's some change, right? You said 'just about'. Am I bigger? You can tell me."

"A little." Brenda hoped Allison would appreciate honesty.

"Dammit." She slumped into a chair.

Brenda didn't touch the dress after that, knowing if Allison could afford to tan herself in Newfoundland in spring, she'd find a way to lose weight in the two weeks before her grad. It fitted perfectly when she popped by to pick it up.

Brenda and Colin were saying their goodnights to everyone when Allison finally acknowledged her. "Have a good night with my big brother?" she asked as she wrapped her scarf around her slender neck and slid into her soft leather peacoat.

"Not too bad ..." Brenda squinted in concentration. "I'm sorry, I'm terrible with names."

"Allison. Allison Doyle. You made my grad dress, remember?"

"Oh, sure." Brenda cocked her head to the side, as if trying to conjure up the fitting. "Dark blue off the shoulder, with all those pleats. Didn't we have to alter it at the last minute?"

Allison looked annoyed for no more than a second, then smiled sweetly and said, "That must have been someone else. My dress was dark green."

Brenda winked back at her. "Yes, I think you're right."

He was so charming, gentlemanly, just holding her hand in the cab on the way home.

As they drove up her street, he actually *asked* if he could kiss her. How could she refuse? She didn't even mind his thick breath. Halfway up the walk, she turned back to demonstrate her perfected wave. He blew her a kiss. She was hooked.

As time passed, Brenda spent more and more time with Colin and his friends. She soon learned to tell the various bands apart by the slight variations in their treatment of the old favourites. But the music made her feel oddly proprietorial. She wondered how many of the townies swirling around her had been to the places they were singing about. They were probably only familiar with the parks and historic sites beyond the overpass. Or some of them may have attended the summer festivals and fun days each community now hosted. What did they really know about Newfoundland, though? She stopped herself from commenting to Colin when she remembered her childhood acquaintance with St. John's. Once a month, all the kids in her school - grades seven to nine - would pile into the fummy yellow bus at 8:30 on Saturday morning. It usually turned out to be an even split between those who chose to go to the Aquarena and those who continued on to the Mall. Brenda opted for swimming until she broke her arm at the beginning of grade eight and was forced to shop. The few times she had been at the Mall with her parents, her mother had insisted that Brenda stick by her side. This was too big a place for a little girl. Now, finally allowed to wander freely, Brenda was enraptured by much more than the Sears catalogue come to life. There was a whole store just for underwear: all that lace!

One week, in addition to the normal Saturday excursion, her grade nine class visited downtown St. John's: the museum, the courthouse, the War Memorial. Then they split up into groups of five, each chaperoned by a parent helper, and went window shopping along Water

Street. The first thing she noticed was that there were never any more than three - S, M, L - samples of each garment. So the racks weren't crammed so tightly that you had to exert yourself just to find your size, as were the clearance racks she was accustomed to.

As soon as something hit her eye - a dress - she noticed the price. Although Brenda had known it would be expensive, it turned out to cost three times as much as her generous guess. Closely examining the fabric, the seams, the overall construction, Brenda tried in earnest to discover what it meant to buy "clothing for quality". Being the only girl in a family of six children, Brenda was a care-label reader out of necessity. Her brothers got away with sloth. "Oh, they'd be able to read them. I don't doubt that for one minute. They're smart boys," her mother reasoned. "They just couldn't care less if the whole family ended up wearing nothing but grey." By the age of ten, then, Brenda had proven herself, even though a black t-shirt misplaced in a white load had almost cost her her reputation. "I didn't think you would stoop so low," her mother intoned. That was the summer her mother was having all that trouble and Brenda was sent to live with her grandparents in Wesleyville. Her grandmother taught her how to knit and bake bread. As Brenda grew up, she never heard tell of *ladies* knitting, though, so she ended up teaching herself needlepoint. Wool seemed a little too coarse for ladies to handle.

The dress, like the slinky acetate shirts at the department stores, had to be either dry-cleaned or washed by hand and laid flat to dry. But this was silk. Unaffected when her nature-show friend asked the group, "Did you know that *bugs* make silk?" Brenda ended up spending a good portion of her clothing allowance on a single pair of silk ankle socks. They were light blue with one pink and white flower embroidered on the outside of each ankle. Brenda had never owned socks that "belonged" to a particular foot. She loved them. "You don't know the value

of money," her mother warned when she caught Brenda washing them in the laundry tub downstairs.

Like butterflies bringing flashes of pleasure, Colin's pogy cheques were ephemeral, his generosity sporadic. Money from one cheque never quite made the pass to the next sum at the two-week mark of the relay. But Colin wanted nothing to do with the scam artistry of some of his friends whose simple desires were easily nourished and quenched by their government cheques. The day he decided to abandon his official job search, Colin was momentarily despondent. It was too degrading, he said, not even being able to get a dinky little summer job for minimum wage. It might take creativity to find anything to do, but Newfoundlanders had managed to thrive here for four-hundred-and-fifty years, thank you very much. "We're entrepreneurs, born and bred," he claimed. "But it might take some time to get inspired." Every now and then he would run his latest idea by her. They were pretty good, too. But never feasible. Brenda didn't discourage him.

Sometimes, as they walked around downtown in the wee hours, hoping to head off a cab before it reached the crowds on George Street, they would peer into the shop windows. Colin would tell her what the storeowner needed to do in order to improve business. "Brighter backdrop", he advised the wedding-boutique people. Next door: "If you're specializing in 'sizes for the bigger man', you'd better carry regular-sized things too, or people won't want to be seen going in there." "These shoes might sell better if you dusted them off and called them retro."

One night, Brenda looked at the display at a Newfoundland handicraft store. Tied around the styrofoam neck of the dummy was a beautiful silkscreened scarf, exactly like the one Allison

claimed to have bought in Montréal. For her mother's birthday! Brenda would have to mail it to her; the square flat box it came in was small enough to fit into a legal-size envelope. That way her mother could get all gussied up to meet Colin when he visited at the end of the summer. Since the window-dresser hadn't realized that visible tags went out with Minnie Pearl, Brenda knew she'd have to save up for the gift.

These evenings really added up. The summer was almost over when Brenda, just for a laugh, requested a printed transaction record at the bank machine on Water Street a few blocks east of the Blarney Stone. That night, it was one of Colin's friends who noticed Brenda wasn't her usual jovial self. "What's the matter, Brenda? You're acting like one of the girls on a Midol moment or something." "The girls", as they were always affectionately referred to in their absence, comprised most of the sisters and girlfriends of Colin's group, including Allison. Sometimes, in private, Colin told Brenda she was much more refined than any of them would ever be. She loved that. He usually said it soon after Brenda covered a yawn with three fingertips, Allison-style, and said it was about time she got her beauty rest; could he please give her a lift home? Sometimes, if he was successful in appealing to her refinements, she ended up staying at his place a little longer.

"Oh, no. Nothing's wrong. Really. I just have a touch of a headache."

"A good stiff drink of something should fix that up right quick. What can I get you?" He was already on his feet. They were all so generous, Colin's friends.

"No. No. Nothing at all, thank you." She motioned for him to sit down again. "My stomach's a bit unsettled too. Could be this weather." St. John's had just entered the second of its annual two weeks of muggy stickiness. Such humidity was foreign to Brenda. No one back

home needed air conditioning or a dehumidifier, the water's edge never any more than a three-minute walk away.

Although she stayed as usual until closing time, she bailed on the restaurant. She told Colin not to worry; she could find her own cab. "You go on and enjoy yourself. I'll be fine." During the fifty-minute walk home, Brenda didn't ask herself where all of the money had gone. She knew full well - rounds (she had begun to fancy beer pretty quick when she found out a whole pitcher of draft cost less than two mixed drinks, once she saw Allison down several pints); food (everyone was more than a bit peckish at two, after six hours at the pub); music (Colin said it was their duty to support local musicians and he would only rarely let her dub off his CDs); day trips (to the various pageants and festivals); and clothes (while Colin obviously preferred home-made bread from the local bakery, she figured clothing was a different matter).

One hundred and twenty-two dollars ----- xx. She spelled it out in her head as if she was writing a cheque. She counted the change in her pockets. Less than \$125 to get her through until mid-September when her student loan would come in. And here she was hoping to earn enough over the summer so she could just stick the loan in the bank and get interest.

At least she hadn't let her studies suffer. But she used to be so organized, her spare time relegated to pleasurable pursuits she could earn a bit of money from. Ordinarily, with courses scheduled in the afternoons, Brenda would have done all of her regular studying in the off-time of the afternoon and, if need be, in the last hours of the morning and the early evening hours. She used to do her sewing in the mornings by natural light. And her typing in the evenings until the computer lab closed at ten, after which she'd walk home, have a cup of warm milk and go to bed with a Victorian novel.

But this summer the only block of time that had remained unsabotaged was her afternoons. "Oh, don't you put it down to some outside force, Brenda Murphy. This is your doing." There was no way in hell she'd be slinking home penniless once her degree was finished. Her mother would be too smug about such prodigality. In high school, when Brenda had been applying for university, her parents had tried to convince her not to go. She had no aptitude for science, they insisted, and so would never make it into one of the professional schools. Any other degree was useless. Her mother told her that raising kids was a full-time job anyway. Brenda decided then the only way she'd have children was if she could hire an unrelated nanny.

She guiltily pleaded headaches for the next few nights. Finally, Colin called one evening at supertime and suggested that he visit her instead of going out to the bar. All summer, she had staved off his seeing the inside of her place. While she lived in an apartment and not as a boarder, Brenda didn't want to arouse desire in herself or curiosity in her landlady. So the farthest Colin ever got with Brenda was to the front door. Not even into the vestibule. She couldn't ask him in; "The lady upstairs, you know," she would say and shrug. Colin always argued that it wasn't her mother they were talking about, that Brenda was a grown-up anyway.

Now he was insistent. "Listen, Brenda. You've been there alone, sick, for half a week. I couldn't live with myself if I let you stay there alone another minute. I'm on my way over."

"No, Colin. I just can't. This is the best place I've stayed since I came in to university. It's clean and quiet and so close to the school. I can't jeopardize that."

"Ah, Brenda. There's lots of places around at least as good. Not that I've never been inside there or anything ... but judging from the outside, I think you could do better."

"But I don't want to move. Listen, we shouldn't be talking about this. It's not doing my

head any good and it's probably just frustrating you."

"But I need to see you. It might change your mind about a few things. And I bet your head will get better. What do you say?"

"Colin ..." Brenda stopped herself short, unsure if she really wanted to get him off her case. Then his silence devoured her thawed resolve. "Well, how about we go for a little walk instead? The fresh air might be just the thing."

"Sure, Bren. I'll be over at eight. Or would you rather meet me somewhere?"

"No, pick me up here; I'll be ready and waiting." There was no telling if she had ignored his sarcasm or was ignorant of it. "But you'd better make it ten. Or, let's say ten fifteen. I've got some things to do."

Having turned down several job opportunities since June - a couple of hemming jobs and an honours' dissertation - Brenda couldn't just spontaneously generate outside business. Nonetheless, she started in at her own work. By ten, she had already completed eight knit cotton dishcloths in pretty colours for her mother's birthday. Her mother probably wouldn't have appreciated the scarf anyway.

Colin was grinning widely when Brenda climbed into his car. "Hello, Gorgeous."

"I'm not gorgeous, Colin." "Gorgeous" now sounded cheap to Brenda. Allison would never be gorgeous. Beautiful, stunning, even ravishing, with its explicit hunger, were more suitable epithets for fine women. But never "gorgeous". It evoked tight jeans and push-up brassieres.

"Honestly. You're the most gorgeous woman I've ever met, Brenda Murphy."

"Right. And if I got disfigured in a car crash?"

"Hey! Don't talk like that, Bren."

"I'm sorry. I'm in a bit of a mood, I guess." Such was the lingo of Allison's friends. The couple said little for the rest of the drive to Bowring Park. Then they headed straight for the duck pond, Brenda wishing she hadn't eaten the stale bread with her supper so she'd have something to offer her hosts.

"I just want to be right next to you in that crash." He spoke plaintively now.

"You're strangely sweet, Colin."

"Aw, shucks." He kicked a dandelion in the head in mock modesty, then stopped walking and squeezed Brenda's hand, pulling her gently towards the park bench. "C'mere. I've gotta ask you something."

"Sure." Not even a hint of alarm in her voice while she wondered if her ears were moving to the beat of her quickened pulse.

And then he proposed that they live together.

"Are you serious? I thought you were going to try for work in B.C."

"I did say that, but I don't exactly *need* to. I've got some buddies I wouldn't mind seeing again, but I don't think I'll stick around out there. I'd miss the Atlantic something fierce, I think. I'm a softie, see, despite myself."

"But didn't you say there's not too much on the go around here?"

"Well, there's always the chance something'll come up. We won't have to worry about money, Brenda."

Normally she might have said that Newfoundland wasn't exactly the best place to live on

air and sunshine. The "We" stopped her short. Her smile was too genuine to hide. "Really?"

"Remember I told you about how Pop - my grandfather - passed away a couple of months ago?" Colin interpreted her silence as a sign of respect for the deceased and continued. "Well, let's just say he made sure that me and Allison would be okay." Brenda had known all along.

Disgusted that they'd read the will so soon after her grandfather's death, Allison had been forced to reschedule one of her fittings. A few weeks later, she was already complaining about the stipulation that her inheritance should remain untouched until she turned twenty-five.

"It's not money, Colin. I think we need time."

"Well I've got all the time in the world, Brenda. You're worth it to me, see? But just so I know, you don't have a problem with the *concept* of living together, do you?"

"Not as a general rule."

"But you do in this case."

"I suppose." Although Brenda had never been much of a hair twirler, the action now seemed to come naturally.

"What can I do? Would you rather get married?"

"That's what I used to think. Ever since I was twelve or thirteen I've wanted nothing more than to get married. Not that I had any hankering for my mother's four c's: cook, clean, coddle, and copulate. - Don't tell her I said that. - And my fantasy husband would go barefoot before I'd be fetching any slippers for him."

"Don't worry. I never wear slippers!" Colin chuckled.

"I'm serious. I pictured some kind of heaven where the biggest job I'd have would be keeping happy."

"Is that it, though? Would you rather just skip the living-together stage?"

"I hate to admit this, Colin. It's the last thing I ever thought I'd be saying. But, well, I guess I *like* work. If I'm not working hard at something, I'm not really happy. I'm not myself."

"So what are you saying? You don't like going out at all?"

"No, I'm not saying that, Colin. I've had a fantastic time with you downtown all summer. But ... Well, okay. You know how I do typing and sewing?"

"Yeah. And ... ?"

"Of course you do; that's how I met you. And your sister."

"I always thought it was neat that you had hobbies the other girls weren't into."

"'Weren't into'? Colin, they aren't *hobbies*."

"Hobbies, work, whatever you want to call them. I wouldn't stop you from doing anything you enjoy."

"You're not getting it ... Listen: this summer was a lot of fun, but I can't say I'm happy with myself. See, after my first year in here, I only wanted to quit and wait for someone to court me, like in the novels. But my grandmother died in August before second year ..."

"I'm sorry."

"Before she was gone, she told me how proud she was of my going to university. No one ever said that to me before. Anyway, she left me \$300 and her old sewing machine. I brought the money with me into town and used it to take an evening class over at the Continuing Education building. Sewing, of course. And then I started earning a bit of money. Look, Colin.

I honestly think you got the wrong picture of me this summer. You once said that 'We're here for a good time, not a long time.' But I'm not like that. I totally forget the good times I had the night before when I wake up at eleven and the day is half over."

"Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

Brenda had picked up a handful of pebbles and was pitching them at the pond. "I don't know. I guess I thought at first you were the best thing for me and I wanted to convince you of that by spending all my time with you. All that time and you don't even know me."

"What? Now you're saying we're strangers?"

"No, but I need to get back to work."

"You make it sound as if I'll stop you from working. That's crazy."

"I can't be the only one working, Col."

Colin jolted upright. "So that's it? You don't think I can work hard? You think I'm lazy? You have no idea what I'm capable of, Brenda Murphy." It sounded to her like a threat, but then the edge of his voice dulled, "Well, I can't keep going out with someone who thinks so poorly of me."

"I'm not judging you. But I've decided I can only go out once in a while ... even though you're hard to resist."

"I kind of figured this would be the best thing for us, living together and everything. I had it all planned, you know, Brenda: making you breakfast in bed, bringing you flowers every couple of days, taking you out to plays and concerts. Can't we see what happens?"

"Not living together, no. But I guess we don't need to call it off, either."

"All right!"

"I may as well tell you right now, though, Colin: I won't last long with you going out all the time."

"Then I won't."

"We'll see."

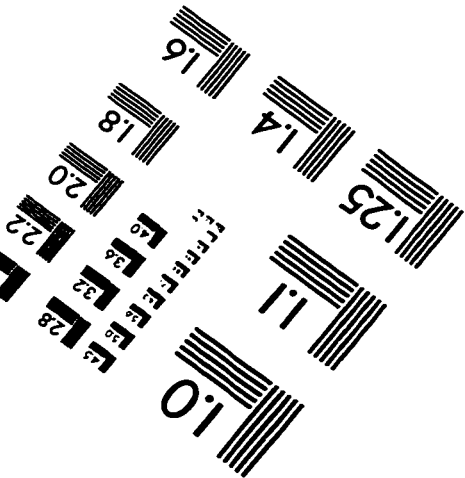
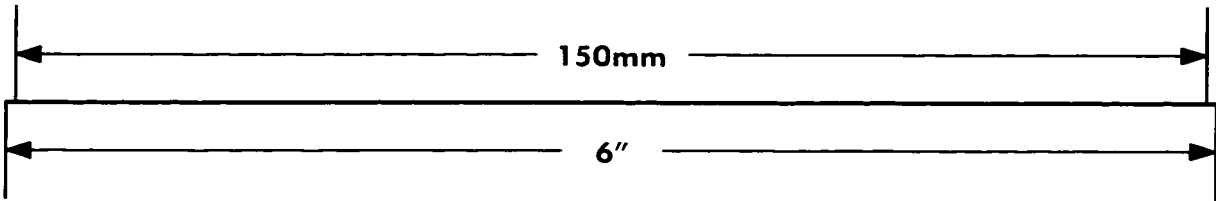
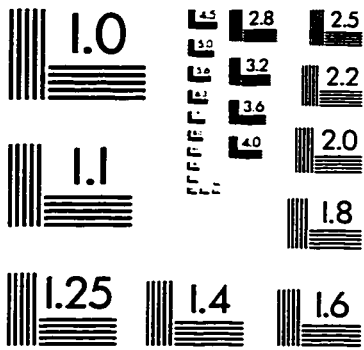
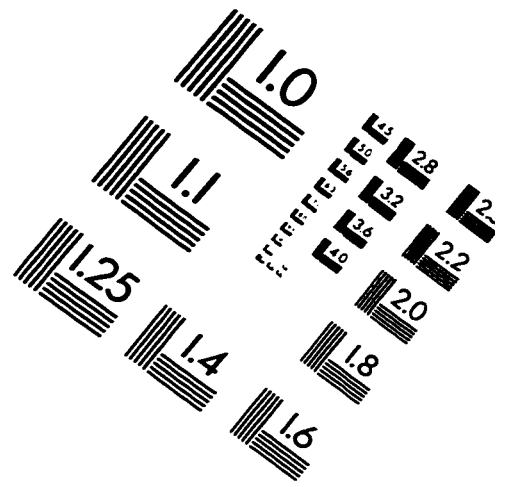
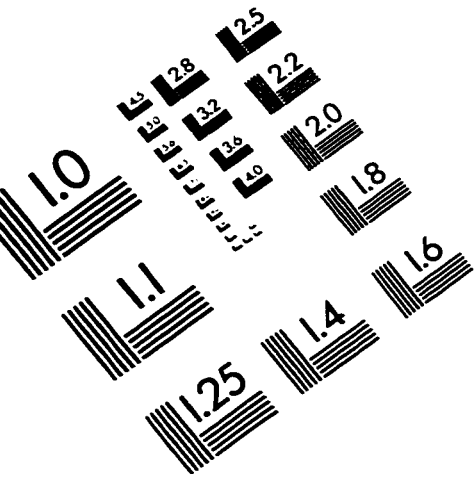
As they drove home no one spoke. When Brenda was bending down to the opened car window from the curb for goodbyes, Colin said, "Dammit. I almost forgot this." He grabbed a square flat box from the dashboard and passed it out the window to her. "This is for you, gorgeous ... Hope you like it."

When Colin dropped by her house unexpectedly the next morning with a posy of English daisies, she came to the door with three straight pins in her mouth, her hair tied out of the way with her new silkscreened scarf.

VITA AUCTORIS

Martha Susan Wells was born in 1972 in St. John's, Newfoundland. She graduated from Memorial University of Newfoundland with a Joint Honours degree in English and French in 1995. She is presently a candidate for the Master's degree in English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

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