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**Inside the Compass' Circle:
Outside of You**
A Collection of Short Stories

by

Brady Rivard

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
1998
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Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following people from the Creative writing workshop for their insights, editorial comments, and friendship: Paul Bellmore, Mike Borshuk, Jennifer Chambers, Chris Kocela, Julie Dennison, and Laurie Smith. I would also like to thank Dr. D. Laing for his inspiration during the year I spent in the Faculty of Education and for his assistance with this project. Also, thanks to Dr. Wanda Campbell for first giving me a start in the Creative Writing program and for editorial assistance on these stories. A special thank you to Dr. A. MacLeod who was always available for guidance, insight, and motivation, even over many miles, and even despite my constant reliance on communication through faulty technical devices.

I would also like to give a special thank you to my parents and my two brothers who provided both support and inspiration over the years. Finally, a special acknowledgment to my wife, Noelle. Without your editorial insights, your unselfish patience during the many weekend hours I spent at the computer, or your constant inspiration and support, I may never have made it this far.

Table of Contents

Machistan	1
The Rock Pit	18
Fish-Flies	38
Cairo is Calling	53
Margaret's Ruined Woodshed	78
Of Wolves and Shepherds	101
Vita Auctoris	118

Machistan

It is an early morning of late April. The snow that has hidden the clay ground of this northern Cree reserve has started to melt. As the white crystal sand of winter begins to disappear, it is replaced by dark muddy pools of earth. A soft rain seeps slowly from the clouds like water through a colander.

The rising sun reveals the angled roofs of a hundred or so wooden houses which have been built randomly on either side of the dirt roads since the 1950's. From the wood burning stoves of each simple home, plumes of smoke accompany the sun's rosy ascent into the northern sky. Even through the rain, the air is pungent with the soothing scent of burning spruce, as each wood burning stove helps to re-create the primitive allure of a campfire.

At the outside edge of the community, the river water flows secretly under the frozen surface and swims towards the Bay. It has done this all winter, but as the temperature warms, the surface becomes thinner and thinner and the secret running water grows deeper and deeper. Somewhere up the river, through miles of dense forest filled with pine and spruce trees, there is a crack like thunder. And the ice begins to break.

At the school, I sat behind my desk and looked through a calendar with an art student named Shawn. I had started teaching Art and History on the reserve in January.

Shawn and I were alone in the classroom. The school had been empty since after the morning announcements when the students were told to return home because of the flood threat. Another small community, south of our reserve, had been evacuated in the middle of the night as the rising water climbed above the river bank.

"Are you coming, Moira?" said a cavalier voice from outside the classroom door. "All the gawkers have already gathered at the river bank. If you want, I can walk over with you, but we can't keep Mother Nature waiting!"

"Yes," I said, without raising my eyes from the calendar I was studying with Shawn. "I'll meet you at the side door in a few minutes."

Even though I had only taught at the school for three months, it was easy to distinguish Jake's assured, somewhat condescending voice. Jake had been teaching on the reserve for over three years. His standard joke — which was also a camouflaged confirmation of the rank and title which was expected for those teachers who were seasoned veterans — was that teachers on reserves should count their experience in dog years: therefore, his three years were like twenty-one years experience.

"Shawn, make sure you follow us out." Jake motioned "You can't wander the halls. School is supposed to be closed and we have to lock up." Shawn barely acknowledged him. He was silent, like always.

I looked up from the calendar as Jake sauntered further into the classroom. He had been coy about his age, but I placed him in his early thirties: a handful of years older than myself. He wore a pair of nylon blue sports pants like pro athletes like to wear before or after a game, and a red collared shirt which was tight around his chest. His hair was black and wavy, but shaved short on the sides and the back. His face was dotted with coarse, dark stubble. He was the kind of man who constantly changed the state of his facial hair. In January, when I first arrived on the reserve, Jake's face was cleanly shaven. After a few days he allowed his hair to grow into the shadowy form of a beard which was then neatly manicured into a goatee.

My mother, of course, would have marvelled at Jake's impeccable posture: his thick neck and upright, broad shoulders, his inflated chest and narrow, arched spine, his plump butt and long, solid legs. But at the sight of what she would have

termed Jake's *evening shadow*, my mother would have raised her cheeks, tightened her brows, pinched her lips and retracted her head defensively into her shoulders like someone who had been scratched by a wool sweater. My fiancé, Clifford, who was just finishing his second year of residence at Toronto General Hospital, would classify Jake as an *eternal adolescent* in search of constant approval, a band of clone-like friends, and the perfect prehistoric wife to nurture him. My father, in his simple straightforward way, would have pigeon-holed Jake as a *dumb jock*. Myself, ever being the quixotic socialist, I was still trying to prove that Jake was just misunderstood.

"Moira, not to scare you, but you really should consider packing yourself a small bag of essential things that you can just pick up and go with. You know — a toothbrush, deodorant, a hair-dryer — essential personal items and such. I've seen it where you get a call at 3:00 a.m. and someone says you've got thirty minutes to get ready to leave. That's how things work around here." Jake was referring to the issue which preoccupied the concerned crowds congregated along the river bank. He also took great pleasure in thinking that he was looking out for me since I was new to things on the reserve, and of course, I was a young woman.

"I'll look into that," I told him. "I just have to get a few things here and then I'll be ready. Meet you at the door in a few, O.K.?" Jake smiled and breezed back out the door. As he left the room, I thought how buoyant he seemed.

I turned back to the calendar which Shawn and I were leafing through. We had been waiting anxiously for its arrival because one of his drawings had been chosen for the calendar which displayed young Native art. I can still remember his reluctance that first week in the art room when I suggested we send his drawings to the contest. Like other students in the school — perhaps even more so — Shawn had conditioned himself to rarely express excitement or optimism. At first he just shrugged his shoulders and turned his head sideways to say "I don't know." When I pushed him further he finally responded.

"I really think you have a chance, Shawn," I encouraged him. "Wouldn't you like to have your art published?"

"*Chay*, I'd never *win*," he blurted skeptically, in that familiar accent where each sentence ended on a high note, like going to the top of a musical scale. His eyes shifted sharply to the student seated beside him then downwards to the sketch book on his desk; he stared despondently at the book, as if he were punishing himself for speaking out. Slowly learning my lessons, I waited until after school when we were alone to persuade him further. After a lengthy discussion where I encouraged Shawn about his art, he finally buried his chin into his chest and nodded his head slowly in agreement.

We turned through the pages, looking for the month that accompanied his drawing. I stopped at the month of April. His sketch was there. I scanned the picture again, still charmed by the delicate shading. I meditated on the complex way in which he had woven each image into one connected collage. In his drawing there was a traditional Elder with a wrinkled face inside the belly of a large whitefish; a pointed wigwam surrounded by sharp pine trees on either side; a young Native man sitting cross-legged with his arms outstretched staring into a bleeding sun; and in the background was the geographic shape of James Bay with its many snake like rivers. All the images were somehow connected with each other, like a web.

I caught Shawn smile when he looked at the calendar. I could tell he never really believed the calendar existed, even after he had received the letter which congratulated him for his winning entry.

Shawn was seventeen and stood a few inches above six feet. His face was long and somewhat flat; his skin tanned with pimple like scars from when he sniffed gas regularly two years earlier; he said he had stopped. His long black hair was held hidden under the Chicago Blackhawk cap which he always wore. He had the headphones of a walk-man around his neck and was wearing a black and white

Megadeath concert shirt which he must have purchased at the Northern store.

"He likes you," Shawn said offhanded, without warning, without looking into my eyes.

"Huh?"

"Jake. He likes you."

"No. Why would you say that?"

Shawn shrugged his shoulders. I was amazed that he had spoken this much, and especially about something so personal.

"I just know," he said quietly. "I heard him talk. Outside his window."

"Even so, Shawn, I'm engaged." I lifted up my hand and wiggled the engagement ring which Clifford and I quickly chose as a Christmas present during the fluster and turmoil of the few weeks before I left for the reserve.

"You like him," Shawn said.

"Who? Jake? No!" I looked down into my lap. "He's not my type."

I placed the calendar on my desk and got up from my chair to open the closet door behind me. I did this because I remembered Jake was waiting, and also because I was growing uncomfortable with Shawn's conversation. I used a key to open the closet door and removed my University of Toronto gym bag from the bottom shelf. As I turned back around I caught Shawn writing on the calendar.

"You go to his house, don't you?" he said, putting the pen down casually.

"Just to visit," I said, a little startled by how much Shawn knew, even for a small community where almost every personal secret was common knowledge. "*We're just friends.*"

This was also what I told Clifford. I tried to explain to him about the loneliness a person could feel in that island world; the loneliness you felt when you came off the plane and entered the search house where strangers looked through your underwear for any illegal alcohol; the loneliness you felt at the local store when you

waited in line to purchase your wilting vegetables and the people behind you were talking and laughing in a language you did not understand.

"I hate him." I was startled by the easy delivery of his expression.

"Don't say that. You don't *really* mean it."

There was a momentary silence, except for the sound of the rain as it softly drummed upon the window.

"Are you nervous about the flood?" I asked in an attempt to redirect our conversation.

"No. If it floods we'll camp on higher ground."

"I've never seen a flood, but the way Jake and everybody talks it's supposed to be scary."

From down the hall I heard a voice call: "Moirra, are you coming or what?" I turned to the shelf and got a few books to place in my bag in case we were evacuated. If I was going to have some extra time on my hands then I wanted to catch up on my reading. When I turned back around, Shawn was heading to the door.

"See you at the river," I said. Shawn shrugged his shoulders and exited through the door. I slung the gym bag over my shoulder and went to meet Jake.

Jake and I walked to the river bank together. The rain had stopped briefly, but already much of the snow had melted and revealed the thick, oozing clay. Even on the gravel roads, our rubber boots sloshed in the slippery mud. I was forced to deal with the weight of my own feet as I tried with each new step not to sink into the ground like a careless explorer who falls into quicksand. Even when the ground was covered with snow a few weeks earlier, it was important to watch your step. The ditches at the side of the road which had been filled with solid snow all winter had begun to carry water underneath the surface. When someone walked across a ditch, it was like a trap door being opened. If you weren't careful, you could find yourself up to your armpits in a snow bank with frigid water biting at everything below your

waist. More than one teacher was forced to go home and change before school began. The students always had a big laugh at the clumsy foolishness of the teachers who came and went through their lives each year.

Jake was uncharacteristically quiet for the first few minutes of our walk. Things were awkward, even without any words to get in the way. I started to wonder if he had overheard Shawn and me talking in the classroom. On my side of the road I heard two local men working on one of the six television satellites that were enclosed by a small wire fence. One man was on a ladder and the other man was standing underneath him. Even now, I am still amazed by the number of cable channels we received from all over North America. I had more channels to choose from than I did living at home with my parents in Toronto. This also meant that the youth in the community were bombarded by images from the south, images from another world: Saturday night wrestling events, Hockey Night in Canada, and movie channels that featured impoverished African American youth involved in gangs, or the perfect worlds of romantic comedies, or even old Westerns.

The man holding the ladder saw us walking and he directed a smile at me. No doubt the two men were forced to repair the satellite after some bored group of kids spent the night throwing stones at the six easy targets. Every night I heard the young people, gathered together, their voices clear as they yelled in a mixture of Cree and English. These two languages, neither of which they had mastered, were their only form of verbal communication. During field trips with Elders, the young people could not understand half of what the Elders wanted to teach them; and, in school, the young people could never articulate their frustration in the language they heard on television, or the language we expected them to learn. So they horsed around restlessly each night; each one learning to communicate through a physical language; each stone thrown at the oil bins or the satellites echoing off the steel like a hollow, hopeless moan. As Jake and I walked to the river, I saw one of the oil bins and it was

littered by graffiti: "Crystal loves Roger, 96", "Bad Boys", and "This town sucks" were just a few of the visible epigraphs.

"Let's hope the rain holds off, we don't need any more water to build up if there is a flood." Jake finally decided to speak.

"Is it true about Albany?" I asked.

"They say the river started to rise in the middle of the night and by morning the whole community was soaked in three feet of water. M.N.R. started evacuating everyone around 2:00 a.m., but of course a lot of people stayed behind and refused to leave. I remember when we were evacuated last year about a hundred stayed behind. Some were afraid of looting — some were afraid of leaving."

"Where do they take you?"

"They fly everyone out to Moosonee or Timmins. When you get there it's a fight to find a hotel room. Most people end up on a cot in some gymnasium. Not a pleasant thing when some of the people here get a chance to drink again. The place smells of urine and sour liquor. Kids are running around beating the hell out of each other during the day and crying at night because their parents haven't come back. You can't ever get comfortable. I'd rather sleep in a back alley."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think, Jake?"

"That's the truth, and it ain't always pretty. But I know, I'm a fascist right?" Jake laughed, in order to turn the discussion into a playful joke. "You're still green. Give it a year and your tune might change."

"Then why are you still here?"

"The money." I shook my head in submission and Jake chuckled victoriously. Most days I would have challenged Jake and tried to help him see the light, to come to my way of thinking, but I was more concerned about the flood and couldn't spare the energy. I was finding that my robust energy to defend against all the evils of the world had been steadily declining.

"What about the people who stay behind?"

"Some stay in their houses or watch the water at the river bank. Sometimes you can get evacuated and the flood never materializes. It just depends on the year and the incidentals of Nature that you can't quite predict. Some of the Elders and their kids get flown by helicopter into the bush where they have goose camps."

"That must be where Shawn said he would go."

"He seems to be really responding to you," Jake said, with some hesitation.

"He's an excellent artist."

"You know he has had a lot of trouble over the years."

"I heard."

"He sniffed gas for a long time. Until one of the guys he was with died because of a gun shot to the head. Suicide. We didn't see Shawn at school for a long time. I think he went out for treatment or some sort of crap like that. Anyways, you should be careful with him, you never can tell. He's threatened more than one teacher at the school."

"He's been really good so far. I mean — he's had his moments. He's an intense kid, but he has a lot of talent."

"Well, be careful he doesn't get some sort of crush on you. I think he has already. You don't need him stalking around your house at night. Things are dangerous enough around here."

"Really, Jake. Sometimes you can be such a happy-go-lucky guy and other times you're a real cynic. I just don't get you."

"I know I seem cynical to you. But you don't really understand. So many times I've seen people get their hopes up. I've seen people try hard to turn things around, but they keep running into the same brick walls and nothing ever gets better. I've spent hours in this town, talking myself into circles arguing every possible side, every possible angle, about what has to be done to make things better, but in the end

you realise that there just isn't any easy solution. Things just happen, and you learn to live with it. Some people see it as surrender; then you realise it's survival."

We came to the end of the road and the crowds of people along the river bank were clearly visible. On the left was the historic church which had been in the community for over a hundred years. On the right was the Northern store; the original impetus for this settlement long ago when the fur trade created a one business economy. The Northern store was still the centre of economic activity, providing all the necessities of life at a considerable cost.

As we reached the river, I was amazed by the number of people already gathered together, watching the river like street crowds waiting for the parade of floats. There was a carnival atmosphere, and the tension that accompanies anticipation sat in the air like heavy moisture on a humid day. For the first time, I felt the anxious anticipation as my stomach seemed to tighten, my throat seemed raw.

Most of the people were gathered in groups of four or five. Some groups were centred around a truck, or the more common mode of transportation, a four-wheeler. Many of the kids from the elementary school were playing in the open land. Scattered along the river were the aluminum boats and long green canoes which were left on the top of the bank through the winter. Across the river, I could see the wilderness of the James Bay inland: a wall of wiry coniferous trees which camouflage the many small dark lakes that were only visible from the air.

Jake and I found an open spot to stand on the edge of the river bank. As I looked down into the river, I was surprised to discover that it was no longer covered by ice. The water flowed freely. Some of the chunks of ice had been left along the river bank, like cars abandoned at the side of the road, but most of the ice had disappeared. I was also surprised to discover that the water was not very high; in fact, the river bank dropped at least ten feet before reaching the water.

"I thought there was suppose to be a build up of ice or something here, Jake?"

"The ice at this point of the river has already broken up and found its way out to the Bay. It's the ice coming from up river that you have to worry about." He pointed up river where there might be an ice jam.

"They say there is already a block built up down there. About three miles. That's what we're waiting for. What happens, see, is that the ice wants to flow out into the Bay, but the width of the river changes, like a bottle neck. When the river becomes narrow, or the ice flow is too heavy, then it builds up like a beaver's dam. All that ice is trapped together with nowhere to go. That's when the water starts to rise, and unless the ice can break free, pretty soon you have a flood on your hands. That's what happened south of us."

"Can the water really rise high enough to flood the whole community?"

"Hell, yes. I've never seen it happen in my years, but it's happened before. Every year is a gamble; there's always a threat. Sometimes the flood never materialises, sometimes you can get flown out and nothing happens, and there is always that off chance that Nature will work against us: tide levels, rain, wind, density of the ice, timing, — you never know."

"So every year the community goes through these days of waiting and they continue to live on the river?"

"Yup."

"Why don't they move to a different spot?"

"I don't know. It's not like there isn't a lot of land for the taking up here. I guess it's just part of life. If it happens, it happens."

Some of the people started to point at a corner of the river. Around a bend of land some large white bodies of ice started to turn into the river and make their way towards us. The crowds began to buzz as the parade they had waited for began to march in front of them. The first few bodies of ice seemed only to crawl through the water, but as the parade of white objects began to increase, I suddenly recognised just how quickly the current was moving.

The bodies of ice were randomly cut into different shapes, like the shapes in a bag of crushed ice, only magnified. Their surface was a thin white layer of snow and ice. Some of the ice pieces had broken tree trunks and splintered branches frozen on top from when the ice broke then snapped and bulldozed its way along the river bank.

The surface of each ice chunk was covered with a thin layer of frozen white snow. From above the water, this thin layer of skin was all that we could see, but hidden beneath the dark flowing water was the body and muscle of the ice chunks. Only when the ice lodged itself on the bank or built on top of one another could you see their full bodies. Some pieces were as thick as a small child.

Their thickness was made of both clear, transparent ice and white, hardened ice. The white ice was formed by gases trapped like air pockets in the ice, the same as an ice cube in the freezer. This mixture of transparent and white ice was what looked like the sinewy muscles of each exposed body. As Jake and I watched the ice jam where the river narrowed, I marvelled at the exposed chunks of frozen mounting muscles, and thought of the iceberg which sunk the Titanic: hidden, unknown, undetectable, deadly destructive.

As the ice continued to jam at the narrow part of the river I could sense the increased tension in the air.

"This is how it starts," Jake said. "As this continues to build, all we can do is watch and wait. Pick a spot on the bank: a rock or a piece of garbage. Take a look for it every now and again and you'll see how much the water rises. You don't really know. It's not like the river tells you or it makes any noise. It just creeps up." I looked along the bank and chose a rock about the size of a bowling ball as my benchmark.

In the next half hour, while I sat and watched the river, the pieces of ice jammed together to create a dam as far out into the river as my eyes could see.

Nothing in the river seemed to move any longer. It was like the river had frozen solid once again: the single chunks of ice became one large enemy. Jake had gone over to an Elder that he knew. He talked to him for awhile and then returned back to where I was sitting.

"He says that the ice is thick and it is possible that we may flood. He says it reminds him of the time the river flooded when he was a young man." Jake paused for a moment.

"M.N.R. says the same thing," he continued. "They've been monitoring the water and the flow of the ice from a helicopter in the air. They've also been testing the density of the ice and the level of the water. They're not quite ready to spend the thousands of dollars to issue an evacuation notice, but if the danger continues, they might just fly us all out of here. Truth is, though, all the experience of the Elders and the technical tools of M.N.R. can't tell for sure what Nature will do."

Jake tilted his head to the sky as a few drops of rain fell on his cheeks. We both looked up to the clouds which blocked the sun.

"Should we go home?" I asked.

"It's almost one o'clock. Might as well go home and have a bite to eat. Then maybe come back out and take a look at the water level. Can you tell how much the water has risen yet?"

I looked down at my rock which was now almost entirely submerged in the rising water. "About five feet," I told Jake.

"This could get scary," he said. "Do you want to come over for a sandwich?" he asked.

My initial instinct was to say yes.

"No," I said upon second thought. "I should go home. I've got some things to take care off."

"O.k. I'll walk back with you."

Just as we stood up from the river bank, Shawn and a group of his friends emerged from the crowd like drops of water sneaking through cracks in glass.

Their balance seemed broken, as if the ground beneath them was being shaken by a slight earthquake. They were laughing heartily, suspiciously. Shawn's two friends had their eyes covered by sunglasses; Shawn's eyes were uncovered, red and fixed. They were all wearing heavy coats, even though the afternoon sun had warmed the air. Each of them had their hands hidden inside the sleeves of their coat, as if their arms were not long enough to hang out. I was unable to recognise Shawn's two companions and assumed they were some of the many young people who never bothered coming to school. One of the boys, who was bigger than Shawn, had a red bandanna wrapped around his head. The other boy had a patch of dried blood under his red, irritated nose.

"Hey, teachers." Shawn said as a half-hearted greeting. It reminded me of the first night I walked off the plane towards the police shack where the luggage and passengers are checked for alcohol. Gathered along the fences of the tiny airport, their faces pressed against the wire fence which their hands clutched, the young people waited to get their first glance at the new teachers for that semester. The lights from skidoos and four-wheelers pointed at the line of passengers headed towards the shack. As I walked by, I could hear them calling: *teacher, teacher!* They knew immediately my purpose for entering the community. At the shack I heard the cajoling voices from behind the fence. The images of movies about prisons flashed through my mind, where the new inmates are cat-called at by those people who are already there.

"Hello, Shawn," I said, trying extra hard to be friendly. "Did you tell your friends about your picture that was published?"

Shawn turned his head and his friends gave him a taunting grin. I reprimanded myself for thinking I might stroke Shawn's ego by bringing up his success at school in front of his two rather rough looking companions.

Jake tried quickly to change the pace of the conversation.

“Water’s getting pretty high,” he said. There was a short pause and then one of Shawn’s friends spoke.

“Just like me,” said the boy who had the dried blood caked under his nose. He leaned into his friend with the bandanna and nudged him with an elbow. They both snickered and turned to Shawn. Shawn looked to me first then responded with a small smirk of his own. When the boy with the dried blood under his nose nudged his friend, he exposed a plastic bag which he had hidden inside his sleeve.

“Sniffing gas again, eh Shawn?” Jake accused, pointing to the bag his friend had. They used the plastic bag to hold the gasoline. As they walked around they would press their nose into their sleeves and inhale the fumes from the plastic bag.

“Not us!” the boy with the bloody nose said sarcastically.

“Right,” Jake continued, “And your nose is bleeding because the air is dry, not because you’ve been burning it out with gas fumes.”

As if to hide the blood, the boy put his hand to his nose and bent his head with mild embarrassment. “Do you have any idea what that does to you?” Jake scolded him. “It burns out your lungs and it weakens your heart, not to mention the possibility of lead poisoning.” Jake paused.

“It’s O.K.,” said the boy with the bandanna. “I don’t have to worry about lead poisoning,” he said in mock seriousness. “I sniff unleaded!” They both started to laugh again.

“Yeah, you should know!” said the boy with the bloody nose, regaining his sense of comedy. “We got the gas from your skidoo this morning!”

Even more infuriated, Jake continued his tirade. “If you want to kill yourself, there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Nothing. It’s your business. But you best stay away from my things or you’ll find yourself in a heap of trouble.”

“What’s it to you?” Shawn suddenly challenged.

“And you . . .” Jake continued, pointing his finger with renewed volatility. “You . . . Shawn . . . you should know better than anyone what this stuff can do. Look at yourself. You should be ashamed. Isn’t it enough that one of your friends has already died? Does there have to be more before you learn?”

Shawn suddenly charged Jake. As Shawn lunged at Jake, his eyes were distant and red, as if he were seeing right through Jake. The power of his anger, of his frustration, of his pain, was frighteningly unforgettable.

Jake was caught slightly off-guard and stumbled backwards before he regained his balance. While Jake tried to regain his balance, Shawn threw a punch that landed directly on Jake’s chin. Jake slipped in the muddy earth, made more slippery by the slow drizzle, and landed on his back. Shawn charged again but Jake threw him over his shoulder and into a patch of dark chocolate earth. Both of them stood up and lunged for another encounter.

People from the crowd were starting to look and point. I felt overwhelmed, and shocked at the fight in front of me. All my ideals about the great things I would do as a teacher in the community, all the students I would reach and help, all the self-indulgent changes I had planned under the guise of the betterment of all, seemed to burst in front of my eyes. And I thought how quickly things can change.

Jake was the quicker of the two combatants. He had lost all sight of any future consequences; he could only feel the pain and anger of his own frustrations. He quickly launched a powerful right hand into Shawn’s stomach and all the gas fumes in Shawn’s lungs must have burst out in one torrential gust. Shawn bent over and held his side, slightly winded.

I don’t know if it was the gust of air from Shawn’s lungs or some unknown force of nature, but at that time there came a loud crack from the river.

I snapped my head back in the direction of the noise, half assuming that a gun had been fired. Below, where the chunks of ice had built themselves into a powerful

dam, the ice was now starting to move and rumble slowly towards the Bay. At first, the tiny icebergs moved slowly, like a backup of cars on a freeway in Toronto; then the blocks of ice picked up speed and the spaces between each chunk began to grow. Within minutes the whole river was moving again. I stood above the river bank, mesmerized by the *majesty* of nature that I was witnessing: her unharnessed power, her gift of beauty, her penchant for destruction which we have yet to solve or answer.

When the river's spell had been broken and I turned back to the fight, Jake and Shawn had already been separated. The police who had been at the river, waiting like others for the break-up, had seen the scuffle emerge and were headed in our direction. When they arrived, the police questioned everyone about the incident. As I retold the story of how Shawn had charged Jake, Shawn never looked at me, but kept his chin buried in his chest, his eyes hidden under that familiar Chicago Blackhawk cap.

While the police tried to sort out the causes of the event, the river water flowed freely and the flood threat was over.

The next morning, I went to school early. As I sat in my desk trying to concentrate on my agenda for that day, I couldn't help but be preoccupied by the previous day's events. I reached into my desk drawer and retrieved the calendar with Shawn's picture. Almost certainly, Shawn would not return to school. I flipped through the book and turned to his drawing. I thought about his powerful talent, his powerful gift which would probably never be realised.

Then, in the box for the day of April 22, I saw the words Shawn had written the previous day. The first word was in Cree. I looked closely at the hand writing and it seemed to spell *Machistan*. Underneath this was an English word that was easier to decipher: break-up. This was the first time during my months on the reserve that both languages seemed to have meaning.

The Rock Pit

Orvel Peterson knelt in the woods by the Masonville quarry and stared at the distant headlights which approached slowly from a dirt road that led north to the provincial highway. Entranced by the luminescent lines, like a mystified deer trapped in the lure of oncoming light, Orvel's two saucer eyes matched the unwavering stare of the two brilliant beams. His short and stout body was easily hidden within the foliage. Even his fiery red beard was camouflaged by the darkness.

The distant lights drew closer, then swung to the right. As the truck turned into the open clearing above the dark rock pit the lights were quickly turned off even before the truck stopped.

Orvel was hidden in the woods fifty yards further down the dirt road and away from the clearing where the truck had parked. The dirt road forked directly in front of Orvel. One road continued forward for a hundred feet to the Main office of the quarry which was closed for the evening. The second road twisted downward into the dark rock pit where the machines that excavated stone and earth during daylight hours rested in the absence of light.

Orvel had waited in the clearing with Lou, his favourite cat, for over an hour. The clearing floor, the size of a child's sandbox, was brown with leaves and spoiled by a maze of footprints some old and some new. The smell of wet leaves reminded Orvel of Sloan's muddy river which ran behind his trailer. He had found the abandoned trailer in Browning's Bush and quickly turned it into his home. For years, Orvel had combed the river bank in hopes of finding treasures that other people had discarded as junk. Orvel liked to save everything. *Someone 'll wan 'it someday*, Orvel told himself. *Then I'll have it, an' someone 'll hav'ta come to me for it.*

Orvel first discovered the two lovers above the pit during an evening walk through the woods. He knew the trails and landmarks well enough that he never

needed to bring any source of light. He hiked to the quarry to scavenge for scrap material or glass bottles cast off by the afternoon workers. Before he reached the quarry road, he heard a high pitched giggle break the musical rhythm of the night. His conditioned instinct to avoid what he had experienced as the cruel, gregarious customs of humanity initially caused him to turn back in the direction of his safely hidden and private trailer; yet, something in that high pitched giggle fascinated him. Upon reconsideration, he cautiously drew to the edge of the woods to search for the source of such an appealing sound.

Orvel discovered the lovers in the spot where the truck was now parked. He recognized the spot as the place where the employees parked their vehicles each day. There were also a few picnic tables under the shade of a tree for workers to use during lunch and coffee breaks. That first night there were two vehicles parked in the clearing already: a truck and a small compact car. The lovers lay together on a blanket under the shade tree. Orvel watched the silhouettes of their bodies and pulsated with excitement. He could hear small bits of playful conversation, and sometimes even the droll drumming of the guttural sounds produced during their love making. Yet, he never dared move close enough to see the lovers' faces. His fear of discovery and the possibility of interaction outweighed his carnal curiosity. That first night was over three weeks ago, and Orvel had returned each night hoping the lovers might stage another performance. He had been rewarded for his efforts at least half a dozen times.

On this evening, Orvel watched the man's silhouette as he stepped out of the truck, reached into the back seat to retrieve a blanket, then walked towards the tree where he casually sat on a picnic table. He heard a faint scraping sound and then saw a small ember of light from a cigarette. This was the routine. Within minutes the car would slowly enter the clearing, being sure to turn the lights off early, and then the young woman would enter the scene. Orvel had memorized the staging of this play right down to the most intricate details.

When the woman finally arrived, she sat on the picnic table beside the man and a second cigarette was lit. Orvel heard small pieces of their whispered conversation. Something about *castles* and something about a *wife*, but Orvel was more interested in their movements than their conversation. Despite Orvel's mistrust of people, he had a talent for reading body language that most people never decoded. He watched the man's eagerness to make the woman laugh, but also noticed his increasing impatience, as his toes began to tap and his attention became less fixed; he watched the young woman as she struggled to laugh at each correct moment, as she leaned in gradually then shuffled aside a short time later.

Orvel continued to watch as the woman spread out the blanket under the tree. The couple sat on the blanket, wrestling playfully and occasionally pausing for a brief kiss. When the embraces became more frequent, Orvel watched as the silhouettes above the pit began to remove the clothes that confined them. Still the couple laughed and talked, but now their hands met and their bodies briefly touched. When the conversation dissipated, the subtle embraces were replaced by a rhythmic connection. Orvel knew the steps of the performance as if he had watched it over and over again on a video tape. He found himself anticipating each move, each gesture, as if he were actually part of the scene.

Later, when the flicker of the couple's whispered conversation was rekindled, Orvel sensed a change in the situation. The woman did not seem to laugh as freely as she had in the past. Overcompensating for her silence, the man's movements became sporadic, cautious, confused. Then he stood up sharply and began to put the clothes on which he had so eagerly discarded earlier. He was looking for a response. Finally, he submitted and sat sulking on the picnic table. Then the woman snapped up from the blanket.

Orvel watched as the performance he had come to memorize began to change.

Helena stared expectantly. Her determined hands clutched her naked hips, tight enough that Nick half-expected the long, sharp, red fingernails to puncture her tanned skin.

Nick crouched nervously on a picnic table above the rock pit. His indecisive eyes volleyed from Helena's naked figure back to the blanket which lay between them. The grey, hand-knit blanket came from behind the seat of Nick's Ford pick-up truck. It had been a wedding present from his mother-in-law over fifteen years ago.

The truck, its engine still warm, was parked along the dirt road which approached the Masonville quarry, the place where Nick worked during the day and sometimes came to meet Helena at night.

"Nick, did you hear me?" Helena questioned. "This is it. I won't let you shrug your shoulders about this anymore. We've been meeting here for over a month now, and I'm not sure we're getting anywhere. Frankly, I'm tired of the sneaking around, Nick."

Helena paused to focus on Nick's expressionless face. "I used to think the thrill of spontaneous sex and new experience were enough," she said as her hands released and fell from her waist, "but I don't know anymore. I'm just not sure."

Helena turned away from Nick, and stared into the darkness of the quarry. The full moon lit her surroundings. Only two steps forward, the earth disappeared into a hollow, dark well like a bottomless pit or the emptiness of a stellar black hole. The moon's glow was like an x-ray machine; it captured the sharp edges of jutting rocks and sloping cliffs just enough to show the rock pit's skeletal features. Somewhere at the bottom of the pit, only shadows in the darkness, a crew of digging machines lay motionless, waiting for the sun to rise when their metal arms would once again excavate the pit, their crocodile teeth gnawing at the earth in search of stones.

The rock pit was surrounded by Browning's Bush, as if the pit were a stage and the trees were the seats of a theatre. In the light, the trees stood above Helena

like old sleeping giants. Each trunk seemed to have an old man's face, like the ancient masks she saw in the many museums of Europe. In the moonlight, the wrinkled bark seemed to move, so that the dramatic masks changed expressions: first a frown, now a sneer. Gently, the guileful wind lifted the boughs and shook the leaves, so that Helena thought each tree whispered to its neighbour.

Standing above the rock pit, she felt as if the moon was a spotlight for her performance in a drama where the eyes of the world could penetrate her increasingly transparent exterior. The dusty edge of earth which suspended her above the sloping rock pit scraped and irritated the exposed skin between her toes. She kicked a pebble over the edge and shared in the hollow sound of its descent.

"Besides," she said, turning to look sharply at Nick, "there is nothing new or spontaneous about this anymore." She opened her hand and dramatically gestured to the blanket which separated them.

She paused to gauge Nick's response. She was sorry for the cut she had inflicted. Truly, she did care about Nick, but right now she wanted him to strike back, to open a wound so that her guilt might find a passage to drip slowly from her body.

As Helena had feared, Nick continued to stare at his feet: silent, expressionless, non-committal. Nick had a tortoise-shell to shield himself from confrontation, and the fall-out which ensued; this protective shell was called indifference.

"I can't keep this a secret forever," she began. "People in town are always watching me — I'm an outsider, a kind of novelty you might purchase from a tourist shop. The other workers at the bar are wondering why I never stay to have drinks after work anymore. Tonight, that college student, Daniel Green, he was flirting with me again and offered me a late night cruise on his 'love boat'."

Nick watched as Helena bent over and snapped up her lace panties from the ground. Her dark, curly hair danced wildly on her tanned shoulders. She was only twenty-eight; Nick was thirty-six. As Nick watched Helena hastily pull the panties up her legs and over her naked buttocks, he allowed a cautious smile to escape.

“It’s not that I want to go with Daniel or anything like that. I mean he’s at least five years younger than me — and I’ve had my share of Daniel Greens — truthfully, the Daniel Greens of the world are like fire-crackers that flare when first lit but quickly turn out to be duds. The thing is, is that Daniel is too young and arrogant to think that I’m not interested in him.” Helena was searching the area now for the black bra that matched her panties.

“He was teasing me all night,” she continued. “He said I must be hiding something, or *someone*.” Helena was becoming frustrated with Nick and with the fact that she could not find her bra.

“Nick,” she snapped, “are you listening to what I’m saying? If that single minded puppy can sniff out our secret, then what’s stopping other people from becoming suspicious? Evelyn — my landlady — she must wonder why I don’t go to my room until well after closing time. And *your wife*, well . . . she must be asking questions . . . or something?”

Helena watched as Nick’s head raised and his brown eyes widened. She had struck the proverbial chord and waited in anticipation for the sound of his response.

On the outside, Nick seemed comfortable with a disordered lifestyle. From his personal appearance to his home and vehicle, Nick was small town. His shirts were always well-worn, the colours faded, the arm-pits stained. His trousers, usually a pair of green work pants, hung loosely around his hips. The thighs of his pants were stained where he wiped his dirty hands. The pants were too long; the hems were fraying from dragging on the ground and catching the heels of his steel-toed boots. Even the seat of his pants still showed the oil residue deposited by the dirty rags he slid in his pockets while trying to fix his vehicles.

At home, the large yard around his house was like a graveyard for abandoned cars, trucks, tractors and out-door vehicles. Nick was fascinated by machines. He spent hours tinkering and attempting to fix the lifeless heaps of metal.

Even his own vehicle, the rusted orange Ford pickup truck, appeared to be a ghost on wheels. The wind-shield was cracked from the driver's side to the passenger's side. The door panels had rusted holes where the skin of the truck was peeling away, as if it had some deadly flesh eating disease. Inside the truck, the air was stale with the smell of cigarettes and dried perspiration. On the passenger's side, rust had eaten a hole in the floor. Nick used the hole as a garbage chute to drop cigarette butts, pop cans and plastic wrappers out of the vehicle while he was driving. Even with the convenience of the hole in the floor to dump his garbage, Nick's truck was still littered with trash.

Yet, even with a disordered life on the outside, Nick feared disruption. Amidst the stained surface and the stagnant junk — Nick found security. When his wife Mary wasn't working at the convenience store or watching the kids, she was continually cleaning up after the trail of messes which Nick left behind. She rarely raised a complaint about the amount of time he spent at the bar with his friends, or in the yard working on his vehicles. She also did not care that Nick kept a stack of *Playboy* magazines on the top shelf of the closet behind the old sweaters he no longer wore. In fact, she even sat and looked through them with him, sometimes reading him passages from a story or article, all in an attempt to make sure he was satisfied. Mary was a plain, yet attractive woman, who may not have matched Nick's desire for sexual performance, but was at least willing to try and please him within the bounds of reason.

Nick was also the father of two children, a thirteen year old girl named Sally and a ten year old boy named Christopher. Sally was still in her tomboy stage; she always held up her hair under a Toronto Blue Jays hat which her father had purchased

during a summer trip to the *big city*. Christopher was a shy boy, with fair, freckled skin and light, dirty blonde hair which would darken as he got older. Nick's mother always said that Christopher looked just like Nick when he was a boy — she took out pictures to prove her point.

Christopher's attachment to his father was obvious. He spent most of his time trying to impress him — following him around the yard like a shadow, racing to the garage at his father's request for clean rags, lugging the oil pan across the lengthy yard to be dumped behind the shed. Christopher was zealous in his attempt to make his father proud. The truth was, Nick was proud of his offspring. Though not always a sensitive or approachable parent, he was a proud father nonetheless.

When Helena insinuated that their secret affair might be exposed, Nick could no longer be indifferent to her attempts at confrontation; he was defenceless against threats to the security he had built around his family life.

"Now, you just *slow* down, Helena," Nick said slowly and deliberately. His voice turned slightly gritty, like a dog who issues a warning growl; the growl is only a fraction of the dog's capability.

"All the nights we spent talking at the bar. You filling my glass with rye and ginger. Me offering you cigarettes. Never once in our talks of where you had travelled in Europe, or where I would like to go . . . of the ancient castles which we were fascinated with, and wanted to visit. Never once during the last month of coming out here . . . of having this . . . this thing. Not once did we ever talk about this going anywhere. Not in my mind." Nick's voice gradually lost its grit, returning back to its comfortable, casual tone.

"You know I have a family," he continued, starting to smile at Helena, like a young child who wants to play. "You know I can't leave that — I can't — you said you understood. Now come on. Let's not fight. It's getting late. We should go." He lifted himself up and pulled out Helena's missing bra from behind his back. He

cautiously walked towards her. He planned to win her silence through uncomplicated play. Like a kid with an elastic band, Nick snapped Helena's shoulder with her bra.

For a moment, Helena almost submitted to Nick's playful ploy; she had fallen for it in the past. He had a special skill for turning everything into a joke. His presence had the power of a deep, calm breath that soothes as it is released. He eased tense situations with his unassuming, boyish smirk, or his natural ability to understate the complexity and magnitude of tense situations. He was easy to be around, and this made him likable.

Helena was initially attracted to Nick's simple, uncomplicated aura. She was always a tangled ball of tight knots, too complicated to be unravelled. Like a cat that bats a ball of yarn across the floor trying to free the yarn from itself, Helena travelled the world trying to pull the tangled ball free.

Europe was the likely, if not somewhat trendy first choice after university. Then came the ancient mysteries of Asia, followed by the ruggedness of New Zealand. Finally, Helena stumbled back to Canada, a place she felt consisted of dull people and dull lives.

She travelled around, stumbling upon Masonville where she took a job as a waitress in the bar. There she discovered Nick, a "stool boy" as the workers called the three or four regular patrons. Nick's simple magic had instantly charmed her, but here, on the edge of the pit, Helena vowed not to be fooled by his strategy to diffuse the tension she had purposefully designed.

"You bastard!" she hissed. "You manipulative, condescending bastard." He recoiled in surprise. She stepped forward offensively and snatched the bra from his startled fingers.

"Have you so easily forgotten how this started? Do you *really* believe you never led me on, led me to believe that this was nothing more than 'forbidden sex?' You sat at the bar hinting that you were secretly unhappy with the constraints of your

life. Hinting that your simple, casual, free nature had been trapped into something, and that your spirit was secretly groaning to be let free — *bullshit!*” she spit, as if she was thrusting the words in his face like a punch.

“Helena, come on now, relax, you’re acting crazy,” Nick pleaded, trying to extinguish her with reason.

“You talked of leaving it all, of getting away, and being free,” Helena charged like a battering ram. “And I fell for it, not because I wanted to start some perfect life with you, but because I wanted to be the hero who rode in on a white horse and saved the person trapped in the tower — you.”

“Helena, calm down, you’re talking gibberish. Someone is going to hear you!” Nick growled with increasing anger and frustration.

“The irony is that you were never trapped. There is no evil witch in this story. No one locked you high up in the tower with no hope for escape. You simply ran up the castle stairs, reached the top floor, and locked the door behind yourself. You loved the security of it all. Then, occasionally, you liked the idea of looking out the castle window and dreaming about the magical worlds beyond. You dreamed of sights unseen, and riches untouched.” Helena paused, and stared at Nick sharply. With sarcasm and the confidence of imminent victory, Helena finished: “And I’m a magical world that has turned too real for you. And now you’re scared that the secrets are about to come out.”

By this time, Nick was hunched back down on the picnic table under the tree. His head pounded. Helena was right, everything had become too real. His jaw clenched with the thought of his wife’s accusing face as she confronted him with the affair. His throat dried when he heard the jeering of the unforgiving school-yard kids who teased his children about their parents’ scandal. His stomach tightened with the thought of people whispering behind his back about the entire sordid affair. And inside, something in Nick snapped.

He leapt forward. “You think you know so much. That you know about the world and that I’m just some dumb, middle-aged man who’s all screwed up. Well, you’re not the expert on people’s lives.”

Stunned, Helena stepped back for the first time all night. Inside, she boiled with excitement, and a sprinkle of fear. “You have no right to judge me.” He took another step forward and Helena was forced to step back cautiously, realizing that the edge of the rock pit was near by.

He huffed with sarcasm, excited by his new found power. “You can’t even keep your own life together. In fact, you’re nothing more than a travelling whore.”

Helena, starting to feel trapped between Nick and the rock pit, lunged forward like a cornered cat. Nick had lost the control which he so often relied upon, and in a moment of fury, he raised his arms and gave her a forceful push backwards.

She fell quickly. There was no slow motion camera angle to capture her descent, no blood curdling scream as she tumbled into the pit. There was simply a hollow cough when Nick’s hands hit Helena’s open chest and forced out a gasp of air. Then she fell backwards over the rock pit’s edge, perhaps hitting her head immediately on a rock which knocked her unconscious. She rolled and tumbled without any grace, until her body stopped at the bottom. For Nick, Helena was only another indistinguishable shadow at the bottom of the pit. The moon was a jester, who tricked his eyes with its light. One moment he thought he could see her body, the next he thought she might simply be another rock.

Nick stood frozen for a moment above the rock pit. He tried to replay the scene again in his mind, hoping somehow the story might change, that if he tried hard enough, he might be able to create a different ending. But the truth was as cold as the night air, and it mocked him like the evening silence which seemed to have eyes.

Quickly, Nick snapped his head left and right, panning the scene for any signs of other people. In his search, his eyes fell upon Helena’s black bra which had fallen

from her hands during the confrontation. Nick bent over slowly to examine the bra; his thoughts were as twisted and mazed as the delicate pattern of lace that he held in his hand. Then, in a moment of foresight, Nick picked up the rest of Helena's clothes and stuffed them into the blanket. He charged towards the road which led to the rock pit's main office. The road forked near the office: one path led to the main door and the other road twisted downwards into the pit. He took the road into the pit, like he did every morning. He ran so fast that he tripped, rolling over three times before he could regain his balance.

When he reached the bottom of the pit, Nick raced towards the area where Helena had fallen. He passed through the trucks and machines which were parked at the bottom of the pit waiting for the workers to return in the morning. In his delirious state, Nick searched each lifeless machine for the eyes which he felt were staring at him, but the trucks were empty.

He finally found her, lying flat on her back. Anyone else may have simply assumed that she was sleeping. Nick crouched above her face and brushed back the hair which covered her eyes. He felt the warmth of blood on his fingers and the grit of earth as he cleared the hair which clung to Helena's face. He quickly raised her head and placed the grey, knit blanket under her neck. Nick placed his hand close to Helena's lips and was surprised to feel a faint kiss of breath upon his skin.

"Helena," he whispered, hoping she might awake, hoping that he might simply help her to the top of the pit, take her home, clean her wounds, and forget that anything had ever happened; yet, Helena did not speak.

Nick was torn with confusion. He knew he had to call for help, or Helena would surely die. He knew that an ambulance was needed, but he also knew that if he made the call then everything would be exposed. Everyone would know about the affair: his wife, his kids, his family, his friends — everyone would know. Then, everything he had worked so hard to build would come crashing down in one incredible, earth shattering evening.

affair: his wife, his kids, his family, his friends — everyone would know. Then, everything he had worked so hard to build would come crashing down in one incredible, earth shattering evening.

“Helena, please Helena, wake up.” Again he tried hopelessly to call her awake. And now he thought of running. He thought of racing back up the road, getting into his Ford pickup truck, and driving home to crawl into bed with his sleeping wife.

How can I do it? he thought to himself. How can I fix this and still get away?

He stood up quickly. Then, with increasing clarity, bent down again and retrieved the blanket which acted like a suitcase for all of Helena’s belongings. With the blanket under his arm, Nick turned and ran back up the winding road of the rock pit.

Orvel Peterson crouched in the woods as the man bolted down the road to the quarry. He was still shocked by the sudden fall of the woman above the pit. As the man raced by, Orvel thought his face was familiar, but he could not distinguish it in the darkness.

For a moment, he thought of following the man into the quarry to help him try and save the woman; however, he changed his mind when he considered the possibility of explaining why he was there. In Orvel’s experience, he had discovered that people didn’t always take what he had to say very seriously. He did not function well with others.

Despite his distrust of people, he was forced to deal with the residents of Masonville on a regular basis when he tried to sell vegetables each summer.

Orvel discovered the art of gardening after he moved into the trailer in the woods. He had very little money for food; collecting bottles, cans, glasses and plastic

for recycling was not a very dependable source of living. In the woods, he cleared some land and planted different kinds of vegetables. Orvel discovered his natural ability for growing life. First, he planted carrots and radishes. The next year, he cleared more land and added onions and cucumbers. The year after that he stuck sticks in the ground to grow tomato plants, and every year his garden grew.

In a few years, Orvel had managed to clear a large area of land which he used for gardening. Each section was systematically divided for all the different vegetables he now grew. Each morning he walked between the rows, picking weeds and showering the earth with water from Sloan's River. As Orvel walked through the rows, he was always accompanied by one or two of his many cats. His trailer was home to over a dozen cats. They slept under his trailer, or climbed up on his window sills to rest in the midday sun. The cats moved freely through the trailer, climbing through an open window, or entering through the door which Orvel kept open for them.

When he first tried to sell his vegetables in the Masonville streets, people were afraid to buy them. He carried the bags of vegetables in his bicycle basket and peddled through the streets. Everyone assumed that Orvel had stole them from a farmer's field, but word soon got out that the vegetables were not only cheap, they were also good. He never filled a bank account with money from vegetable sales, but it was enough to keep him fed during the winter. The image of Orvel Peterson riding his bike through Masonville streets became a familiar picture. Year after year, he heard the familiar phrase as he peddled his vegetables to prospective buyers: *There goes Crazy Orvel again*, they would say.

Orvel's response was as dependable as a sunrise or a sunset.

I ain't crazy, an' I got papers to prove it!

And he did have the papers, official medical documents which certified his sanity were tucked inside his coat pocket. He carried the document everywhere. He

held it tight inside his pocket like a shield against any hecklers who meant to throw stones against the soundness of his mind. *I ain't crazy*, he would defend. *I ain't crazy and I got papers*.

Orvel underwent psychiatric testing shortly after people realized he had taken an abandoned trailer as his home. Mary, Nick's wife who worked at *Baker's Variety Store & More*, was the real catalyst for the testing. Orvel frequented the shop daily. He brought bags of pop bottles which he collected from ditches and garbage cans around town. He always plopped his muddy bottles on Mary's clean counter and asked for his refund. Sometimes he brought as many as twenty to thirty bottles at a time.

Orvel's hygiene habits were never regular: his hair was knotted, his clothes discoloured with perspiration, and his long fingernails were home to thick, black dirt. When Mary got ready for bed at night she liked to talk to her husband Nick about the things they had done that day: it was a small indulgence which she felt was necessary to somehow try and stay connected. Sometimes, Nick even listened, as he lay in bed contemplating the best way to approach the topic of sex with Mary. During some of these conversations Mary would complain to Nick about her day at work and her confrontations with Orvel. "He reeks of urine!" she would say with a disgusted tone. "And the head lice practically jumped off his scalp and into my hair," she complained. "Something has to be done about it."

Finally, totally bewildered by Orvel's appearances at the store, Mary called her sister Jo who worked at the Doctor's office and complained about how *dirty* and *smelly* Orvel Peterson was getting. Jo didn't want to get involved, but considering her relationship with Mary, she felt obligated to help. The next morning Orvel was brought in by the police and forced to go through a thorough shower and de-lousing. Orvel hated when other people got involved with his business. Jo happened to let it slip that Mary at the variety store had done the complaining. Orvel was determined

to teach her a lesson.

The next day Orvel entered the store with muddy boots that dripped on Mary's recently mopped floor. He emptied out his bags of bottles on to of the counter, leaking old pop that stuck to the unprotected lottery tickets like syrup on pancakes. Mary nearly lost her mind.

"You filthy bastard!" she screeched. "I'm calling the police. I don't want you to come here ever again."

"Go 'head," Orvel yelled back. "You ought to mind your own business, or else you might find your store burned down some day," he half threatened, and left the store without collecting any money for his bottles.

Later that day the police came and took Orvel to the station. They charged him for threatening Mary and made him go through a complete psychiatric assessment. That's when Orvel got his papers which said he was legally sane. Mary later dropped the charges, but she never forgot Orvel's threat. Orvel never forgave Mary either, but he was grateful for having the papers to validate his sanity.

On this night though, time passed slowly for Orvel as he waited in the woods for some sign from the dark quarry below. His thoughts became muddled with questions about the nature of the couple's relationship.

Somethin's not right about it, he told himself. Normal people don't hav'ta sneak around so much.

Shoulda known secrets can't be secrets forever. I always tellin myself secrets can't be secrets forever; sooner er later they gotta become truth.

But it ain't none a my business. I always saying, stay outa other peoples' business.

As Orvel tried to pin his thoughts around the evening events, he suddenly saw the man emerge from the pit, running full force towards the road where Orvel knew the truck was parked. He ran with a blanket wrapped under his arms like a running

back carrying a ball. Orvel was surprised that the man did not stop and try to get into the main office of the quarry to use the phone. He decided the man must be racing to get help. Yet, something in the way the man ran towards the road bothered him. As the man ran he kept turning his head backwards and to the side, as if he were looking for someone. It was as if the man was running to escape, not to get help.

Orvel heard the truck door open and then close. The engine started with a grind and then the truck spit gravel as it quickly turned and headed away from the quarry. He sat and wondered when he might hear the sirens from an ambulance or a police car, but the sirens never came. His curiosity and concern stopped him from leaving the rock pit.

Orvel waited in the clearing for what he figured was an hour. He hated when people got involved in other peoples' business, but he could not sit by knowing the woman may be dying alone at the bottom of the pit.

Gotta tell somebody. Can't just leave her there, but I can't go into town either. That man musta went to get somebody. He couldn't just leave her. I'll just wait awhile longer.

Orvel waited another half hour before he finally went to the main office, broke into the front door, and dialed 911.

The next day Orvel Peterson was charged with the murder of Helena Stark, a little known waitress who had only been in Masonville for a month. The police found her at the bottom of the quarry, her head cracked open, and only a pair of panties covering her otherwise naked body. Word passed quickly through the streets and into the local shops. The story went that Orvel must have waited in her vehicle after work and then forced her to drive to the quarry with a gun or maybe a knife. He did unthinkable things to her no doubt. Then he threw her over the pit, or perhaps she fell

over trying to fight him off. And what of the missing bra and waitress uniform that Helena must have been wearing that night? But of course, Orvel could have easily hid her missing clothes somewhere in the woods which he knew more thoroughly than most people know their own backyard. But why did he make the phone call to the police? No doubt the pain of guilt for his sins finally forced Orvel to break down and call for help. Few mentioned the story that Orvel told claiming that there was another man who was involved with the woman.

The local police took Orvel's story lightly, although they did search the quarry for any signs that might have been left behind by the unknown man, but it was impossible to distinguish foot prints or tire tracks from those left by the workers each day at the quarry. They also brainstormed on who in town might be the owner of the mysterious truck, but so many of the farmers and residents had trucks that it could have been anyone. Eventually they easily put Orvel's story to rest and depended on the court system to make the right decision.

The rest of the people in town found it easy to blame Orvel as well. "I'm not surprised," Mary told the local newspaper reporter. "He's always been crazy. A few years back *Crazy Orvel* threatened to burn the store down — and with me in it."

Five months after Helena's death, Orvel was acquitted of the murder by a hung jury who wanted to believe he committed the crime, but were never given enough evidence. The fact that hair samples from the car and semen from the body did not match created enough reasonable doubt.

After the case, local people began to question the integrity of Helena's character. "That girl was no saint," her old landlady told the local paper. "That semen could have belonged to anyone. And we just can't know what happened that night."

Although Orvel was acquitted on the charges of murder, he was forced to undergo psychiatric testing again, and this time he was admitted into a mental

institution despite the papers he kept in his coat pocket.

In the town of Masonville people started to speculate that it may have been someone from out of town who committed the murder. Others assumed that the young woman, *a bit of a flake to begin with* they said, might have jumped over the edge of her own will.

Nick stopped frequenting the local bar. In fact, he also stopped spending weekends in the yard, playing with his vehicles. He went to work each day in the pit, rummaging through the earth and eating into the ground with his machine. After work, Nick raced home to his family. His wife Mary was shocked by the change in him. Even the workers at the quarry said that he wasn't the same lovable Nick who kept the guys laughing during lunch hour. His mother-in-law claimed that he had finally matured.

Nick's character seemed to undergo a miraculous transformation; consequently, people were completely shocked when Mary broke the news that she was leaving Nick. She told people, even her mother, that it was because they had just grown apart. They separated shortly after Orvel was acquitted and sent away to the institution. The truth was, that Mary had found a black bra caught behind the seat of Nick's truck. She had gone into the truck looking for a shirt that Nick said he couldn't find. She had pushed the seat forward under the assumption that Nick may have thrown it there after work and forgotten about it. At first glance she over-looked the bra which was brown with dirt and blended into the soil that had built up on the floor. Yet, on a second glance she caught the weaving outlines of lace. She picked up the bra and immediately realized it was not her own. She tried to justify the bra's appearance as a future gift from Nick, but she realized it was not even close to her size. In her mind, despite how hard she tried, Mary could not justify the appearance of the bra.

As Mary rubbed the dirty lace between her fingers, a flash of truth passed through her mind. She then marched into the house and demanded an explanation from Nick.

He caved immediately. He told her everything about the affair, and about how Helena accidentally fell over the edge of the pit. He even told her about how he had buried the rest of her clothes underneath one of the old cars he had in the backyard.

Nick let Mary have the house and agreed to a settlement for her and the kids. He rented a vacant one bedroom apartment and spent his evenings reading travel brochures and home improvement magazines. His two children seemed to sense his role in their parents' divorce and they harboured a bitterness which even they could not understand.

Orvel's trailer still sits in Browning's Bush. Groups of teenagers go into the bush with their cases of beer hidden in gym bags and sit outside the crumbling trailer. Some go indoors and search through the aging junk that Orvel had collected. In the trailer they drink the beer, smoke cigarettes and tell each other stories. Sometimes they tell stories about *Crazy Orvel*, but most times they just talk about the things they dream of doing and the places they dream of going.

Orvel's garden is overrun with weeds, but in the weeds you can sometimes find an onion plant that grew even without Orvel's attention. Even the cats still walk through the old garden. They comb the river bank during the day and the woods at night. Each cat separately searches for scraps of food. And at night, when the moon rises in the dark sky, the cats gather together and sleep underneath the empty trailer.

Fish-Flies

As Jerry left the 401 and merged into the exit ramp lane, he was struck immediately by a sense of relief which came from the promising knowledge of completing a long journey. At the end of the exit lane he brought the car to a complete stop before turning on to the provincial highway. Like a wayward traveller whose spirits are lifted by a familiar structure, or a recognizable road sign, Jerry felt a surge of adrenaline summoned by the sight of familiar landmarks and landscape.

On the left hand side of the road was a large farm house with a red and green barn. Above the barn was a sign: "Drummond & Sons." The paint had faded and chipped, the roof needed minor repairs, but it was still an exact replica of the picture which had been stored in Jerry's gallery of memories. Farther ahead, to Jerry's right, was the remainder of an old farm house long since abandoned, the crumbling foundation comprised of field stones harvested from the nearby fields. The crumbling mortar was the final testament to the human presence which once inhabited the place. Beside the foundation was a cement grain bin without a roof. It was marked by crack lines in the mortar like wrinkles on an old man's face.

Past the ruins, Jerry saw a tractor ploughing through an empty field. The tractor was turning the soil in preparation for the planting season. A line of birds followed the plough. The line began with a few scattered groups of less ambitious birds searching the turned soil a fair distance behind the tractor. The number of birds increased near the freshly tilled soil. The largest group of birds danced and capered directly behind the plough, getting as close as possible without actually being caught by the deadly turning parts.

Jerry turned down the car radio as he passed a green road sign which read "Masonville." The road curled to the left as the contour of the land rose into a hill. At the top of the hill, the local cemetery came into view. The cemetery was shaped

like a long rectangle: there were many rows, but the lines were short with only eight headstones in each row. The even rows of headstones dipped and turned with the height of the land. As Jerry made the curved descent down the hill, he looked at the cemetery and remembered that the last time he had made the long journey from British Columbia to southern Ontario was when his father died three years earlier.

The road straightened and Jerry knew Masonville was near because there were more and more houses to look at. Once he passed the lumber yard, Jerry instinctively began to slow down for the reduced speed zone. On Masonville's main street, traffic became thick, and Jerry was struck by a sense of familiarity. He quickly recognized the tall yellow brick buildings of his youth, built over a hundred years earlier when the farming town was just starting to prosper. The yellow brick was endemic to the area. All the old houses, including Jerry's family home, were made of the brick. The distinctive colour was produced from the clay unique to the region.

The general appearance of the buildings remained the same. They were blocked together tightly on the main street. Each building had two floors: the first floor was for local merchants and the top floor with the tall rectangular windows was for apartments. Jerry remembered how these top level apartments were labelled "Welfare Street" because they were usually inhabited by people who were unemployed or down on their luck.

"*Baker's Variety Store & More*" had moved to a new location and the always controversial teenage arcade had reopened in the old barber shop, but the overall appearance had not changed since his youth. Even the placid pace of life, a pace he had despised as a teenager and then longed for as an adult, was the same: there was the mother and child who confidently crossed the street in between the slow moving vehicles; the group of elderly men who stood in front of the post office and smoked their pipes; and the three teenagers who sat on the wooden benches with their walkmans and enjoyed the first warm days of summer holidays. Even after so many

years away, Jerry recognized many of the faces he passed. It was a strange feeling; in one way he wanted not to be noticed, and in another, he hoped people might recognize and remember him.

Halted at a stop light, Jerry read the large information sign with the black arrow that was always placed in front of the post office. The first line announced: "It's a boy! Congratulations Mark & Shirley." The following message read "Cemetery Decrations to be held on June 29th." Jerry smiled at the missing letter "o" in the word "decorations." Jerry looked up to the post office's large circular clock and the time read 3:04 p.m. It struck Jerry that the traffic was heavy because the factory where many of the residents were employed had just changed shifts.

Jerry turned right at the post office. He passed by the sign and thought of his mother who had probably already planned for the two of them to go to Mass on Sunday and then take part in the Cemetery decorations that followed. He pictured her spending the entire day in preparation for his home coming. She would have certainly prepared his old room for him: changed the linen, freshened pillows, made space in the dresser drawers. The house would smell of baked goods: apple pies, raisin tarts, and peanut butter cookies. The crock pot would be packed with a splendid roast, cooking slowly with plump potatoes, turnip, and carrots. She would have gone to the grocery store too, and purchased all the things she could remember that Jerry had said he once liked. He smiled at the probability of a box of "Life" Cereal in the kitchen cupboard. He didn't eat cereal anymore, but he wouldn't tell her that.

On his way home, Jerry saw another sign placed in the ground with a wooden stake: "Masonville Fair Starts Saturday, June 28th." He continued down the road and the large metal rides with the vibrant colours came into view above the roof tops of the homes which lined either side of the street. He reached the end of the road, and throughout the arena and park grounds were placed the many booths and rides of the Masonville Fair. Workers were busy putting the final touches on the Fair grounds:

a last coat of paint to cover a blemish on a sign, a few more stuffed animals to decorate a game booth, and some minor tests and adjustments on each ride. Jerry passed slowly by the Fair grounds and then travelled two blocks before parking in his mother's driveway; the long ride home was complete.

That night at the dinner table, after his mother had made a great fuss over him, Jerry told her about his future plans.

"I'll have to stay here for awhile. If that's alright with you?"

"Of course it is," she said, relieved that he had made the decision which she not so secretly desired. "I think it's for the best. You stay here and take it easy for awhile. I have so many plans."

"I'm sure you do," Jerry said lovingly.

"You just never mind. Let your mother do what she does best." Jerry couldn't argue. "For your birthday tomorrow . . ."

"No, Mom. No parties."

"No. No parties. Good heavens, of course no parties. I'm going to make you a big dinner to put some meat on your bones and then fatten you up with some home made cake. In the afternoon we can go do some shopping if you want."

"Actually, I already have plans for tomorrow."

"You do?" she said. The surprise and interest in her voice was obvious. "With who?"

"Just me. I passed by the arena and saw the old Fair was in town and thought I might check it out."

"Alone?"

"Yes, mom. People are capable of doing things by themselves."

"Well I know that. You're not planning on going on the rides, are you?"

“Mom, you have to give me space or this won’t work.”

“OK,” she said, turned off by the realization that she was pushing too hard. “Just promise not to over do it.”

At the fair the next afternoon, Jerry watched as the June breeze twirled the plastic petals of a hand-held windmill and blurred the colours of blue and red into black. The wheel was clutched by the smooth, unwrinkled hands of a young boy. His nails were dull white and his stubby fingers seemed to deny shape. The young mother carried a large blue-swirled cotton candy in one hand and pushed the baby’s cart with the other. The air was saturated with carnival sounds: the merry-go-round music bounced in the air; luring game-shop keepers promised prizes; young excited voices demanded to experience the carnival world.

Jerry stood in the ticket booth line and casually watched the woman and her young boy as they moved through the bustling crowd. They seemed lured by the merry-go-round music where majestic horses danced in a see-saw motion. From the cotton candy wagon, a pair of boys ran to the young mother and pleaded for expedience; they were anxious to forego any lengthy lines at the beloved tilt-a-whirl.

Jerry watched the mother try to convince her boys to be patient, but the two over-zealous participants would have nothing to do with patience today. She surrendered with a smile. Content with their mother’s capitulation, the two boys bolted for the desired ride. The woman sighed; she appeared tired. The child in the carriage reminded his mother about his needs by flopping his windmill on to the ground and bellowing out a sudden, piercing scream. She picked up the windmill and placed it on a rack under the baby carriage and then renewed her journey to the merry-go-round.

In the ticket line, Jerry witnessed the entire family scene. He followed the woman until she blended into the crowd. He liked to watch people because people interested him. He was also skilled at something akin to second-sight. He never

believed in the power to peer through crystal balls and discover a person's past or future; however, he had a special gift for observing human interaction and then reconstructing a fairly accurate narrative for that person's past.

The special skill was discovered when Jerry was a child. It started as a game he played walking through shopping malls with his mother, or during bicycle rides with his father through the streets of Masonville. The game was called "guess the story behind the picture." He watched the different scenes of people and through their body language or fragments of conversation he designed stories behind each scene.

As he watched the young woman and her family, the story behind their picture began to formulate in his mind. In the young woman's gentle smile he discovered love and devotion; in her soft sigh he perceived sadness. It was not difficult to discover the missing link in the familiar family scene; there was no father present. It could be that the father could not come. Perhaps he had to work, or had previous engagements. Yet, Jerry never pictured this in the story he developed. It could have been separation or a divorce, but again, he imagined something more. There was a tired, listlessness about her walk. There was the quick surrender with the two boys, as if she felt she had no right to refuse them, no right to deny them of anything since they had already been denied so much. His story for the young woman included a husband who died suddenly.

The death must have been recent he told himself. She had come to the carnival to escape the house, and to provide her children with a fun outing to get their minds away from the event which haunted them. Of course, she probably denied her need for some small glimpse of happiness and planned the trip under the pretence of pleasing the children.

"Can I help you?" questioned an impatient voice. Jerry looked to the ticket booth where a young girl waited for his request. She caught him off-guard, slightly vulnerable.

“Ah — two tickets, please.”

The young girl had brownish-blond hair. It was the kind of hair young girls always wanted to dye, staying up nights with watery-red eyes, wondering what they had done to deserve hair that wasn't pure blonde. Her hair was teased out and up, big and stiff with hair spray. Jerry immediately sensed her impatience. She seemed to be in a hurry, but for what, Jerry could not imagine.

“Two dollars,” she said. As an after thought she added, “Please.” She was wearing a black and white concert jersey which he recognized as the shirts he used to wear as a teenager. They were imitation shirts bought from *K-Mart* or *Biway*, but they were not the real shirts from actual concerts. He received his tickets and paid the anxious young girl. He stepped back from the ticket booth slowly enough to irritate the next man in line. The man had an overly thick moustache, an over weight wife, and two overly energetic children.

“Come on, Dad!” one of the children snapped. “We'll never make the Tilt-a Whirl.” The boy jerked and tugged at his father's hand, unable to contain the excitement which came out of him like electric shocks from a broken chord.

“Sorry,” Jerry said meekly.

“Hmm!” the man grunted. When he stepped in line the boy tugged hard at his arm again.

“Dad!”

The man turned to his wife who was holding the hand of the other boy. “Do you think you could take him for one minute?” he snapped

“I already have one,” she said. “Can't you handle it?” The boy she held looked up to Jerry and pointed at the red ball cap on his head.

“Don't point!” she said, and lightly slapped the back of his hand. The boy began to cry.

Jerry left the squabble at the ticket booth and entered the fair grounds where familiar images greeted his eyes. He saw the line of game booths: red stars on white backboards marked with tiny dart holes; rows of bright pink fish bowls that people tried to fill with golden ping-pong balls; lines of over-sized stuffed animals attracting children like moths to a flame. One end of the fair ground was a picnic area with teeter-totters and wooden swings. The grassy field was littered with wrappers that had once disguised leaking hot dogs or sticky cotton candy. On the other side of the fair, the land of rides spread out like shops in a market place.

Of all the rides, the Ferris wheel was the most distinctive. It stood above all others and reached up and into the summer sky. The giant rotating circle with the flashing coloured lights was the tallest, most common ride at any small town Fair.

The Carnival scene was all familiar to Jerry. The annual Fair in Masonville officially opened the summer season. He had been to the Fair many times as a boy, but had not returned since moving away from home. The Fair had always been extra special to him because it was held during the week of his birthday. He had decided to go to the Fair this year as a present to himself.

At the cotton candy wagon, he purchased a stick and watched as the attendant swirled his cardboard cone around the revolving machine. The blue strands were wrapped together until they were plump and puffy around the now almost entirely hidden cone. He walked to the picnic area with his candy and chose to sit on a swing. The area was empty except for two young girls who shared a cigarette at a table. He watched as the older girl glanced through the crowd, then assured of secrecy, brought her hand out from under the table and took a quick, anxious drag from the cigarette. Then she handed the cigarette to her younger friend by passing it under the table like a secret note in class.

Jerry released a guarded smile as he watched the actions of the two rebellious girls, inspired by the rare quality of the carnival, testing the limits between

adolescence and adulthood. He remembered the night he and Ashley, his first serious girl-friend, had sat together sharing a cigarette on the swings. The coloured lights of the carnival painted the sky like a canvas. He had enjoyed the artistic quality of the night. He held Ashley under his school jacket until they both fell asleep in the grass. Jerry remembered waking up to a dark sky save the stars and a small slice of the moon. The paint had faded. The coloured lights withdrawn. Realizing how late it was, he tried to wake an unwilling Ashley. Even though they were late, when they kissed goodnight they took their time, softly with eyes closed.

Sitting on the swing again, he remembered the young mother he had watched earlier in the day. There was something about her. He knew this instinctively. He thought of his special skill to find the story behind the picture, the skill he had harnessed over the years, and still could not decide whether it was a gift or a curse. He always felt the emotions which accompanied the experiences behind each face he met. Jerry also saw things for himself. He was in touch with the random thoughts that ran through his mind like music in an elevator. He was able to organize the thoughts, to put the scrap pieces of words and pictures into something whole, something meaningful. Yet, these thoughts sometimes remained scrambled in the mind like pieces which just couldn't seem to find a place in the puzzle. Lately, Jerry couldn't seem to put the pieces back together. He thought the Fair might help him sort things out.

Of course, his mother would be over-protective if he moved home. She had been very maternal when he was a boy, but now she would be even more motherly, watching his diet, religiously changing his linen, demanding more loads of laundry to wash or shirts to iron. This was never an unselfish act; Jerry's mother gained a feeling of self-worth by helping him. She had always defined herself by her skills as a mother and a wife. With his father deceased for over three years, and no children at home, his mother desperately looked for something to nurture. This was part of the

reason she had made such big plans to prepare for his birthday.

His birthday had always been a point of direction in his life; consequently, his birthday sometimes scared him. The week Jerry turned seven, he vacationed at a cottage with his parents. It was a typical family tourist attraction under the guise of a rustic campground. In fact the cottage was more like a hotel and the area was filled with public beaches, market shops, and entertainment venues; there were no secluded campgrounds, private fishing ponds, or campfire celebrations. Nevertheless, Jerry always loved the beach resort.

He remembered quite vividly the day he found a penny while playing on the beach. He was sifting through the sand with a plastic sieve when he heard the clink of the penny. He shook the sieve more rapidly until the copper penny caught his eye. He was so excited about his discovery that he brought the penny to his father.

“It’s a sign of good luck,” his father explained. “Any time you find a penny it means the rest of the day will bring good luck.” Excited by the prospect of good fortune, Jerry spent the afternoon burying pennies in the sand then returning to find them.

Jerry was allowed to open his presents before the birthday dinner which promised cake and ice cream. The presents all met the standards of a seven year old and he was pleased with the good fortune he had created for himself. While he waited at the dinner table for the cake with the candles and the ice cream, a waitress came to the table with the message of an urgent call.

Later that night, as his father raced home down the highway, he learned that his grandfather had died that morning after a three year battle with cancer. On the mostly silent ride home, Jerry could not rest, despite the sleep which weighed on his eyelids; instead, he thought about the many things his grandfather had taught him. The lesson that stood out most in his memory was when his grandfather showed him how to determine a tree’s age by counting the circles in the wood. He couldn’t help

but think that his grandfather's death had something to do with his birthday.

The following year, Jerry attended an Uncle's funeral the day after his own birthday. This time, when people gathered in small groups outside the church, he knew what the word cancer meant. He also knew what it meant when they said: "It runs in the family." In his mind, Jerry's fate was finally sealed when a few years later he was watching television before his friends were expected to come over and celebrate his eleventh birthday. His heart nearly stopped when he heard the news that the courageous Terry Fox had died that morning of June 28th. For Jerry, it all meant something; it all worked out into a pattern in his mind. He knew from then on that someday he would die of cancer on his birthday. Of course he never told anyone, even when he was younger, and didn't understand that thinking that way was wrong. He never told anyone because he feared that speaking the words out loud would bring bad luck, would make it happen sooner.

At the fair, he rocked gently on a swing in the picnic area and rolled his toes back and forth in the sand. Waking from his thoughts, he noticed a small black ant navigating through the sand. He blocked the ant's progress with his shoes. The ant ran frantically back and forth in an attempt to escape this sudden wall. Then, without thinking, Jerry buried the ant under a hill of sand pushed together by his feet. After a few moments of surveying the sand pile, he watched as the ant struggled out through the top of the sand like a man climbing out from underneath a pile of scrap and rubble. He covered the ant again. He did this twice more then finally allowed the exhausted ant to free itself completely. It sat on the ant hill, too weakened to move.

Jerry found himself thinking of a monarch butterfly he grasped within his young fingertips and placed inside a mason jar with holes through the lid for circulation. The problem occurred when he decided to release the insect: no matter

how high he threw the butterfly into the air, it always dropped to the grass. Its wings had been tainted and flight was no longer an option. He thought of the ant and his need to control it. He regretted it now, but also couldn't change his desire to be in control of the ant's world: a world of sand hills the size of mountains, moving barricades, and a world where Jerry was the size of the heavens. He wondered if ants could see into the clouds.

He left the half eaten cotton candy cone on a swing beside him. He rose and was greeted with a feeling of nausea. He stopped and held the cold steel chain links of the swing. After a few seconds with his eyes closed, the feeling passed. He adjusted his ball cap and moved on.

Inside the crowd, he shuffled aimlessly, content to watch the routes and patterns of other people. He noticed that many people watched him as well. At least they gave him many second glances. He didn't mind; after all, he watched them as well.

His hands fumbled in his pockets. He felt the papered edges of the two tickets he purchased from the unhappy girl at the ticket booth. The only ride he planned to go on was the ferris-wheel. When he reached the ride, he was not surprised to find that the waiting line was short. The ferris-wheel had lost its attraction with the introduction of new, more exciting rides.

The young man operating the machine locked Jerry into a seat. As he bent close to the handle bars, the young man gave him an inquisitive look then quickly turned away in embarrassment.

"Make sure you keep your hands under the seat." he said as he pushed Jerry's chair along and waited for the next chair to come down. He said the lines without emotion, like an over rehearsed speech. It was obvious that the young man didn't think much of the ride. Jerry thought he would have preferred the tilt-a-whirl. Perhaps he was a friend of the dirty blonde at the ticket booth.

The ride moved slowly at first, one cart at a time until the entire wheel was filled. Jerry's cart stopped at the top of the wheel. This was his favourite part. The entire Fair was visible from the top of the wheel. He could see the swarms of people mingling through the assortment of rides. He could see the roof tops of the suburban houses which lined the Masonville streets. He could even see the roof top of his own house where his mother probably sat on the couch knitting in silence, worrying about her son, but taking pride in the fact that she had prepared him a wonderful birthday dinner.

He also saw the young mother and her children sitting at the picnic table where the two rebellious girls had shared a forbidden cigarette. The mother held the baby in her arms while the other two children were fighting over something he could not picture. The young woman was eating a sandwich with her one free hand. Jerry guessed bologna. She ate the sandwich without looking at it, without enjoying it, only eating it because it was there, it was needed. The baby reached and grabbed a lock of her hair in search of more attention. The mother smiled. Again he recognized the smile. It was not a joyous smile or a spontaneous smile, it was the kind of smile which suggests a calm acceptance of things.

Jerry thought he could like this woman; he thought, perhaps, he could love this woman. It seemed silly to think love might blossom from the sight of a woman eating a bologna sandwich; Jerry knew this, but he liked the idea and refused to let it go. The ferris-wheel cart jolted and he instinctively reached for the bar. The wheel was full and began to spin at a steady pace.

After the ride, Jerry spent the remainder of the afternoon sitting on the swings, hoping to catch another glimpse of the family which had captivated him. It wasn't until night came that he decided to return to his car and make the trip home. His mother was certainly frantic by now.

He left the swing and walked to the parking lot. It wouldn't be easy finding his car hidden within the crowded parking lot, but the street lights were on and he thought it might help. Walking under a street lamp, he was caught by a damp, musky smell. It reminded him of the dead fish that sometimes drifted to the shore during the vacations he spent at the beach resort. He felt a crackling underneath his feet and quickly recognized the sound. A buzzing noise brought his attention to the top of the street lamp. The light seemed hazy, like the moon blurred by a cloudy winter night, as insects swarmed around the source of energy.

Jerry turned his gaze back to the ground and found the scattered bodies of hundreds of fish-flies. At least, that was what Jerry called them: some people called them June-bugs and some people called them fish-flies. Their tiny wings were meshed, as if formed by many tiny strands of thread, and connected to a small larva body much like a butterfly. Yet, these insects did not dawn the vibrant colours of a monarch but instead were a pale tan like the colour of harvested wheat.

This was their season. Each summer, during the month of June, the insects began their pilgrimage off the lake water and into the land where they instinctively gathered near sources of light. In swarms and patches they attached themselves to buildings, or cars, or streetlights and then waited as their inevitable death pursued them as quickly as the wind which swept them off the lake and into the land.

Already, these insects began gathering into lifeless clumps and piles which blew like dust in the air. Soon the clumps would turn into larger piles as the droves of insects made their seasonal exodus. And the wind would sweep them along the walls like sand that gathers into dunes, or snow that drifts beside a building. The smell would last too. For Jerry, fish-flies were another familiar sight and sign of his birthday.

A car door closed and caught Jerry's attention. He saw the young woman returning to her door after securing her baby in a car seat. The woman walked around

the back of her car and Jerry saw her watching her children as she did this task. She opened her own door, sat behind the wheel, then turned the ignition.

Jerry walked to the door of his car and fumbled with his keys taking a final look at the woman as she passed by in her car. Opening the car door, he removed his ball cap and threw it on the back seat. He sat down and looked into the rear view mirror. He saw his own reflection, his own picture, and sighed; he had made it through another birthday.

Cairo is Calling

I was eighteen and bored the first time I took the ferry from Leamington to Pelee Island, advertised as the most southern point in Ontario. It was late July and I had just finished my final year in high school. As I sat on the ferry's top deck with the refreshing Lake Erie wind blowing through my long brown hair, and both my parents and younger brother Bob seated beside me, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to fast forward my life into the month of September when I would turn nineteen and start a new life on my own. I was going to leave home and attend university in Ottawa.

"Rory," my father said, pointing out into the lake. "Look out there, I think I see it now." My father was speaking of the island where he had just purchased an expensive summer cottage for the entire family. Ever since I can remember, my parents dreamed about owning a summer cottage. For my parents, the ten years between the age of thirty and forty blurred together as one long decade; my mother worked an indeterminate number of over-time hours and my father took an inhuman number of case loads in an attempt to save money for this dream. Unfortunately, the spell of the dream they had conjured together was not yet powerful enough to enchant me.

"I see it Dad — it looks small," I said, not trying to hide my lack of enthusiasm.

"Rory," my mother broke in, "stop sulking about it. We're here and you're just going to have to try and enjoy the summer."

I had planned to spend the summer lethargically with friends: beach tanning during the week, outdoor parties on the weekend, and perhaps a blow out bash to Cedar Point as a last hurrah for our storied friendship. The prospect of moving to a new place excited me, a place where I was completely unknown and

undefined, where I could wear a new set of clothes without standing out; yet, I still wanted one last summer in the common clothes I had spent a short lifetime designing.

“I have three glorious weeks before I return to the office,” said my father excitedly. “Our agenda will be full, no doubt.”

“Of course we will have to clean everything: the walls, the cupboards, the ceiling — everything. Rory and I will cover the inside, and little Bob and your Father can work on the yard.”

Since I was the only other woman in the family, my mother always chose me to be her personal household cleaning slave. On the weekends, when all the household chores were scheduled to be completed, my mother composed a list to delegate who would complete each job. Without fail, I was always on her team, working away at the grime in our kitchen cupboards, or vacuuming the television room where everyone seemed to congregate for popcorn or potato chips after dinner and homework were completed. As I chipped away at our household clutter which seemed to build each week, and my mother patrolled the house with her potent list, I often scorned her under my breath for choosing to have a career.

“I could get used to this lifestyle,” my mother said. “Knowing that I don’t have to return to my office for three weeks is quite comforting: no complaints, no conflicts. How will I possibly survive?” she said in a sarcastic, dramatic voice. My mother was the Head of Personnel at the hospital.

“I hope there is girls on this island,” my little brother Bob said. He had just turned fourteen and discovered that girls had more importance than filling the defensive spots in a soccer game. “Jenny decided to ditch me since I won’t be home for most of the summer,” he complained.

“*There are . . . Bobby!*” My mother corrected his increasingly colloquial dialect. Bobby was in the stage where he thought to speak incorrectly showed that he was cool.

“Of course there *are* girls, Bobby,” my father chuckled. “There will be lots of people your age to play with, girls and boys. I even have a fishing trip scheduled through one of my clients. He has a Charter Boat on the island.”

“Besides,” my mother interrupted, “You are far too young to concern yourself with members of the opposite sex.”

When the ferry speaker informed the passengers that it was almost time to dock, we walked down two flights of stairs into the belly of the boat where the vehicles were parked. Inside our Ford Mini-Van, loaded with supplies and materials for the summer, we waited for the mouth of the ferry to be opened so we could drive onto the island.

When we finally exited the ferry, I was surprised by the banality of the area. The word *island* is accompanied by a heap of exotic images constructed through years of print and television; yet, there was nothing remarkable or romantic about the flatness of the land, or the modesty of the sparse rural houses which collectively formed what might be termed the island’s main street. In fact, if it were not for the miles of lake water which surrounded the island, it would have been easy to imagine that we were driving through some small rural farming town in South-western Ontario.

“That’s the local restaurant over there.” my father pointed as we slowly passed one of the few brick buildings with a large outside patio.

“And over there is where the ice cream stand is set up,” my mother said. It was only a small closed shack, like a wooden wagon which could be transported to different areas.

We drove down a dirt road which cradled the island shore. Between the road and the lake were patches of tall green and brown grass. Occasionally we passed different wooden docks where people were swimming and playing in the sand.

We drove for five minutes before we pulled into the driveway of a one level cottage slightly secluded by a copse of trees on either side. The cottage's shingles were painted pale green with cream coloured shutters. It looked small and dirty and I could only shake my head at the thought of spending an entire summer trapped inside.

That morning my mother worked me to the bone. I struck my own quiet revolution: sighing at the mention of each new task, moping through each job bereft of enthusiasm, and constantly staring up at the slow ticking clock. After lunch, my mother grew tired of my antics.

"Rory," she said, "I can't stomach your mood any longer. Get out of the house for the afternoon. Take your bike and ride around the island to see if anything interests you, but please get out of this house."

I was satisfied with my victory and unhitched my bike from the van. I set out down the road towards the lake and kept in contact with the shore. Finally, I left the bike at the side of the road and followed a short dirt path down to a small clearing made of a mixture of sand and pebbles. Ever since I was a child I collected rocks. I took pleasure and great care in sifting through the rocks in search of something special: an interesting shape, an eye-catching colour, a unique texture. As I examined the rocks in search of that special keepsake, I thought I was entirely alone.

"Hello, tourist." a playful male voice startled me. I saw a dark head peaking above the water at the end of the dock. The rest of the body was submerged in the lake.

"Hello," I said after a short gasp. "You caught me by surprise."

"Sorry about that." He paused and then constructed a puzzled look. "Do you play with rocks back home too?"

"Not really," I chuckled, taking his dig light-heartedly.

“My name is Dane,” he said confidently. “I live on the island.”

“My name is Rory, and as you have already so keenly surmised, I’m just visiting.”

“I pride myself on small details,” he mocked. “Plus, you don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to distinguish a tourist from a local. There aren’t any locals here who I don’t know and tourists always make themselves stand out even when they’re trying to be inconspicuous. They’re usually taking pictures, or carrying too much baggage, or stopping to pick flowers — or even stones.”

Dane used the dock as leverage to lift his body out from the water. He raised himself swiftly and I was surprised by the shape and tone of his body. His arms were cut and sculptured. His waist was thin and his stomach flat. He was nothing like the pudgy, childish boys that continually did foolish things in order to impress my friends and me at school; and he was nothing like my wrinkled, hairy father whose body, when recently pulled from the pool, seemed to drip to the ground like the pool water which raced off his skin. Dane took two steps forward then bent over and retrieved a towel from the dock. He patted the thick, dark hair on his head then wrapped the towel around his broad shoulders.

“How long are you here for?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, most of the summer,” I said before realizing that I may have offended him. “No offence,” I quickly blurted. “It’s just not what I had planned for my last summer before University.”

“Sounds like we have a prisoner on our hands. Must be a parent thing — I can relate.”

“A little brother too,” I added.

“Even worse,” Dane laughed.

Just then I heard splashing sounds beyond the dock. I stood up and looked out into the lake. A younger boy was swimming wildly towards us. Dane turned

to watch as the boy pushed towards the dock with his arms stretched out like a swimmer who reaches for the final wall. When he touched the wall his whole body physically released, then he dipped his head under the water, wiped the hair from his face, and returned to the surface breathing heavily.

“It’s about time,” Dane bantered. “I’ve been in for at least five minutes.”

“I know, but I think I’m going faster now,” the young boy said. “I kept close until we made it around the buoy.”

“Only because I let you!” Dane continued to tease.

“But you’re the best swimmer on the island,” the young boy argued.

“I was just teasing, Devon. You really are getting better. You’re still just a bit awkward with your arms. Your strokes need to be smoother.” Dane stopped and then showed Devon what he meant by gracefully, yet powerfully motioning his arms in a free-style stroke. Devon tried to imitate the movement from within the water. “Sometimes I can’t tell for sure whether you’re swimming or drowning the way your hands are flapping in the water.” Dane waved his hands comically for effect.

“Rory,” he turned back to me, “this is my younger brother Devon. He looks like a little pain in the ass, but in all truthfulness, I will freely admit that there are times when I think he’s a big pain in the ass.”

Devon, who had originally gleamed slightly at what he thought might be his brother’s approval, turned his head and pinched his lips at Dane’s playful slight. It was easy to see Devon’s admiration for Dane by the submissive homage he seemed to display.

Devon slowly lifted himself on to the dock. Standing upright, Devon crossed his forearms over his chest so that each hand held the opposite shoulder, forming an X to hide his exposed body. Devon reached for the towel around Dane’s waist and Dane playfully stepped back.

“Come on Dane, give me the towel!” he said, sounding slightly agitated.

Devon was tall and slight. His face was boyish and his hair fair, like a cloth that is faded from too much sunlight. His arms and legs, thin and wiry, seemed to have outgrown the rest of his relatively small body. The unevenness of his physique resulted in an air of awkwardness about him. I remember thinking of an excited puppy removed from a tub of water who then stumbles bullishly across the floor with a set of large, slippery paws. Yet, even despite the awkwardness, it was clear that when Devon’s body grew and solved the proportion problem, he would most likely turn out to have the same strong features as Dane.

“What towel?” Dane asked.

“The towel around your waist.” Devon made a half-hearted swipe at the towel before returning his arm back to cover his chest.

“Oh, this towel,” Dane said, then slowly hung the towel out in front of himself so that Devon might grab it. Devon snatched the towel sharply then covered his body and grumbled down the dock to the shore. When he passed me, Devon smiled shyly, then put his head back down and walked towards the bag of clothes he had hidden in some long grass.

“What were you guys doing?” I asked.

“Our daily dose of male testosterone release,” Dane smirked.

“What?” I asked with amusement.

“Everyday we race one another. We swim out to that buoy then turn back to the dock.”

My eyes followed the shimmering lake water out to the horizon where the red buoy bobbed in the water like a gigantic balloon. The buoy was about two hundred yards away. Another two hundred yards past the buoy was *Three Sisters* island, named after the island’s three small hills which were visible like humps on

a camel's back. Somewhere closer to the horizon was the mainland.

"That's a fairly long trek," I said somewhat overzealously. "You must be good swimmers?" Dane shrugged his shoulders.

"We're in training!" Devon declared with enthusiasm. "Dane was asked to try out for the Olympic swimming team. I'm training with him so that maybe someday I can try out too."

"It's just a try out," Dane said shyly. Then came the disclaimer: "They ask a lot of people to go. It's really not that big of a deal." His sudden modesty came as a surprise. "I'm still not sure I want to go."

"Why not?"

"I don't know if that's what I want to do yet. Right now I work on the ferry part-time, but my father says he might be able to get me a full-time job. He's Captain of the ferry." Dane seemed pensive as he explained the possibility of his future. "But enough about me, what about you?" he said in a bar room voice. "Haven't we met before?"

"That's an original line," I said, playing along.

"Why don't you meet me at the Tavern where you can hear more common pick up lines with a local flare. Some friends of mine are meeting and since you already sound bored here, why don't you come out for a pitcher or two."

I put my head down and drew in the sand with my toes. Dane sensed my apprehension.

"Look, I don't know how old you are, but if you're worried about being carded let me pick you up and you can enter with me. They won't bother asking if they see you're with us."

I initially hesitated, but after remembering my desire to try something new, I agreed to go. "OK," I said, trying to hide my enthusiasm.

"I'll pick you up at 9:00."

Dane walked towards Devon and retrieved his shirt from the bag Devon had been scrambling through. When he was finished he turned back to me before leaving.

“Continue your rock picking,” he said.

As the two brothers turned to leave, I was suddenly struck with the fact that I had not given Dane directions to the cottage.

“Hey, wait a minute!” I said. “I never told you where I’m staying.”

“I already know,” he said slyly. “I saw you moving into Jameson’s old cottage this morning. I told you, tourists stick out around here.”

Dane and I spent most of our days in the water. He guided me around the island, and we tested the swimming area off each dock. At first, Devon tagged along and tried eagerly to prove that he could fit in: sometimes he bombarded me with probing questions intended to show his mature level of conversation, or other days he remained silent and separated himself from us by swimming ahead or staying on the shore. Devon struggled to find a comfortable replacement for his brother’s routine companionship.

Devon must have found the time difficult and awkward since Dane and I were always centred on this new entity called “us”. How did we expect him to react while we openly kissed and embraced in the water, while we selfishly steered conversations towards personal topics like our friends or our separate experiences, while we each secretly harboured the hope that he might grow tired and frustrated with our company and find companionship of his own?

Dane and I never openly discussed the issue. Dane was far more protective of his brother’s feelings. It was Dane who first remembered Devon’s presence while we wrestled on the beach; Dane who first recognized Devon’s discomfort

when we spoke about our personal plans for the future; Dane who first felt guilty for not wanting Devon to be around. The closest we ever came to talking about the awkwardness was when I suggested Devon be introduced to my younger brother Bob. Dane agreed with some reservations, but we never openly discussed our reason for wanting our two siblings to become friends.

Yet, the planned meeting never materialized because as we had both expected, Devon eventually grew tired of feeling uncomfortable around us and chose to spend his time elsewhere. It was not a sudden decision: it was a decision which grew and developed over time. First there was a failure to appear for a planned hike to the rocks on the Southern point of the island, followed by a refusal to partake in the usual bike ride after supper, up to the point where he started not showing up when we went swimming during the day.

Devon was not the only family member Dane was having trouble with. Dane and his father had always been at odds. Shortly after starting the full-time job on the island ferry which his father had pulled special strings to arrange, Dane suddenly chose to quit. When Dane's only explanation for the resignation was "It's not what I want to do," his father could barely control his temper.

At first, my parents were ecstatic about my new attitude towards the island. Then they started to question the time I spent with Dane, reminding me of my plans to attend school in Ottawa at the end of the summer. That was also the summer that my parents started to have troubles of their own. At night I could hear them bickering about careers, and costs, and plans, and by the end of the summer I barely heard them speak at all. If I had not been so preoccupied with nurturing this entity called a "relationship," I may have been more devastated by my parents' behaviour.

The last weekend of the summer, the weekend of my nineteenth birthday, Dane and I were alone at the cottage. My parents had returned to work and had

already started losing interest in their dream home. Dane told his friends, Rick and Jason, that he wasn't going out that night. We sat in the cottage together and planned our strategy for the upcoming year.

"We can write all the time," I told him, as we sipped a glass of wine that I legally bought at the liquor store that morning. "And I'll take the train home to visit and sometimes you can come to see me."

"Do you really think we can make it work?" Dane asked. He had more concerns about the future than I did.

"If we want to, we can get through anything," I said idealistically. "And when the summer is over, I'll try to find a job on the island so I can live here."

"I don't know," Dane said. "I'd rather spend the summer travelling somewhere. I don't think I can stay here anymore." He placed his glass of wine down on the coffee table as if he had lost his appetite for food and beverage.

"What do you mean?" I asked, perplexed by his sudden distaste for the place that had meant so much to us.

"I don't know. I just feel like I need a change. I don't know what it is I want to do, but I know it isn't here. I think I'm going to give up swimming too."

"What for? I thought you wanted to try out for the Olympics."

"It doesn't mean the same thing to me anymore. Besides, I was never really good enough anyways." I was surprised by the changes Dane was going through, but was determined to hang on to the idea which we had created.

"Well we can camp our way to the west coast if you'd like. Or travel to Florida, or maybe the Keys."

"No. I want something different." He looked down at the coffee table and picked up a knick-knack he had seen hundreds of times before. It was a small golden pyramid, a souvenir from the year when my parents had taken me to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto to see the *Tutankhamen* exhibit. I had begged

to visit the exhibit, fascinated by the mysterious pyramids and the traditions of Ancient Egyptian culture.

“We could save our money and go to Cairo,” I suggested on a whim. “I know a lot about the pyramids and their history.”

“That’s the kind of place I’ve always wanted to explore,” Dane said excitedly. We spent the rest of the evening planning for the future, sometimes planning ahead for things which were impossible to predict, like who would stand up in our wedding, where we would ideally like to live, and what kind of colour scheme each room in our house would have.

Dane and I lasted through the tumultuous years of University. For three years we survived on Canada Post, Bell Canada, and Via Rail. It was never easy, but we took a kind of puritanical satisfaction in defeating the odds which people said were against us. Each summer we had hopes of travelling, but each summer we were forced to save money and work on the island. Dane took a job selling gas for a Marina, even though his father said he could get him another chance on the ferry. I worked at the tavern as a waitress.

Everything seemed to fall apart in my last year of University. My parents separated that year and I was asked to take care of the cottage over the summer until they could settle on whether or not it would be sold. Dane and I looked forward to the possibility of living together for the summer without the constant separation we had come accustomed to during the school year.

Yet, something was eating Dane, and he surprised me at the beginning of the summer when he chose to work at a food processing plant on the mainland. It meant that we would only be together on the weekends when he returned to the island. I was angry with him, but my stubborn independence refused to show it. I was starting to feel trapped by my connection to Dane, and I knew Dane was feeling restrictions of his own.

Despite the obvious problems with our relationship, ironically, we planned more frequently about our future. It was as if we thought talking about the future might heal the problems growing in the present.

Dane was also having problems with his friends. Rick and Jason were bitter about his refusal to stay on the island. Devon returned home from studying Human Kinetics at University, and immediately became tight with Dane's friends. Many weekends when Dane chose to work overtime, his friends and Devon came to the tavern to drink and socialize with me while I worked.

Devon had grown up. He was still tall and thin, but was no longer the awkward boy who always seemed out of place. As Devon became my confidant to listen to the problems I was having with Dane, we became close friends. We spent time together at the tavern, or riding bikes around the island. One night, after drinking heavily, Devon and I took his father's boat for a ride to *Three Sisters* island. We carried our cooler of beer onto the shore and Devon lit a small fire. We talked about what was happening with Dane and what was happening with me. Overwhelmed by too much alcohol and the feeling that something had to change, Devon and I began to kiss by the fire. I had an impulse to stop what was happening, but I ignored it and let myself go, trying hard to forget everything that was happening, and everything that was changing.

The next morning, the charms of the alcohol gone, and the reality of life renewed by a morning breeze and clear sunlight, Devon and I agreed that we had made a mistake and that Dane should never find out. I promised to keep it a secret, but deep down I knew I was lying.

A week after Devon and I spent the night on *Three Sisters* island, my relationship with Dane reached a climax. At the height of the tourist season, when the ferry was running at peak level and the roads and trails buzzed with visitors' voices, and the tables of the tavern were filled by locals and guests, the season

was also coming to an end. It was Labour Day weekend — three final days to celebrate the transformation of summer into fall.

A band from the mainland was hired to play at the tavern for the holiday weekend. Since people went to the tavern to drink regardless of marketing strategies, the owners rarely spent money on entertainment, especially quality entertainment. The group of skin heads they hired on one teenager's recommendation and a low ticket price was a perfect example.

The band arrived on the Friday morning ferry. I watched as they drove their motor scooters down the ramp. They were dressed in metal and leather and their heads were shaved bald, or spiked like nails. There was also a van of groupies in similar spirit who were transporting the band's second hand equipment. The van itself should have easily been condemned as the muffler dragged and sparked on the road and volcanic black smoke spit out the rear. I was waiting for Dane who had called the previous night to say he would be in that morning, but after all the cars and passengers had exited, and the crew started to walk together to the tavern for breakfast, Dane was still nowhere to be found.

Dane came on the afternoon ferry and I didn't have the energy to bring up his morning absence. He was distant and withdrawn; he barely spoke and when we entered my parent's cottage he said he was going to take a nap and that I should wake him when it was time to go out.

When the group gathered together at the tavern, the tension was obvious. There was a quality of reservation about us. Our conversation consisted of meaningless pleasantries and awkward silences.

We all sat around a table and immediately a tray of drinks was ordered. When I went to pay for mine, Devon pushed my hand aside.

"It's your birthday! You don't pay for anything tonight," he said in a cavalier voice.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Jason. “Get her a shooter on me.” he handed the waitress a five dollar bill.

“What kind of shooter do you want?” the waitress asked.

I was slow to answer and Rick quickly jumped in: “Get her a *Sex on the Beach!*” he said laughing.

My eyes shifted to Dane who was sitting beside me at the end of the table. He did not seem to respond. “Alright,” I submitted.

For the first hour things seemed to go well. I was having a great time losing myself over all the attention I was receiving. As the group seemed to warm up with each new tray of drinks, Dane was the only person who seemed withdrawn. He remained at the end of the table and only joined the conversation when required.

Devon was the life of the party. He and Rick were like a comic tandem keeping everyone laughing. They made jokes at the expense of some wealthy tourists who had come excessively over-dressed to the obviously humble establishment. A middle aged man dressed in a pair of bright white slacks with a purple collared golf shirt and a blue visor hat received considerable attention. “He’s probably trying to take advantage of his last possible opportunity to wear white for the season,” Devon said in a mocking stylish voice.

“Yes,” Rick followed his cue. “It would be absolutely dreadful to wear those pants after Labour Day.”

“He may very well have to leave before midnight or else the fashion gurus might find him guilty of a terrible faux pas.”

When the band finally came on for their first set, Devon and Rick had a new target for their heckling. As the lead singer stepped up to the microphone, a roar of applause came from the table of groupies who stood out like an orange in a barrel of apples.

The lead singer was dressed only in a plaid kilt and red suspenders. The rest of the band was decked out in black leather and metal chains. Their sound was raw and flat, like you would expect to hear from a high school band who practiced in their parents' garage. When the words were distinguishable, they seemed to chant for anarchy and revolt. The groupies danced angrily in front of the band, and pushed and slammed into one another. After two songs the man with the white pants left with his group of friends. Our table thrived on the heckles of Devon and Rick, but as our group became more intoxicated, the heckling turned loud and confrontational. People were growing tired of the band's sensationalism. When the lead singer with the red suspenders burned a bible, things at the tavern turned for the worse; Devon and Rick were not religious, but the anger in the songs had brought out their own hostilities.

"Get off the stage you flat-top freaks!" I turned to see Devon standing on his chair and waving his hands angrily.

"Yeah!" Rick continued "Get on your bad mad scooters and ride, baby ride!"

"Why don't you and your *dates* swim home." Devon pointed to the groupies on the dance floor. Some of the groupies gave menacing stares, but the band continued to play as if the heckling only helped to inspire them. Dane remained, as he had for most of the evening, frighteningly quiet. Yet, I could tell by the tightening of his shoulders and the pinching of his lips that he was preparing for the inevitable.

I didn't see who threw the first punch; I suppose it is irrelevant. Within minutes, the band and their followers were squared off against the island locals; it was *us* and *them*. Devon and Rick led the attack and Jason was behind them.

Devon rushed at one of the groupies and pushed him into a wall. Then he quickly used his elbow to take a baseball like swing into the startled victim's jaw.

The groupie slipped to the floor and slouched against the wall. Devon moved on to the next target.

Meanwhile, Dane had stood up from his chair, but had not entered the fight. I stood like a statue at the front of the table. Dane stayed in his position until a few of the groupies crossed the line towards our table. The one at the front had a crooked smile and chose to come for me before Dane.

Even with the problems between us, the turmoil of the last two months, Dane jumped in between us in an instant. He met the attacker head on and struck a blow above the right temple of the groupie's shaved head. He used his hands like a clamp on the groupies shaven head and banged his forehead mercilessly onto the table three times. When he let go, the groupie drooped to the floor and blood dripped from a fresh gash above his eye.

Dane leaped over the limp body and met the next attacker with a raised knee into the stomach. A gust of air burst out his mouth like air from a popped balloon. Dane grabbed the groupie and twisted his arm. He wrenched the forearm over a table and with one quick blow, the man's bone snapped like brittle driftwood.

The arm bent and twisted in a way that can only be described as dark comedy: the twisted mess seemed unreal, like an arm could only look that way in make believe cartoons. I stood in gaping fear as I saw in front of me the darkness and strength of Dane.

I must have shrieked because Dane turned sharply. "Get out of here!" he ordered as I stood motionless. I wanted to leave, but I was mesmerized by the speed in which things can happen. Dane turned his attention back to the fight raging on the dance floor. He entered the crowd and was quickly lost.

Moments later, our group was running towards me; blood dripped from their cheeks and mouths, and each carried their own scars and cuts. Dane was at

the end of the line and grabbed my hand as he ran by. I felt the warmth of blood kiss my palm and seep between my fingers.

“Come on!” Dane tugged at my hand. “We have to get out of here.”

As a group we rushed out the door onto the lighted porch while inside, other local islanders continued to fight with the visitors. When we stopped, everyone saw the police car across the road by the main dock. It was officer John, the one permanent police officer on the island. He sat in the cruiser with a weekend partner sent from the mainland to help out during the busy holiday weekend. We waited and watched, but there was no movement inside the police car. This was part of the unspoken rule of fellowship on the island. Officer John was giving us time to leave before he stormed the tavern and cleaned up the mess. Everyone looked to Dane for the group’s next move. “Let’s go to the second dock,” Devon suddenly interrupted.

“I’ll pick up some beer from my place!” Rick eagerly agreed.

The second dock was our usual spot for late night dips and happy campfires. Often times we stayed up through the night and watched the sunrise gloriously above the lake water. Second dock was also the place where I first met Dane and Devon. Going to second dock was a ritual which I loved so much during those first summers.

“Let’s go!” Devon urged us. Officer John isn’t going to wait forever.”

We ran as a group towards the second dock. Dane and I ran together at the back of the group. He did not look at me; his thoughts held him hostage. My thoughts started to shift towards the next day when I planned to leave Dane and the island forever.

At Rick’s house, we stopped outside the back door and waited for Rick to return with the beer. Everyone was silent. Rick finally emerged from the house with a case of beer and placed it on a picnic table. He wiped a bit of caking blood

from his knuckles and then turned to Dane accusingly.

“What took you so long to join the fight?” he asked. “Living the good life on the mainland make you so soft that you can’t back up your old friends anymore?”

Dane stepped forward to Rick, paused, then struck him hard with a blow to the nose. Rick fell backwards onto the picnic table, surprised by the sudden blow. Jason bent over to help him up. When Rick regained balance, he pinched his nose and made a great snort to blow out the blood.

“What is wrong with you?” Devon asked in shock. “Rick’s one of us.”

“The hell with him,” Rick sneered. “We’re all tired of his nonsense anyways. Why don’t you get out of here.” Rick challenged. Devon was still perplexed.

“I mean Dane,” he stumbled, “what the hell did you do that for?”

With complete control and composure, Dane looked Devon in the eyes and plainly said, “Rory and I are going swimming. Do you want to come with us or not?”

I thought at first that Dane and Devon might finally have it out, that Dane’s forcing Devon to make a choice might lead to the inevitable quarrel; yet, despite all that had happened between them, the metamorphose of their relationship as siblings, there was still something of the younger brother, awkward and insecure, that kept Devon loyal to Dane. There was a short silence while Devon made his decision. Then in an apologetic voice, Devon voiced his loyalty. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow, Rick. Things are too crazy right now.”

At second dock, Devon lit a fire while I went to the water to wash my face and hands. The blood on my palm where Dane grabbed my hand dissolved easily into the water, but some of the blood soaked into my sleeve and would not come out. I sat by the water and held an internal conversation. Like a good lawyer, I

tried to anticipate the possible scenarios which might occur for the rest of the evening. I planned out all the possibilities and prepared a defence for each line of argument, a counter-attack for each accusation. Dane sat silently on the dock. He appeared oblivious to what Devon and I were doing. With the fire lit, Devon knelt down beside me to wash his hands.

“What the hell is going on with him?” Devon whispered.

Before I could respond, Dane surprised us by breaking his pattern of silence. “Are you guys coming in or not?” he challenged us. Dane calmly removed his shirt then his shorts and underwear until he stood completely naked on the dock. When we went swimming as a group we always swam in the summer clothes we had worn to the bar. Only when we were alone had Dane and I ever swum naked in the lake.

“Are you coming or not?” he asked with more emphasis.

“What are you doing, Dane?” I said, angered by his newest attempt to be dramatic.

“A little midnight swim among friends — in the buff of course.” Dane taunted. Devon let out a dark chuckle.

“Come on, *Mr. Comedian!*” Dane jeered. “Are you taking your pants off or not?” Devon did not respond.

“Dane!” I pleaded.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid to see one another naked,” he mocked.

“You’re pathetic, Dane.” I turned away and looked into the fire. “A real piece of work.” I sat beside the fire and felt like a sulking child. Dane turned his attention back to Devon.

“Well?” he asked, opening up his arms as if he were exasperated by our lack of response.

Devon looked at me for a moment and I think he finally realized that Dane knew about our affair. This new knowledge must have given him a sense of defiant adrenaline, like an athlete who feels a burst of energy to defy an inevitable defeat.

“I’ll do it. Yeah, I’ll do it.”

Devon removed his shirt quickly, as if now that the decision was made there was no time to waste. As I watched him I thought of the night we spent together and the awkward way he rushed out of his clothes on the beach. Devon had always been this way; unlike Dane and I, once Devon decided to do something, he never wasted time second guessing the decision.

“Dane, don’t!” I pleaded one final time. As Devon removed the rest of his clothes I instinctively turned away and looked into the heart of the fire. Then I felt the anger boil in me like a bubbling tea kettle. I was letting Dane win; I was reacting the way he had expected, the way he had planned: embarrassed, ashamed, and guilty. I suddenly shot back around and stared at the two naked men standing on the dock. I saw them there, as the moon glowed upon their white bodies. In front of me stood the only two men I had ever seen naked. And standing in front of me, the sagging humility of the male body exposed, I felt nauseated by the idea of sex, and passion, and companionship. I only wished for solitude; the solitude of winter days in hibernation.

Devon jumped in the water with a quick and sudden splash. When he returned to the surface he reacted to the shock of the water. “Whoee!” he exclaimed.

Dane stared briefly at me then slid silently off the edge of the dock. When Dane surfaced he pulled his dark hair smoothly back upon his head.

“Let’s have a race, Devon,” Dane said, as he treaded water in the dark lake.

“Race me?” Devon sounded surprised. “To where?”

“To *Three Sisters* island. We’ll rest there before we come back.”

“That’s a long way, Dane. Are you sure about this?”

“Dane,” I broke in. “Its too far! Don’t be stupid.” I stood up and scurried towards the dock. “It has all gone too far. Get out of the water and we’ll go some where and talk.”

“You don’t think you can make it?” Dane tested Devon, ignoring my approach.

“You’re God-damn right I can!” Devon exclaimed, sinking back into the roles they had established as kids growing up under the same roof.

“Then let’s go!” Dane said as he splashed water in Devon’s face and began swimming out to the island. Devon quickly followed, swinging his thin arms forward. Dane did not turn to look back; instead, he moved forward smoothly with his long, even tempered strokes.

At the end of the dock, I yelled out into the lake one final time. “Dane, don’t. Come back! Please, come back and talk to me . . .” I lost sight of them both as they merged into the darkness with only the sound of their arms and feet cutting through the water.

My anger renewed itself as I stood alone on the dock. I was letting him control my actions again. I wanted to free myself of him, but I didn’t know how. I removed my clothes and jumped into the cool lake water. The water swirled around my naked body, and I felt an incredible sense of freedom. I dove below the surface again, holding my breath with my eyes closed. What I would do next flashed before my eyes like scenes from a film. I would get out of the water and sit naked on the dock. When they both returned, I would confess everything that Dane already suspected. I imagined an altercation between Dane and Devon, but it would make no difference to me. I would dress myself and walk away without

turning back — no remorse, no regrets.

But when I returned to the surface, the ridiculous idealism of my plot was revealed as I heard the screams in the distance. Voices in the darkness were far and muffled. Confusion led to a tense feeling of helplessness. I screamed back at the darkness.

“Dane, what is happening?” I yelled. “Devon? Someone please answer me.” Yet, the only reply was from the disturbed water and the voices that were muffled by turmoil. Then there was silence. I went into a panic. I pulled myself on to the dock and began to yell hysterically for help. Still hearing nothing from the distance I ran down the dock and almost forgot to put my clothes back on. I retrieved the clothes then proceeded to dress myself in a flurry of movements. Once dressed, I ran down the pebbled path to the road and headed in the direction of town.

I must have ran for at least five minutes before I saw a set of headlights approaching from the distance. I stood on the road waving my hands wildly. Officer John was overwhelmed when I approached his car in a panic. I tried to explain to him the series of events that night, but I could only manage short broken phrases, unable to link my thoughts into complete sentences. Officer John and his weekend partner finally decoded enough to realize that something had happened at the dock. They put me in the back of the car and we drove to the dock with the lights flashing.

He parked the car at the side of the road and I could see Dane slumped over the edge of the dock. The fire we had lit was still burning brightly and it gave a strange glow to the area. The two officers stepped out of the car and advised me to stay in the back seat. I don't know what was said between Dane and the officers, I only saw their shadows lit by the fire. Dane kept pointing out into the lake towards the mainland. I tried to read Dane's lips which, in my fragile state

of mind, seemed to keep repeating *Cairo is calling!*” At first the words were obtuse, strange, and incoherent; but, as the weight of the situation settled in it all seemed perfectly clear: *Cairo is calling!*” It wasn’t until the next day that I realized Dane had been telling the officer to *keep calling*.

That night, while rescue crews searched the water for Devon, Dane and I were questioned separately about the events that led up to the incident at second dock. The fight at the tavern and the amount of alcohol which Devon consumed were of key importance to the officers.

It wasn’t until the next afternoon that the police called with the news that Devon had been found, bloated and blue, bobbing lifeless like a piece of driftwood on the lake. The police reported the death as an accident with the possibility of alcohol as a leading cause. Neither Dane or I was ever implicated in the death.

Dane’s father was not as forgiving. Two days after the funeral, Dane left the island for good after an explosive, emotional fight with his father. He called me to meet him at the ferry that afternoon to see him off.

Surprisingly, there were no soul cleansing revelations at our parting, no confessions of guilt, or proclamations of innocence, no laying of blame or shouting of accusations, but only the meaningless exchange of dull pleasantries.

“My parents sold the cottage,” I told him, as we waited for the ferry to give the signal for passengers to come aboard.

“I guess there’s no chance for a reconciliation.”

“Not likely.”

“What are your plans?”

“I think I’ll go to law school. Maybe open a practice some day like my father.” I said rather blandly, not really believing what I said.

The bell that signals the boarding of passengers on the ferry rang and Dane turned to look at the boat. "I guess I have to go."

"Where are you heading?" I asked.

"Not sure." He started to walk away then turned with a smirk and said, "Cairo, maybe."

As he walked away I found myself saying, "Perhaps I'll see you there."

Margaret's Ruined Woodshed

Dressed in a cotton housecoat and holding a stained cup of steaming coffee, Margaret follows the sidewalk from her house to the woodshed, where, after lighting the gas stove, she sits silently and searches for the fading smell of sawdust. This is her morning ritual. In Margaret's experience, scent has the power to revive memories. Her habitual pilgrimage to the woodshed is her way of trying to stop a time in her life from slipping into memory.

Inside the woodshed dust lies visible and still on the cold silver machines, and wood chips sit on the floor, still unswept. She keeps the floor this way, hoping that perhaps the smell will last longer. Against the shed's panelled wall, she sits on an old cot; the light from the rising morning sun shines through the partially opened blinds and casts a checkered shadow over her body. The light reveals the growing wrinkles under her eyes and the patch of grey hair on the front of her head. She sits with her back arched forward, elbows on her thighs, and her hands surround the coffee mug which rests on her knees.

Sometimes the sound of birds calling to one another in the forest behind the shed penetrates the walls, but mostly, the shed is like a glass-box or a padded room where sound does not enter. Margaret is fully aware of the silence; the machines are silent, like the band saw that used to grind wood in its metal teeth, or the planer which buzzed like a lawnmower as it gave a smooth finish to a knotted piece of wood; hammers do not pound; sand-paper does not shuffle; the radio does not play. All green lights are now red or off — life fails to register. If she listens carefully, and makes the effort to concentrate hard enough, she can hear the gas stove's gentle hum; however, everything else is silent, and although she can feel the presence of moving shadows, they never choose to speak.

In the bars of light criss-crossing her face, she can see tiny particles of dust still trying to find a place to settle. She is bewildered by how, even without any stirring movement, there are countless numbers of dust particles still unsettled in the room. And no matter how long she sits motionless on the cot, listening to the silence — sometimes it could be an entire day — there are always flecks of dust weaving in and out of the bars of light.

Today is Sunday, and Sundays are for building. After the early morning Sunday mass, Margaret's husband Mark used to spend the day in the shed, transforming wood into furniture, or decorative knickknacks for the house: cedar chests, patio chairs, magazine racks, and picture frames. On Sunday afternoons the woodshed beamed with energy as machines chattered inside its walls, and on a good damp day Margaret could smell the rich flavour of sawdust from outside the shed's door.

Yet, Margaret did not go to mass this morning, nor did she go the week before. Today, like many recent days gone by, she has chosen to sit silently within the walls of her shed. There is no sermon to hear from the pulpit, no transformation of the Eucharist into God, nor even the metamorphoses of wood into art. There is only Margaret and the silence which pervades the woodshed. And as the sun continues to rise behind the shed, and to creep in through the open blinds, the bars of light which shine on her slowly rise until she is totally engulfed. In the light, she watches as the dust particles continue to bounce restlessly through the dead air. Margaret wrestles with herself, determined that some change must occur in her life.

Margaret's family moved from England to Canada in 1947, when she was two years old. Her father started a Sporting Goods store in a small town in southern Ontario. Her father handled money intelligently, and by the time she was in her

teens, the family lived comfortably in a water-front home on the edge of Lake Erie.

When Margaret was eighteen years old she went to a dance held in the basement of St. Mary's Parish. St. Mary's was a big church with high rising steeples and a seemingly endless number of floor levels under and above the actual church. Every Friday night, the Parish sponsored a High School dance.

Margaret was a shy girl who barely recognized her own beauty. When her best friend Cecilia asked her to go to the dance with two popular girls who had stolen a bottle of rye from their parents' liquor cabinet, Margaret was reluctant to go. Even when she finally agreed to go, she only did so with the guarantee that she would not be forced to try anything.

By the time the group of girls reached the many steps of St. Mary's, they were laughing and giggling uncontrollably. Cecilia made it half way up the steps before she finally plopped herself down, proclaiming that she was going to get sick. Margaret was terrified at the prospect of being discovered. Anyone who was found intoxicated at a dance was forced to wait in the rectory while Father Don called the parents to retrieve their child. If Cecilia were caught, news of the event would travel quickly between parents while they sat at the restaurants eating Sunday brunch. Margaret's parents were sure to find out about Cecilia, and Margaret would ultimately be linked with the event.

"Come on Celia, you have to straighten yourself out," she pleaded. "The people watching the doors are going to see you, and then we're all going to get into a heap of trouble." Margaret walked down the steps to Cecilia and grabbed her arm to try and help her up.

"Marg, you gotta help me," Cecilia whispered. "My father will kill me if he finds out. I keep telling myself to straighten out, but the rest of me won't listen."

"You have to act sober when we go through the door, then we'll hide you in the bathroom and put water on your face. But you have to be sober enough to get through the door."

“I’ll try, Marg. I’ll try.”

“I knew we shouldn’t have come with these girls,” she half-scolded her friend.
“Promise me you’ll never do this again.”

“I promise, Marg. Just get me to the bathroom.”

The other two girls, Cynthia Larson and Beth Crawford, had already gone up the stairs and through the doors. Margaret helped Cecilia to her feet and together they walked slowly to the top of the stairs. Beyond the front door, Father Don greeted the teenagers coming into the dance, and two adult chaperones collected tickets. Margaret smiled and quickly submitted her ticket to Father Don. Cecilia stumbled for her purse, having forgotten her need for a ticket. In her panic she dropped her purse and the contents went rolling on to the floor. Margaret thought for sure they would be caught. She bent over quickly to help Cecilia pick up her things. She also picked up the ticket and gave it to the people at the table.

“Sorry about that,” Margaret told them. By this time, Cecilia had managed to gather some of her senses.

“Ya! Sorry about that,” she said.

Then Father Don spoke. “I hope you’re not that clumsy when you dance, Cecilia,” he teased.

“Me too!” said Margaret, and the two girls shuffled down the stairs toward the basement where the sounds of music were emanating.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Margaret looked through the dance doors and saw Cynthia and Beth dancing in a group. She took Cecilia down the hall to the washrooms. Inside the washrooms, Margaret made Cecilia splash water on her face. Then she told her to go into a stall and sit down and close the door while she went to ask Cynthia for a ride home.

When Margaret entered the dance, she did not see the two girls. She walked further into the room and turned left towards the rows of tables where many of the

boys usually sat to play cards and watch the girls dance.

She saw Cynthia and Beth at the centre of a group of boys. They were laughing and quite obviously, happy to be the focus of so much attention. She walked into the group and tried to get their attention.

“We have to go,” she told Cynthia, the girl who gave them a ride in her father’s car.

“What do you mean?” Cynthia laughed. “We just got here.”

“Cecilia is sick and we have to get her home. And it’s your responsibility to make sure we get there,” Margaret demanded. Cynthia was starting to get upset because Margaret was interrupting her fun. Two boys left the circle and joined another crowd.

“Look Margaret, just because Cecilia can’t handle it, doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t have a good time,” she said harshly. “You can go if you want, but we’re not leaving.” Cynthia gave Beth a nod and the two girls turned away and rejoined the crowd at another table. Margaret was about to chase them down, when she heard a voice call from behind her.

“Maybe I can help,” a young man said. Margaret turned around and saw the man. He was sitting alone at the table. She did not recognize him and she thought he looked too old to be from another school.

“I’m not really having much fun here, so I could probably give you and your friend a ride home,” the young man continued. Margaret remained quiet, her mind was trying to make all the events of the evening fit into some kind of easy order in her mind so that she could plan her next steps. The sudden invitation from this stranger complicated the maze she was trying to sort through.

“My name’s Mark,” he said confidently, but modestly enough that Margaret did not feel any pressure from him. “And if I heard right, I think you’re Margaret.”

“Yes,” she said, still somewhat dazed.

“Look, I’m sorry if it seems like I’m getting involved in your business, I just thought that since I’m leaving anyways, I might as well try and help you and your friend out.” Margaret was starting to return back to her typically solid self.

“Look, I don’t mean to be rude — it’s very nice of you to try and help Cecilia and me — but I don’t even know you, and I don’t think it would be right to get into a car with you.”

“Good, because I only have a truck,” Mark joked, trying to lessen Margaret’s need for suspicion. She released a short, surprised laugh.

“Really, I’ve never even seen you before, and this town is pretty small. Everyone knows everything about everybody.”

“Well, I’m not from here. I live on the island. I’m a customs officer, but eventually I’m going to be in charge of taking care of all the traffic coming in and out of the island.”

“What are you doing at a high school dance then?” Margaret asked.

“I guess I was trying to see if the grass really was greener on the other side!”

“So?” Margaret encouraged, “And what did you find?”

“It’s all just grass, and I’m content with the grass I’m used to,” he teased. Margaret was enjoying her conversation with Mark, who seemed so much older and mature than the boys she dealt with at school.

“How old are you, Mark?” she asked.

“Twenty-four and counting. A friend of mine that comes to the mainland told me that these dances were always a good time, but I really don’t see why. Most people here just act like kids.”

“It is all a little foolish when you really look at it,” Margaret found herself agreeing.

“So where is your friend?” he asked, bringing the conversation back to the ride home.

“She’s in the bathroom. I think she’s getting sick.”

“Would you like me to help you get her out of here?”

“I guess it would be a good idea.”

The three of them made it safely out of the church and into Mark’s truck. Cecilia drove on the passenger’s side with her head out the window. Margaret was impressed by the cleanliness of the truck. It was washed both inside and out. On the back of the truck, Mark had built a small cab out of wood which he said he used to carry materials for a house he was building on the island.

They took Cecilia home first, and then Mark brought Margaret back to her parents’ house. They continued to talk in the truck while they were parked in the driveway. Eventually, they planned to go on a date the following weekend. When Cecilia’s parents came home that night they found her on the bathroom floor. She was grounded for a month. Somehow, Margaret’s parents never found out. Mark came across on the ferry every weekend to see Margaret. During the week, she spent her spare time dreaming about marrying Mark. She was happy to find someone who seemed so much more settled and mature than the boys she knew.

Margaret married Mark on a Saturday. The next afternoon, the two newlyweds took the ferry to Pelee island. Margaret disliked the ferry ride because it made her feel sick to her stomach. She had taken it only once before, when her parents took her to visit Mark one weekend when they were still dating. Mark, on the other hand, enjoyed the ferry, especially on hot summer days when you could sit on the deck and feel the sun warm your skin. The best way for Margaret to deal with the sickness was to stay inside the cabin and rest her head on one of the cafeteria tables. The day after their wedding, Mark agreed to go inside the cabin with her, even though the sun was shining brightly.

The walls inside were decorated with landscape paintings of water and boats. Life preservers were hung on the walls as decorations. When Margaret and Mark entered the room, most people recognized Mark from the customs office and were eager to congratulate him on his new bride. They sat at a table near a window so that Mark could still look out on the lake.

Once the ferry began to move, Margaret felt sick. Mark was talking to a couple at the next table who were friends of his parents. Margaret tried to participate in the conversation. She did not mean to be rude, but she was finally forced to put her head down when she felt she could take it no longer.

“Your new bride’s turning a little green, Mark,” the elderly gentleman said as Margaret put her head down. “What did ya do to her last night? Feed her too much wine?” Mark laughed but didn’t say anything about how Margaret got sick on the ferry.

“She’s still not used to the ferry, eh?” the woman asked Mark.

“No, she isn’t much good at riding boats,” Mark replied

“She’ll get used to it,” the woman seemed to promise.

All this was said as if Margaret was not able to hear or respond. Then the three islanders started to discuss the weather. “Feels like the winds are coming from the south,” the elderly gentleman told Mark.

“Ya, probably a storm brewing out on the lake. It’s bound to put a damper on the number of people coming across on the ferry for the next few days.”

“You know the tourists!” the man replied. “They think that a little rain might melt them.” They all laughed knowingly.

“Some of the people coming to visit the island really are foolish,” Mark said. “These outsiders don’t know a thing about it. I had one guy bring all six of his kids on the ferry, and when I checked him at customs he asked me if I could provide directions to the amusement park.” All three of them laughed. “I think he and his

kids were pretty disappointed with what they found here.”

“If you’re not born here,” the elderly man said, “then you can’t appreciate it or understand it.”

Margaret listened to the conversation as her stomach twisted and shook and she thought to herself that it was better off not being able to talk because they were speaking a different language.

When the ferry docked at Pelee island, Mark tapped Margaret’s shoulder as a sign that they had arrived. Together they carried their luggage down the ramp and on to the dock. A short distance forward was the customs office, a small one room building with only two windows.

“I’ll take you in to meet Carl some time this week,” Mark told Margaret as they walked by the office. “He’s a funny old man. You’ll like him.” Carl was a fifty-two year old man who managed the customs office. It was likely that Mark would replace him when he retired.

Mark and Margaret began to walk down the main road which travelled along the shore of the entire island. They had to walk four kilometres down the road towards the old Mill where Mark and his father had spent the summer building a new home for the soon-to-be-married couple.

As they walked along the main road, Margaret was surprised by how very little development there was on the island. On one side of the road was the shore and the lake, and on the other side was a ditch followed by a firm line of trees. At some points the trees opened up and Margaret saw the familiar sight of farmland, but most of the area was still covered with bush. Margaret was tired from the ferry ride and she began to struggle with her luggage. Mark saw her difficulty and offered to carry her luggage for her.

After a half hour of walking, Mark pointed to a dirt road on the right hand side. They turned on to the road and walked another 100 feet before the house came into

view. It was a beautiful log house with two floors. The house was placed far away from the road and surrounded by high standing trees on all other sides. The ground in front of the house was turned and flattened in preparation for the sod which was going to be planted. Margaret smiled at Mark as they walked towards the front steps.

“Mark, it’s beautiful!” she said. “I can’t believe you built it!”

“Believe it, because it’s all ours.”

Once they walked onto the long wooden porch, Mark pulled out a key chain with one key and presented it to Margaret. “Mine?” she asked.

“All yours,” Mark replied.

In her excitement, Margaret tried to open the door, but kept fumbling with the key.

“Let me help,” Mark said politely, and he placed the keys inside the door knob and opened up the door to their new home. Inside the house everything was still and slightly dark. Margaret’s eyes probed across her new home. She took a few steps past the hallway and entered the large main room of the house. The sun shone through the square windows, which had no curtains yet, and lit the bare wooden floors. The house seemed large and open without any furniture on the floors. All the items for the house were not expected to arrive until the following week. Through the windows Margaret could see a small area behind the house which had been cleared for a yard and then the trees where the woods started again.

“This is unbelievable,” Margaret told Mark. “There are so many possibilities for this place. I’ve always wanted to decorate my own house.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Mark said. “I don’t think I have time to build another one,” he joked. “Would you like to see the upstairs?”

Mark took Margaret up the wooden staircase and showed her the three bedrooms on the top floor, including the master bedroom which was furnished simply with a small cot and a blue blanket. Exhausted from the excitement of the last few

days, they both crowded into the cot and fell asleep.

A few days later, after Mark had returned back to work at customs, Margaret became curious about the area which surrounded her new house. She had cleaned as many parts of the house as possible, and was out of ideas to occupy her time. In fact, she found herself wanting to escape the cold afternoon silence which she felt in the house.

The sun was hot and Margaret put on a pair of shorts and a halter top before going out the back door. The woods behind the house were dark and enclosing. Margaret entered the woods without much thought of where she was going and began to walk aimlessly through the trees. As she walked in the woods some of the branches scratched her naked thighs and a few drops of blood dripped from a small scrape. In the afternoon, as the sun became more scalding, Margaret began to perspire and the drops of sweat stung as they dripped into each open scrape.

When Margaret finally decided to turn back and search for home, she was completely exhausted and began to feel an irritation on her skin. She stopped to examine her skin which was beginning to show red blotches. Margaret feared that she had touched upon something she shouldn't have in the woods. She walked in the direction that she thought was home. As she walked she became more and more confused about her location. She began to panic, feeling lost inside a world of which she had little knowledge. At first her panic was only visible in the increased urgency of each step. Her strides became more direct, and her muscles tense. As the silence of the woods increased and the shadows became more complex, Margaret's panic turned into an aimless sprint.

She ran as long as she could, pushing her way through the trees and the bush. Her legs and arms became more bruised, until finally, in complete exhaustion, she collapsed under a tree. Sobbing like a small girl, she wrapped herself up in her own shivering arms. She lay there into the early evening when Mark found her huddled

under the tree.

“What are you doing?” Mark asked in amazement. “I didn’t know what happened to you.” Margaret got up quickly and fell into Mark’s open arms. Mark was relieved to find Margaret and couldn’t help but flood her with questions that she could only vaguely answer.

“What’s the matter?” he asked in bewilderment.

“Everything.” was all that she could sob. When they got home Margaret tried to explain how it happened, but Mark just didn’t understand her, as if she was speaking a language that was foreign to him.

At night, when they laid tightly in the cot, she felt his anger. In the darkness of their bedroom, his resentment hung heavily in the air like humidity. The summer air felt hot and muggy, and even the open windows could not cool her down.

By the next morning, the poison ivy made its first attack on Margaret’s body. The cuts, still young and only beginning to form protective scabs, soon turned into blisters. Each scratch opened up blisters which were followed by oozing pus. Margaret sat in the tub crying for most of the morning. She hoped that the harder she scrubbed her body, the sooner she would remove the poison. The poison ivy was so severe that Mark insisted on taking her to the Doctor. The Doctor gave Margaret some ointment, but the poison still lasted for over a week.

After their first daughter Blanche was born, Mark built a woodshed in the back yard. During the winter months, there was very little work for Mark to do at the customs office, so he built the shed in order to occupy his time. Even after Carl retired and Mark was promoted to run the customs office, Mark still had a great deal of free time. The large house had grown too small for Mark; sometimes people need extra living space. The shed was a project which Mark intended to use as a place to go and be away from the reality of everyday life. Margaret understood this even

better than Mark, so she fully supported the woodshed.

When the shed was completed Mark brought Margaret and their new born child into the shed to sit on the cot and talk about the many things they would do in the shed. Mark dreamed of having the perfect wood shop, and Margaret had picked out a corner where she could set up some pottery equipment for herself. Margaret enjoyed being a mother and a wife, but she found herself wanting to have something of her own. Sometimes when Margaret became withdrawn and Mark wondered if he had done something to upset her, Margaret would try to explain to him about how sometimes she felt like something was missing.

“It’s hard for you to understand, Mark, you’ve always known what you wanted. You’ve always had something you’re good at. I never have. I feel like I am always looking for *my thing*, but I’ve never been able to find it.”

“What do you mean, your thing? You’re great at lots of things. You’re a wonderful mother, and an excellent cook. Don’t you remember winning first place in the best apple pie contest. You also made that quilt once. And the crafts you make! Everyone wants to get them.”

Mark couldn’t understand how that wasn’t enough for Margaret. Every time Margaret brought the subject up, she and Mark ended up fighting. Mark felt like Margaret’s need for something else meant that she was not happy with her marriage. He became frustrated because he wanted to solve Margaret’s problems. He tried hard to help her, bringing home different projects like quilt patterns, or cross-stitching, or home design. Yet, Margaret didn’t want Mark to solve her problems; in fact, that was exactly what she didn’t want. So the more Mark interfered, the more Margaret became aware of her need for something else. Eventually, she cut off the lines of communication in this area, preferring to try and deal with her feelings alone.

The first piece of furniture to be placed in the shed was actually not a machine, but the small cot which had once been used in their bedroom. It took many years

before Mark filled the shed with all the necessary machines and tools, but eventually the shed was transformed into a state of the art woodworking shop. After Iris was born, Margaret's second daughter, Mark surprised Margaret with the equipment to start making pottery. Mark re-arranged the wood shed to accommodate a small amount of space for Margaret to get started, but she never did. Raising her two daughters swallowed up most of her time, and in the extra time she just couldn't make herself work on the pottery.

Mark on the other hand was constantly starting new projects in the shed. Over the years, he had finished hundreds of projects. Some of the things he built were sold to people on the island — a picnic table, a patio chair, a picture frame — but most things found a place somewhere in the house or in the shed. He built wooden shelves throughout the house where he displayed some wood-carvings of different animals, or picture frames he had built to surround pictures from his fishing or hunting trips, and even the cut out of his family name that he did on the band saw.

Much of the furniture in the house had been built by Mark, including their bedroom set. There was also the deck which he built around the patio doors. The deck was circular and included a Gazebo with a swing. All the patio furniture was also created in the woodshed. Mark enjoyed building so much that he even offered to help other people who were building on the island in his spare time.

Mark was well liked on the island. He had lived there all his life and his job at the customs office kept him in constant contact with people coming from both sides of the lake. People looked up to Mark because of his position, and because he seemed to be in complete control. Through his many years in the customs office Mark had built strong relationships with the people who travelled back and forth to the island. After so many years in charge of the traffic of goods to the island, Mark had created his own set of rules and routines that he felt best fit the needs of the people on the island. When the government came to the island to ensure that all their

regulations were being properly enforced, Mark was always embittered by their interference.

“This is my island!” he would tell Margaret and others who would listen. “They have no right coming in here and deciding what should and shouldn’t be done. It ain’t like where they come from here. Things are different. And they can say what they want, but I’m not changing my routine. They’ll have to learn that this is my port of entry, and they’re just passing through.”

Usually Mark tried to adjust his ways slightly while the government officials were on the island. He tried to come down a little harder on the people he knew were carrying undeclared cartons of cigarettes or bottles of alcohol brought from the American side of the border. Inevitably though, Mark always steered back to the course which he had set and people started to know when they could and couldn’t do their smuggling. They started to know Mark’s rules and limitations, how much stuff he would allow to go undeclared, and what kinds of things he wouldn’t allow. Sometimes he would get negative feedback from some of the islanders about his policies, but for the most part, people respected his way of running things.

Margaret became well known in the community as well. As the years passed, more people on the island began to accept her as close to one of their own as anyone could hope to be. Mark and Margaret lived happily on the island watching both their daughters grow up, marry, and move away. Mark expected to retire when he was sixty and then devote all his time to working in the shed. Margaret imagined that it would be nice to spend more than just Sunday afternoons in the shed with Mark. When Mark retired, then they could work together in the shed, and maybe Margaret would start some projects of her own.

Mark died suddenly on a Sunday, in the middle of February, while he was working in the woodshed. He was fifty-seven years old when he suffered a massive coronary. Margaret was in the shed with him when he bent over the wood planer, holding his chest. They flew Mark out to the hospital on the mainland by helicopter, but it was too late. Margaret found herself at the age of fifty without a spouse, and without much hope for the future.

Now, as she sits watching the dust settle on the lifeless machines in the woodshed, Margaret has come to the conclusion that she must change the direction in her life: after she married Mark the course had been set. Mark's death had set her off the course which she had counted on, the course which had been safely arranged through years of marriage. Since Mark's death, she had found herself to be paralyzed between two worlds: the one she had grown to depend upon, and the one that lay ahead like a sailor who sees a spot of land on the horizon. Three months after Mark's death, she is still sitting in the woodshed, searching for the fading scent of saw dust and trying to straighten out in her mind what it is she will do in the future.

She stopped going to church a few weeks earlier; a pattern which she had ritualistically followed while Mark was alive. It wasn't just that Margaret wanted to stay in the woodshed on Sundays, it was also because she didn't want to face the people. Margaret found that people changed after your spouse died.

The first Sunday after Mark's funeral, Margaret went to church as she always had. After the sermon. Father Bernard offered a few brief consoling and encouraging words for "the wife of the deceased Mark Gates." Margaret felt awkward as the eyes of the church searched carefully and shyly through the pews for a glimpse of the island's latest widow. And after the mass, when everyone gathered to share coffee, donuts, and gossip, Margaret was treated like a china doll.

"We're really very sorry about Mark," Clare Conner said sadly. His wife June nodded in agreement.

“Drop by for some tea or muffins sometime,” his wife Priscilla added. “Yes,” Clare continued, “you really should come and see us.”

Finally, when most of the crowd had dispersed and Margaret felt like she might be able to make an escape, Father Bernard caught a glimpse of Margaret taking her coat from the rack. He was talking to Maria Stark, the eldest woman on the island who was trying to discuss some of the alarming reforms the church was going through in order to meet the needs of a changing modern world. Margaret watched as Father Bernard kept glancing in her direction. Maria Stark kept talking even though Father Bernard had started walking away. Margaret tried to rush towards the door as inconspicuously as possible, but it was too late.

“Oh Margaret!” he said, finally escaping from Mrs. Stark. “Margaret! I was hoping to have a word with you.” Margaret stopped and turned to face the priest.

“I know this is a terrible time for you, and that you will need all the strength in the world to deal with this great loss,” he said in an almost patronizing tone.

“I just want to remind you that you can always find consolation in the Lord. Any investment in the church always results in a return that far surpasses the personal cost,” he added. Margaret smiled in false agreement and eagerly made her exit.

With the way people treated her, Margaret found it easy to fall into self-pity. It was easy to lock herself inside the woodshed and long for times past. After your spouse dies, everyone makes it clear that this is an accepted, even an expected thing to do. So Margaret locked away her personal happiness and began the ritualistic process of mourning

The Needleman were eager to help her in the process. The Needleman were an older couple who had lived next door to Mark and Margaret for many years. Mark had always been good friends with Mr. Needleman, although Margaret had always found them to be something of a burden. During the days before the funeral, the Needleman sent over a pot of baked beans and a dish of lasagna for Margaret and her

family. The note attached said: "Our sympathies go out to you and your family. If you ever need anything, we will always be here."

They were true to their word. The Needleman's were always hunting Margaret down: in the woodshed, inside her home, in the backyard. They said it wasn't good for her to be alone all the time. At least once a week they dropped by with an offering of food, as if they had performed some duty or obligation. Every Thursday they dropped by to pick Margaret up and take her to the church Bingo. In fact, the Needleman's came twice as often as they had before Mark died.

One afternoon, when Margaret was out front trimming the hedges, she heard the Needleman's talking about her.

"Ain't it sad to see such a thing?" Mr. Needleman said. "The poor woman, she's all alone and having to do her own hedges. It just ain't right -- it just ain't natural."

"She needs a man," Mrs. Needleman responded. "Someone to trim her hedges and keep her company."

"Yes, I suppose she does," Mr. Needleman replied.

It's not surprising that the Needleman's were the first who suggested that Margaret consider meeting John for coffee. John, a member of the church, had lost his wife a year before Mark's death. At first, Margaret was against the idea of dating: an internal voice, a voice that was not her own, warned Margaret against attempting to find new companionship. Yet, sitting amidst the settling dust of the woodshed — a year after Mark has died — Margaret is contemplating making changes in her life. Margaret lifts herself up from the cot and out of the criss-crossing bars of light from the window and begins to practice what she will say when she calls John.

Margaret and John planned to meet at *Rosie's Coffee House*, a small meeting place for people on the island who don't enjoy the tavern. John owned a real-estate

agency on the island. Margaret had always considered John to be a pleasant man, although Mark used to say he was hen-pecked.

Margaret felt at ease as she stepped out of the rain and into the smoke-filled coffee house. At a table in the corner, John sat in a chair with his shoulder leaning against the wall. He wore a grey trench coat which was still spotted by drops of rain. John's coffee was already half empty and an empty muffin wrapper sat beside the sugar jar. In the ashtray, smudged and broken, lay two cigarette filters. Even though she was a few minutes early, Margaret presumed that John had been waiting for some time. Margaret thought by the way John's coat flowed from his shoulders to the floor and his back hunched forward that he looked like he was curled up into a ball. His hair had grown more grey than she remembered and his skin was thick with fresh wrinkles. John's eyes never lifted from the table when the bell above the door rang. Only when Margaret approached the table did John appear to remember the planned meeting.

John stood up to greet Margaret as she pulled out a chair to sit on. "Oh! Hello. Ah . . . I'm . . . ah . . . I'm glad you came. My name is John Bellows." John's lips seemed to drop further as he realized the awkwardness of his greeting. "Obviously, you already knew that — I guess that was a rather dumb thing to say. Sorry about that. I don't mean to be nervous — but I am. I mean, you don't make me nervous, it's just that . . ."

Margaret felt a need to save John. "It's all right. I like proper introductions. Besides, it's natural to be nervous." Margaret felt odd taking control of the conversation in this way.

"Would you like a coffee . . . I mean would you like me to get you a coffee?"

"Thank-you," Margaret replied.

John seemed to relax as the evening progressed, even though he was continuously smoking.

“You don’t mind my smoking, do you?” John asked. “Michelle, my wife, she hated cigarette smoke.”

“No,” Margaret reassured him, “Mark never liked to have me smoke in the house either.”

As the night progressed they discussed their mutual friends, the Needleman. John considered them a second set of parents, which was silly considering they were only about ten years older. John also talked about the things he was involved with at the church and some of the people he worked with. Most of all, John talked about his wife. Margaret kept hoping to steer the conversation into different areas: she felt an incredible urge to talk about the things which she liked. She wanted to tell him about her plans to re-decorate her home, about her hopes of taking a trip to the Orient, and about the pottery class which she enrolled in. Margaret wanted to talk about all the things she had planned to do during those hours she sat idly in the woodshed among the lifeless machines, but she was starting to realize that John was looking for something else.

“I miss her all the time,” John startled her. “But I know you understand. That’s why I’m so glad to be here with you — to get to know you. You miss him all the time too? . . . Don’t you? The Needleman told me about how lonely they think you are.” Margaret wanted to interrupt, to explain to John that she wasn’t lonely and that she wasn’t like him, but she couldn’t find the words to explain herself. More importantly, she was sure that John would never understand.

“Some people tell me to move on — you know — to just forget!” John was feeling comfortable now that he was on a subject which he could handle. “But you understand that it’s just not that easy. That’s why I asked Needleman about you. I overheard them in the church basement telling Father Bernard that he should stop by and call upon you. It was like something went off inside of me: *Margaret would understand*, I thought to myself. Margaret would listen to me. Of all people,

Margaret would feel as I do. That's why I wanted to meet you. And I can see that I was right. Even now, you are trying to pretend it didn't happen. You talk about everything else as if you're all better now. But I know you couldn't possibly be . . . I mean how could you be?"

Margaret opened her cigarette box, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. From the window behind her a beam of lightning flashed upon John's face. She pulled the steaming cup of coffee to her lips and then sighed.

When John called the next evening, Margaret acted busy and pre-occupied. She wanted to be gentle, but more importantly she wanted to be clear. The Needleman dropped by the following Sunday and wanted to know her position on John. She explained that she didn't feel comfortable with dating yet, (even though it was a lie) and that she couldn't possibly see him again.

Margaret did her best to start avoiding the Needleman. As she started to get involved with more things, her two daughters began calling more often, wondering where she was and why she was pushing herself so hard. Margaret didn't try to explain because she knew that neither her children nor the Needleman would understand.

When Margaret came home in a new car that she bought on the mainland, the Needleman came out of their house to take a closer look.

"Now you can go to all those places you've been going to in style," Mr. Needleman said.

"That don't look cheap!" added Mrs. Needleman.

"Mark must have really taken care of you," Mr. Needleman concluded in an almost accusing tone.

Leaving home in the mornings, Margaret saw the Needleman staring from their window, sipping tea at the kitchen table, and watching the small amount of traffic pass by on the road. A short time after she bought the new car, Father Bernard

stopped in to see Margaret at home. He was interested in knowing why she had stopped attending church. He seemed very interested in how she was doing and very democratic about her absence from mass each week. He reassured her that he didn't mean to pressure her, but he wanted to give her some advice for her own well being.

"It's natural to lose faith in the order of the world when everything seems to have been turned upside down, but we can't lose faith in these things," he encouraged her. Margaret thanked him for coming and said she might see him on Sunday — she didn't.

After the experience with John, Margaret concentrated on doing some of the things which she had imagined during her time alone in the woodshed. She still went to the woodshed, but now it was with the intention of working on the pottery which she always meant to start. At first, she wasn't very successful: her first coffee mug actually looked more like one of those awkward ashtrays which kids so proudly bring home from their arts and crafts class as gifts to their parents. As time passed though, Margaret became skilled at moulding the clay into interesting mugs and bowls. She enjoyed making coffee mugs best. Her first mugs were given as gifts to her daughters and friends. Each cup was designed and decorated with the personality of a certain person in mind. Margaret felt like a coffee mug somehow gave a glimpse into peoples' identities. People sent messages about themselves by the kinds of mugs which they used each day: some people had mugs with emblems from their old University; some people had mugs with definitions of their names; some mugs had jokes about bald people, and sex, and stress; and Margaret used to have a mug that said *Number one Mom*. When Margaret thought about those mugs, and the meaning they held for each person, she was reminded of the time Mark purchased a computerised print out of the history of his family name. Mark bought the document from a small exhibition stand in the mall. He was very proud of the document and built a special frame to display it on the shelves he had built inside the house.

Margaret also began working on the machines that had been dormant for over a year. She had learned many things from listening to Mark and watching him build things in the shed. She started designing her own picture frames and special crafts like paper towel holders and children's toys.

When the shed became crowded with Margaret's completed projects she came up with an idea to open a specialty arts and crafts store on the island. When she first explained the idea to her children they told her she was too old to start such a risky undertaking, but Margaret refused to listen. She rented a shop next door to *Rosie's Coffee House* in the main business section on the island. She catered to the tourists who came to the island. The store did very well and Margaret found herself constantly working to keep the shelves filled during the busy summer months.

Some of the flower pots that Margaret made in the shed and didn't sell at her store were brought into the house. She placed them artistically on the shelves throughout the house and began to grow long dangling pots of ivy and baby's breath. The plants seemed to flourish within the house that had always had so many windows. She saved one pot to keep old bills and receipts for tax purposes. They were all simply addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Mark Gates.

Of Wolves and Shepherds

"Look out the window, John. It's starting to snow!" I said, as I watched the glossy white flakes shimmer as they entered the sphere of my back porch light.

John turned his head casually toward the back door where I held the curtain open: a discoloured white towel draped on two nails above the door. He nodded his head and smiled slightly. John was not trained in the art of aimless small talk.

It was October 13th and the northern reserve's cold air had produced the first snowflakes of the long winter. John and I were playing crib. As always, John was winning.

As I opened the curtain to watch the new snowfall, a dog barked eagerly. Although I knew the source of the disturbance, I looked out the window to confirm my suspicions: tied to a fence pole was a large black and white dog. I had not yet ascertained the noisy canine's name, but for two weeks it had hoisted many annoyed heads from the security of their pillows since the owner chained it to the fence. The dog's owner was Val, a new nurse at the hospital. We both lived in subsidised housing provided by the hospital. The hospital houses were grouped together and surrounded by a protective wire fence. This protected area was commonly referred to as the "nurses' compound." There was also a night-watchman responsible for patrolling the compound, but the warning barks of the new canine resident had been more reliable at chasing trespassers away.

"Stupid mutt," I laughed. "I wonder where he came from?"

"From the bush. *She* 's part wolf part German Shepherd," John subtly corrected me.

"No kidding! Makes a great guard dog, whatever she is. She barks so loud that no one ever comes around. If they only knew that she really barks for some attention. I fed her a piece of leftover chicken yesterday and she practically licked

my hand off in thanks. Too bad she makes so much racket! I've heard that even people outside the compound are getting fed up with it." John nodded his head in agreement, as if he had heard people complaining before.

I glanced at the dog again. It had a long white snout and sunken grey eyes. Her back was covered with mostly short black fur, but her paws and under her belly were white like the snout. Her ears were sharp and pointed, like two tiny antennas. The features of a shepherd were easy to distinguish, but only the grey eyes and the pointed snout revealed the characteristics of wolf which ran through her veins.

The dog stared back hopefully; she desperately sought some attention or relief from her ongoing isolation. There were always many stray dogs running in wolf-like packs through the gravel roads of the reserve. These groups of dogs often stopped on the other side of the fence to torment the dog trapped inside. She barked and wailed at the pack to come to her, but of course the fence made a connection impossible.

After the curtain was tied open, I returned to the kitchen table where John mixed the cards for our next game.

"More tea?" I asked. Then I lifted the pot and carefully poured the steaming green tea into his cup without waiting for a reply. John's affection for tea had become common knowledge to me; his favourite tea was Darjeeling. As I held the pot above his cup and allowed a few final drops to drip in, our eyes briefly met and John acknowledged his appreciation with a nod. Then he raised the warm cup to his face and allowed the steam to circle his nose before he took a cautious sip.

John was meticulous in his appreciation for the art of savouring a soothing cup of tea. I've never had the patience for tea. If not for John, the heinous herbal concoction would never have found a home in my kitchen cupboards. I preferred a simple cup of jolting java: thick, black, and preferably oozing with caffeine.

John was in his early twenties. His hair was long and black like a horse's mane, but as fine as thread. He tied the long flowing hair back so that it bobbed at

the centre of his thick back whenever he took a stride. His forehead was large and his jaw line long and square; coupled with his modesty, the features of John's face always made him appear shy, even aloof.

John took a second cautious sip from the steaming mug. I was always amused by the irony created when John, a six foot tall man with bull-like shoulders and a neck almost as thick as my thigh, sipped the aristocratic liquid with such favour, with such gentility.

I knew he was capable of lifting a resistant man twice my size and strait-jacketing him on his shoulder like some bag of soft, defenceless feathers — I saw him do it. I also saw John use his shoulders like a catapult to cast a charging man over his back and into a distant snow bank, and I saw John stand motionless as a drunken woman pummelled him with a barrage of cannon like fists — the woman was his girlfriend.

Under my supervision, John was being trained as an ambulance attendant. The training was funded through a program with Indian Affairs which wanted professional positions held by *outsiders* in northern communities — nurses, teachers, and social workers — replaced by trained and educated Native people. Essentially, John would someday replace me, or my future replacement, as the ambulance paramedic on the small Cree reserve somewhat hidden in the vast obscurity of what is simply called “The North.”

That is not to suggest that John or I ever had a rivalry over the position, or that I harboured a resentment over my inevitable replacement; on the contrary, John and I had become good friends.

He felt no competition with me; he recognised my plan to eventually leave the reserve which he called home. I felt no competition with him because I was always searching for an opportunity to locate a job elsewhere. It was a strange arrangement, but it worked. Unfortunately, it was that nagging knowledge of time's restrictions that

always limited our friendship, quarantined it to something which could only be passing, like spring or summer.

John dealt the cards and we went through the painful yet necessary process of picking and choosing what to keep and what to discard into the crib. We played through the first set without much conversation. The only interruption came from our canine friend who barked as someone passed beside my home.

“That dog is better than a five hundred dollar electrical nightmare; one of those sensory lights the hospital suggested we get,” I joked to John. “Only problem is that you can’t turn the dog off.” John smiled and made a large enough laugh that his chest seemed to move slightly.

When I had first invited John to play cards at my house a year earlier, I found our frequent silences uncomfortable, awkward, even intrusive. I tried vigorously to break the slow silence of our evening by generating conversation on amusing topics: hockey, music, or local gossip; John only seemed annoyed by my constant persistence. After our first awkward evening, I assumed John would never return; obviously he must have been appalled by my company since he seemed so uninvolved, uninterested. In different places I would have taken John's apparent indifference as a sign that my company bored him; however, the next week, much to my surprise, he asked if he could return to play cards again. That next time he brought over three packages of tea and a crib board. After that night, I always stocked my shelves with Darjeeling tea and started to read books on the art of cribbage. It was easy to become accustomed to, even dependent on, the slow, serene pace of our torpid lifestyle.

That is not to suggest that John and I passed our time uneventfully. I saw a great many things while working as a paramedic on the reserve. There were always emergency calls which required us to react immediately.

I remember the first call John and I answered was made by a young boy who was secretly calling from a closet in his home. His mother was bleeding in the tub after his father had beaten her during a drunken disagreement. She had threatened to leave him after he sold their four-wheeler for a hundred and seventy dollars which he then used to buy a mickey of contraband whisky. When we pulled in front of the run down home with a graveyard of broken, disassembled snowmobiles in the yard, we discovered the husband sitting on the wooden front steps rocking back and forth like a child in a chair. He was shirtless in the summer heat: the ripples of his stomach, the sinewy cut of his muscular arms painted with tattoos were exposed in the afternoon light. In rhythm with his rocking, the man repeatedly drove his knife into the wooden steps like a dart on a dart board.

When John saw the man he put his forearm against my shoulder and motioned for me to stay in the ambulance. John cautiously approached the porch where the man sat rocking. As John grew closer, the husband waved his knife and demanded that we leave his property. We had phoned the police after receiving the young boy's call, but as usual, the local police were slow to react. This didn't deter John. He approached the man confidently, speaking in Cree. It took at least a half-hour of coaxing before the man allowed us to enter the home. I never knew what was said between the two men, I just remember the fear I felt when John motioned for me a second time. This time he was directing me into the house where we knew the woman was waiting. When I walked by him on the porch, he told me to find the woman and the boy while he waited with the husband. The husband never looked at me as I cautiously stepped past him and into the house. He also never relinquished possession of his knife. I still wonder what might have happened to me in a case like this, had I been alone. Would the husband have even allowed me, *a stranger*, to enter his home?

It was these experiences which helped to bind John and me together. As we played cards that night of the first snowfall, it seemed obvious that our friendship

never required conversation. Sometimes though, I looked at John and tried unsuccessfully to penetrate his thoughts, the dark chasms and long corridors which formulated his mind, his memory, his history. I wished that I could have found some way to scratch beyond the surface of our friendship.

"Fifteen two. Fifteen four." I counted out my points. "*Nairow!*" I said, trying to pronounce the Cree word for the number four.

"*Nero*" he corrected me, stressing the articulation in an attempt to show me the proper pronunciation.

"*Nero*" I repeated awkwardly. John nodded his head again to affirm my pronunciation.

"I sure hope we don't get a call tonight," I said. "I really don't feel like going out. The first snowfall is pretty from behind a warm window, but it's starting to look cold outside." As I spoke the words I knew I had jinxed us, and sure enough, within a half-hour our game was interrupted when the hydro blinked and then went out. The entire house went dark and the stereo we played became suddenly silent. I was well prepared for the common occurrence, and immediately rose from the table and opened the kitchen cupboard where I kept the emergency candles, matches, and flashlight. While I was lighting the emergency candles, I was startled from the silence by the ringing of the phone.

"Craig?" a familiar voice asked.

"Yah."

"It's Val at the hospital, . . . "

"Uh huh,"

"There's a fire and they may need you. We . . . "

"Oh no,"

". . . already called the firehall. Is John there?"

"Yah."

"Tell him it's at Josey's place. They say he'll know."

"OK. Do they know if anyone is hurt?"

"We don't know. Just got the call from a neighbour."

"All right."

I hung up the phone and looked to John and he knew we had to get ready. He retrieved his coat from the chair and shrugged it around his shoulders all in one awkward yet efficient motion.

"What is it?"

"A fire," I said. "They don't know if anyone is hurt yet, but the fire department has already been called."

"Where?"

"They said to tell you it's at Josey's."

For a brief moment I caught a glimpse of uncanny surprise on John's face followed by his routine nod of acknowledgement. We rushed out the back door to where the ambulance was parked. On the porch, the flushness of my cheeks was swarmed by cool flakes of snow which melted on impact. Val's dog barked and jumped and tugged at its rope all in an effort to get our attention.

"Shh!" I told her, as I sped into the ambulance where John was already seated behind the wheel.

John drove while I started to prepare the oxygen masks for anyone affected by smoke inhalation. While fumbling through the equipment in the back of the rocking vehicle, I inspected the world outside the tinted ambulance glass for signs of the fire.

On either side of the road all the houses were dark and shadowy. The typically burnished stars of the north sparkled more spryly without electrical competition, as if the community's energy had been transferred to the stars testifying to the scientific hypothesis that energy is never lost, just simply transformed. Even the elegant northern lights, seemingly clad in a wispy ballroom dress which was green like the

colour of John's tea, danced and curtsied more visibly in the darkened sky.

Beneath the elevated glamour of the evening sky, darkness had spread across all terrestrial things except the swelling flames and mounting smoke which were easily distinguished in the distance. The flames clambered up the burning house as if it were a ladder to the stars. As John accelerated on the loose gravel road, I slipped and bounced in the back of the ambulance as if gravity no longer existed on earth.

Within minutes we reached the street and made a left turn. As we made the turn, John was forced to slow our speed more than I had expected; information, good or bad, passes quickly in a small place like a reserve, and a crowd had flocked around the spectacle of ascending flames, mounting ashes, and crumbling lives. The sour scent of tragedy wafted in the air and mixed with the smoke and ash to lure everyone to the light like animals who are sensitive to smells. An image of my father deciding to follow a flashing red fire truck during a Sunday drive presented itself in my mind then quickly faded and was replaced by the tangible sight of flames which licked and fed on the vulnerable volatility of wood.

In front of the burning home, John honked his horn twice before the crowd separated. If I had been driving, I could not have matched John's patient poise, the same patience he showed whether he was playing cards or defending himself against an assault. After the crowd separated, we parked the ambulance past the foot of the driveway to leave enough room for the fire engines when they arrived.

When the ambulance was parked, I rushed out the sliding doors and panned the area for any victims, or for some sign of the fire department. I saw an elderly woman standing in the driveway holding her mouth. She coughed heavily into her wrinkled hands; each sooty convulsion shook her brittle bones like an aged tree caught in a squall. Her face was blotched with dark ash and the tears which dripped upon her cheek turned into dark muddled water. She moaned rhythmically in Cree like a chant, like a religious incantation. By the time I gathered my senses enough to approach her,

John was already there to help hold the woman upright.

"Where's the fire department?" I asked John in a flustered voice.

He shrugged his shoulders then turned to look at the burning home. The flames continued to nibble and gnaw at the wood. The fire which seemed to originate at the new addition in the back square of the house had marched forward, encompassing at least half of the home. The cool drops of crystal white flakes continued to fall from the sky, mixing in with the heat of smoke and ash and falling on our faces like debris from an erupting volcano.

"Is there anyone inside?" I asked John, knowing the housing problem on the reserve that forced families to fit ten to twelve people in one crowded home.

John asked the woman a question in Cree.

"*Mona*" she said, which I had learned meant *No*.

By this time the throng of people herded around the burning house whispered and sighed like children around a campfire. I stood on the ambulance bumper for leverage and searched down the road towards the firehall. The battery operated siren still rang, but the wooden door to the large garage remained closed.

Suddenly, the wooden door shattered as the fire truck bolted out of the firehall like a derailed train. At first I denied the logic of my eyes, but then I realised that it was true: the truck had driven straight through the garage door. I heard scattered bits of dark laughter from within the crowd, the kind of laughter that sometimes strikes the helpless.

Standing on the bumper I gaped at the old fire truck which bounced toward the fire. The driver stopped twice in an attempt to disperse the human walls which blocked his passage. When the truck finally halted just behind our ambulance, two local men vaulted out the doors on either side. The driver stopped to speak with two men from the crowd. Immediately, these two men became new recruits as they started to help remove the fire hose from the truck. The driver pulled one end toward

the only fire hydrant on the street about fifty yards back in the direction of the firehall.

"What the hell happened?" I asked the fire-fighter who came out the passenger's door of the fire engine. I didn't know his name, but he was given a job as a fire-fighter when his father had become the new Chief that year.

"No power. The electric door opener wouldn't work. We had to drive through the door." He answered calmly.

"*Why . . .*" I began, and then I stopped myself, realising that asking the *whys* wouldn't solve the current problem.

The men pulling the hose were forced to stop when they ran out of line about five feet short of the hydrant. The driver of the truck hoisted the hose over his back and tugged forcefully in an attempt to somehow create more line. One of the recruits stepped behind the driver and vigorously tugged on the hose in a futile attempt to help stretch the line. The black comedy of the situation began to formulate in my mind as the driver pushed the volunteer off the rope in frustration and then yelled to someone in the crowd to move the truck.

A third man from the crowd hesitated, then climbed into the truck and started the engine. I remember his smiling face as he backed towards the hydrant, thoroughly satisfied with his chance to drive the large vehicle. His smile was comparable to a teenager after his first successful attempt to parallel park.

As the smiling volunteer pushed backwards towards the hydrant, and the flames continued to devour larger portions of the home, the crowd began to recognise the urgency of the situation and separated without any prompting. The four men working on the hose finally got it linked with the hydrant and two of them returned to the truck where they retrieved the nozzle. Feeling a sense of displacement and perhaps a misplaced urge for heroism, I rushed behind the two men in an effort to help hold the hose in preparation for the oncoming water. We crept towards the home

in an effort to get a position as close to the fire as possible. When we were in place, the man at the front yelled in Cree to the two men working at the hydrant.

I braced myself and waited for the tightening of the hose when a torrent of water would blast its way through the shaft like a bullet. But the bullet did not come. The water did not gush. The hose never tightened. It remained limp, lifeless, heavy in my hands.

The two men holding the hose carried on a shouting match with the two men at the hydrant. Somewhere in the mixture of their voices and the buzzing of the crowd, I heard the word *hydro*. It is amazing how heavy the weight of airlessness is once tragic realisation sucks out your breath like a vampire. And the flood of oxygen released from our exasperated lungs only helped to feed the flames which consumed everything they touched.

When the hydro was finally restored and the lights of the previously dark homes simultaneously turned on with a buzz, the walls of the burning home had crumbled. By this time I had left my station at the hose and returned to the ambulance, slumped on the bumper, my elbows balanced on my knees. John was helping the woman with her oxygen mask, silently consoling her as she fixed an empty, dry stare at what was once her life.

I heard the sound of the water as it snapped its way through the hose. The two men holding the hose were forced to dig their feet into the ground when it finally shot out toward the flames. But this was only a formality; it was too late to save the photo albums, the trunks of cloth, or the leather hides.

The air in the crowd turned bitter. Their sense of injustice stirred; their frustration and fear of helplessness renewed. Struck by my own solitude within the

crowd, I walked toward John and the woman who both leaned against the sliding ambulance door.

In the mixture of voices in the crowd I heard an acid voice directed towards the spot where a house once existed.

"It's just too bad. Too bad it wasn't a fancy teacher's home, or a nurse's home. Why here?"

At first I imagined that I was wrong, that I had misheard the words, but I knew that they were meant for me, just loud enough for me to hear. The words slid their way down my thick throat and into my empty stomach where they ate at the thin liner of my insides like some kind of poison. I looked at John beside me, sure that he must have heard these words, but he was staring into the embers of the house and never acknowledged me or the voice. I began to feel small and crowded, like a lost child in the dark woods. I walked around to the driver's side of the ambulance and opened the door. Then I turned to John and the woman he was consoling.

"We should probably take her to the hospital. Let the nurses look at her. They might want to keep her overnight."

John opened the sliding door. He said a few words in Cree, then helped the woman into the ambulance. The three minute drive to the hospital was filled with an intrusive silence.

"Is that it?" I asked Val. She was working behind the front desk since the hospital was short on staff after another new nurse had decided to leave the community before her contract was finished. Val is from North Bay, close to my hometown in Sudbury.

"I think so. All the forms are done. I just feel bad for Josey. She lost everything tonight."

"Thankfully she wasn't hurt. I'm glad there was no one else in the house."

"Me too." I turned to John who was sitting patiently on the visitors' couch.

"Are you ready to go?" He stood up slowly.

John had spent the last half hour with Josey. I did not know it until we got to the hospital, that Josey was John's grandmother. During a short conversation he had with her in the examining room, I caught the word *Koukom*, which means grandmother in Cree. At that moment I felt how strange it was that through all our nights of playing cards and responding to emergency calls, I did not know such a simple yet personal piece of information about John's life.

I turned back to Val who had just tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear so it wouldn't get in the way of her paper work.

"Thanks!" I said excessively cheerful. I never admitted it to anyone other than myself, but I was interested in Val. She was not my usual *type*, but in a small town with a limited number of prospective mates, it was important to keep your options open.

"No problem. I'll probably see you tomorrow."

"Sure thing."

John and I walked to the ambulance together. I remember wondering if he ever sensed my mild flirtation with Val, but I knew he would never have inquired.

"Do you want to go back to my place and finish the card game?"

"No," John said. "I think I'll go home."

"Jump in!" I pointed to the ambulance which I always parked outside my house. "I'll give you a lift."

"No. I'll walk."

John tightened the zipper on his coat and walked slowly toward the exit at the end of the nursing compound, his large shoulders bent inward and his hands dug deep

into his pockets in an effort to defend against the cold. Then he stopped and turned back in my direction.

"Have a good night," he said as an after thought.

"You too," I paused. "I'm sorry about your grandmother's house," I added. John kept walking towards the compound's exit gate.

When I got home I quickly entered the house and took a shower. As the water ran over my pale skin, I couldn't help but think of the acid voice from the crowd.

After my shower I sat in front of the television and drank a cup of warm milk to try and settle the many nerves which tingled and burned like live wires beneath my skin. Outside, the wind's intensity magnified as it charged at the walls and rattled the plexi-glass which covered and protected my windows from the rocks that local children threw. The wind picked up the crystal white flakes of snow and built them into rising desert dunes alongside the walls of my home.

Before going to bed I bolted the door and placed a wooden bar across it. The bar was a safety feature provided in all the nurses' homes as an extra precaution in case the night watchman fell asleep or disappeared on a week long binge. I walked down the stairs into the basement, turned off the light, and flopped on the bed where I finally fell into a restless sleep.

Sometime later I was awakened by a low moaning sound which seemed to be right outside my basement window. At first I thought it was the northern wind moaning in the lonely night, but then I realised that the sound was too precise, too rhythmic to be the wind. I listened carefully, my whole body tightened in an effort to decipher the origin of such a pathetic sound. I scanned my window for shadows, but none appeared. I heard the moan again, long and drawn like someone in agony. My poisoned mind, fermented by the evening events, frothed and bubbled with a cauldron of interpretations to explain the haunting moans outside my window.

Is someone injured? I thought to myself. *Dying and bleeding. Right here! Right outside my window!* The muffled moan penetrated the thin walls again.

No. Can't be. Why would they come here? Some kid is probably trying to scare me. Playing a prank. The watchman. He should be coming soon. He must hear this. God, how could he not hear this?

Yet, the night watchman never appeared. I unjustly cursed him for his irresponsibility. Even the dog next door, that strange, ironic mix of wolf and shepherd, never barked, nor growled, nor groaned to scare off the intruder.

Maybe Val took a break from the night shift to bring the dog in out of the cold? I told myself. *Or maybe she called a neighbour to bring him in?*

Then all the horror stories about houses being invaded and retaliatory beatings that I was told when I first arrived began to play through my mind.

Maybe a gas sniffer is hiding under the shadow of my house. Got his face buried in some plastic bag filled with that yellow venom. Probably so high he doesn't even know where he is.

I had heard many stories about bored youth who sought inexpensive outlets by getting high off gas or paint fumes. It was well known that a person high on gas, lost in his own destructive drug induced delusions, is prone to howling at the moon; yet as another muffled moan chilled my blanket-covered body, I knew that the sound was too agonising, too painful to just be some hallucinating sniffer. I weighed the option of going out into the dark night to try and discover the genesis of the sound, but the possibilities seemed too frightening. Instead, I remained paralysed in my bed, staring at the window and cringing with each low wrenching wail.

But what if someone needs my help? But what if it is just a prank? Or maybe, someone is just waiting for me to come out.

Still the muffled moan seeped through my bedroom walls, mixing above my bed and into the darkness where all my other emotions circled at tornado-like speed,

mixing and circling like smoke and ash in the darkened sky. The sound continued for another agonising hour until it finally dissipated. All was silent save the night wind. Somehow, I managed to fall back into an uncomfortable sleep.

The next morning I quickly got up and stepped out onto the porch and into the silent morning air. My feet crunched softly as I made my way down each snow covered step. I turned the corner of my house towards the basement window with the intention of searching for footprints in the snow, or some other sign to explain the clamour of the night. I was puzzled when I could only find a few animal tracks that had not been buried by the wind blown snow. I went around to the other side of the house and started to sense the truth behind the mysterious moan.

As I turned the corner, I looked under the wooden front steps and saw a frozen motionless mass of fur, like a coat or a hat frozen to the ground. With dark realisation settling in, I knelt in front of the porch and bent down for a closer look. There I saw the familiar long snout of Val's dog. The eyes were caught in a frozen stare and the mouth was locked open so that the teeth were visible, as if the dog had died in the middle of a growl. Staining the white snow that had blown under the steps was a patch of dried red blood which must have trickled from the dog's mouth while it died in agony under my porch. The blood settled beside the icy snout as if the dog had rotted from the inside out. While I laid in bed trying to ignore the moans, the dog had slowly died in this unglamorous, awkward position.

I rose up from the darkness hidden under my porch and looked out across the fresh crystal snow which had covered the muddy earth like plaster or dry wall. I thought to myself how easy it is to forget the besmirching quality of wet earth while the ground is covered in the sanctity of white snow; how effortless it is to remove the memory of gritty dust grating on your teeth when the air is cold and crisp for seven months of the year; and how uncomplicated it is to ignore pleas for help when you

can convince yourself that it is merely the wind, and what can one do against the wind?

Not long after the fire I accepted a job selling pharmaceuticals in Toronto. John and some other friends I had made on the reserve helped me carry my bags to the airport in the back of a wooden sled which was connected to a snowmobile. The airport consisted of a long gravel road, a small shack used by the police, and a small building where people checked in and waited for the plane to come. Inside the waiting area, we joked casually about things, avoiding the obvious — this was the last time we would ever see one another. Even John's grandmother, Josey, came to say good-bye. When it was time to board the plane John and I shook hands and we both tried to make the farewell as easy as possible.

On the plane, I sat at a window seat. As the plane began to speed down the runway, I watched as the small crowd of people waved goodbye, their figures becoming smaller and smaller as the distance between the plane and the ground increased. I slept easily for the first half-hour of the plane ride. When I awoke, I looked out the window and down to the earth which was a flat green. For miles behind me this sea of green coniferous trees swept back to the reserve I left behind. I thought of the apartment I would probably rent somewhere downtown, of the fast food cheeseburgers, the drive-thru coffee shops, the shopping malls with an infinite amount of unnecessary items, and the slushy suburban roads of a southern winter; and then I saw John and the miles of swamp and trees that I could claim quarantined our friendship even more than time.

Vita Auctoris

Brady Rivard was born in Chatham, Ontario in 1971. He received his B.A. in English from the University of Windsor in 1994 and began working on his M.A. in Creative Writing in 1995. He took a year to obtain a Bachelors of Education from the University of Windsor in 1996 and then accepted a teaching position on the James Bay coast where he continued to finish his M.A. on a part-time basis. He plans to continue teaching in the future.