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ALL THE RAGE

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

BY

JENNIFER CHAMBERS

A Creative Writing Project submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts at the University of Windsor.

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1996

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To my mother and father,
for their proximity and their distance

*When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.*

Adrienne Rich

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'Ce Soir Si Noir'

The autumn air is turning from balmy to crisp, and in the French Canadian community of Nordbrun, M. and Mme. Bélanger are spending a Saturday night out on the town. The change of season marks the end of Pierre Bélanger's bulk of work: he is a foreman for a tree planting company, which keeps him busy and mostly away from his family from the moment spring is in the air until winter nears. Tonight, Pierre and his wife Hilary are celebrating his homecoming by going out to dinner and then to the town players' performance of *Les Belles Soeurs*. Pierre's wiry body masks his strength, though his pink and ruddy complexion and especially his rough hands give away his outdoor trade. Short and petite, Hilary Bélanger complements her husband in every way except that she is an anglophone who grew up in Nordbrun. She is a pretty and nervous woman, who is proud of her husband and two daughters, though they are a small family compared to many in their community. People like the Bélangers because they are modest and private. The Bélangers settle up the dinner bill at a restaurant and head toward the town hall.

It is not often that Angélique and Janine Bélanger are left alone by their parents. Janine is fourteen now and still helpful around the house. She takes good care of her seven year old sister when their mother works temporary jobs as a secretary throughout the year. Tonight, their mother left a lasagna for them to eat for dinner, but Janine only ate two bites before her head sank down so that the ends of her long brown hair fell into the sauce on her plate. Angélique does not point this out to her sister, though she finds it disturbing.

“I’m just going to the couch,” Janine announces while Angélique keeps eating at the table. Janine had been grouchy all day and Angélique tried to be quiet around her to avoid fighting. Janine was usually kind to Angélique, especially when she was babysitting, allowing her to stay up past her bedtime watching television or playing dress-up with their mother’s clothes. Small for her age, and with her bowl-cut hair, Angélique looks almost elfin. Dressing her up in her mother’s makeup and clothes makes her look like a cartoon miniature of her mother.

Angélique finishes what she can of the lasagna on her plate and gets up from the table to look in on Janine. She sees her sister sleeping soundly. Angélique feels strange in the house with Janine sleeping and nobody else there. It is almost like being home alone. She feels worried, unsettled somehow. What if someone tried to break in through the front windows with an axe? The thought makes her shiver. She takes the dishes into the kitchen, and standing on a chair, she runs the water and pours soap into the sink to wash up because it is her turn.

Once she has finished doing the dishes, Angélique goes back to where Janine is sleeping. She sits on the floor with her back to the couch and turns on the television. Janine does not stir when the animated television voices fill the room. In a few minutes, though, Janine opens her eyes and stretches. “I’m not feeling well at all,” she says. Angélique feels sorry for her sister. She edges her bottom up onto the couch and tries to snuggle in with Janine, who lets her. Shortly, though, Janine becomes restless. She sits up slowly, and her head falls to one side. Angélique notices a stringline stain of tomato sauce on the couch cushion where Janine’s hair had lain.

“Are you tired?” Janine asks.

Angélique shakes her head and stares wide-eyed at her sister.

"I think I have to go to bed," she explains. "I'm feeling really sick."

"Does your tummy hurt?" Angélique asks.

"Everything does. My tummy, my head, legs, back. I think I need to go to sleep. Do you want to come upstairs and get ready for bed?"

Angélique does this because she is worried about her sister. "You don't have to go to bed yet if you don't want to," Janine explains. "But *I* need to. Just get in your pajamas, we'll brush our teeth and then you can go back and watch TV for another hour – until the hall clock strikes eight – before coming up to bed. How does that sound?"

"Ok," Angélique says doubtfully.

"Or you can go to bed now, too, if you feel like it."

Angélique trudges back downstairs after she has brushed her teeth. She doesn't like to look out of the windows now that it is dark outside and nobody is with her. She goes to the television and watches for a little while. She feels alone and bored, so she gets a colouring book and crayons between the lines for a few minutes. Before the clock strikes eight, she heads back upstairs to the room she shares with Janine and tucks herself into the darkness. The sound of her sister's even breathing soothes her to sleep.

Through a wave of dreaminess Angélique awakes, confused. She hears Janine coughing and sputtering in bed. It takes her eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness and then she can make out Janine's silhouette sitting up in bed. Angélique throws off her covers and moves toward the doorway of the room. Standing on her tiptoes, she turns on the overhead light.

Vomit seeps out of Janine's coughing mouth, staining the bedsheets and stinking up the room. Angélique does not know what to do.

"Janine!" she cries, as she slides onto the bed, putting an arm around

her sister. Janine feels damp and hot and her eyes have not looked at Angélique once. Her eyes are rolling back in her head, showing the whites, ghostly. “Janine?” Angélique questions more desperately.

Instead of answering, Janine chokes some more, a huge eruption of a cough, which brings up only a tiny bit of throw-up. Angélique feels lost. She whimpers for her sister to wake up. “Please,” she whines. “Janine, I don’t know what to do...I don’t know...what to do.”

Worse than she could have imagined, as Angélique tries to wipe Janine’s mouth with the bedsheet, she realizes that blood is beginning to seep out of her sister’s mouth.

I have to get Mommy, Angélique thinks, she would know what to do. She scurries down the flight of stairs, pulls on rubber boots and a jacket from the hook in the front hall. Opening the front door, Angélique looks out into the obscurity of her street. A nervousness swells in her stomach and she hesitates. Hearing the awful sound of Janine still being sick upstairs, she flees the house. She must get help for Janine.

The night is fiercely dark. Scary. Angélique runs from her front porch, down the street, which is empty, lonely, frightening in its secretiveness. She looks straight ahead, not wanting to see anything that might be lurking in the shadows. Her rubber boots are loose around her ankles and they make a thudding sound with every step as her feet hit the pavement. Rushing, rushing, all she can think is that her sister is dying and she has to save her. Why did her parents have to go out tonight? Angélique’s jacket flutters at her sides in the cool breeze she makes as she runs.

Where are her parents? She remembers her mother telling them that they would be at the town hall watching a play tonight, should they need them for any reason. She knows she can get there by running because she

and her mother walk into town a lot. Her parents will be angry with her for being awake at this hour, for being out in the street in the dark, for not being able to save her sister on her own. Angélique is breathing hard, and she can feel her legs aching beneath her. She slows down, trying to keep her legs running. It is getting hard for her. But Janine. Whose eyes couldn't even look at her. Who couldn't say one single word to her, but only throw up more and more and then the blood. Angélique picks up the pace. She must get to her mother before Janine dies.

She wishes she were bigger. Then she could run faster. Then she could know what to do for Janine without her mother. If it weren't for the blood, Angélique thinks, she wouldn't have to run. But blood is serious. Blood is private. Blood is worth crying over. When she got knocked down in the schoolyard and both of her knees bled, Angélique remembers how afraid it made her to see the blood seeping out of her body, dripping down her legs. She has seen her mother, too, lying flat on the kitchen floor, crying as blood smeared her dress, when they promised her another sister or brother. But after the blood they took the promise back. And they never talked about it.

Her breathing gets thicker and heavier with every step she takes. She tries not to think about it. She counts each step in her head – seventy-three, seventy-four, *soixante-quinze*, *soixante-seize* – until she almost goes over on her ankle, and has to stumble to stay upright. *Chaque pas, déguelas – chaque pas, déguelas*. Angélique begins chanting in her head with every step. It is a game her father taught her when she had to go to the doctor for a booster shot. He told her to think of a French rhyme and repeat it in her head. He made up funny ones. *Grand fou, il est jaloux. Chaque pas, déguelas. Chaque pas, déguelas.*

Up ahead she can finally see the town hall, its clock the biggest light in

the darkness of the town. There are a few cars parked there, and some restaurants still open.

“Hey, little girl, isn’t it past your bedtime?” A voice calls out to her but she keeps on running to get away from it.

“What’s your hurry?” the voice persists.

She is nearly at the town hall steps. Her nightgown is moist with sweat, which reminds her again of Janine. She keeps going. *Presque là, comme ça va, presque là, comme ça va*, she chants in her head with every step. A group of teenagers hanging out under a street light see her and call out, “What’s the matter, *jeune fille*? The boogie man get you?”

Reaching the stairs, Angélique runs straight up, through the door that is propped open and ahead to the auditorium. She has been here before, sometimes on Saturdays, for puppet shows. She gulps in air, panting, unable to catch her breath. Her head feels light and spinny. She heaves at the heavy door to the auditorium – once, twice, three times, and then she has opened it enough to squeeze her body through.

On the other side of the door, Angélique is amazed to see that it is completely dark except for the stage. It is not what she was expecting. The audience is quiet, attentive, listening to what the actors are saying. Angélique tries to adjust her eyes to the lighting. She *has* to find her parents. Moving quietly from the doorway towards the back row, she can make out the backs of heads. Swarms of heads. Her breathing hastens as she begins to sob in silence. How will she ever find her parents in here?

Suddenly, Angélique is grabbed from behind. It is completely unexpected and in her panic, she freezes. The hands that move around her waist from behind are clumsy, clutching. At first, she cannot tell whether it is simply an adult trying to keep her from disrupting the play, but then she is

afraid. She is pulled back, by a clumsy hand around her waist, against something hard. The other hand sweeps past her eyes first, then covers her mouth sloppily. Somehow, Angélique understands that this is a sign that she must remain silent. She is panting, sobbing two breaths in, one breath out. The hand moves from her mouth, pulling at her jacket and going inside her nightgown. She feels goose bumps form on her skin. Her mind is unfocussed. The hand moves down, shifting her around, feeling her naked body in a way she does not understand. She is confused. Her bare skin shudders under the hands, which sweep over her, knowing, in a way that she does not, what they are looking for. She feels them touch the soft spot between her legs and she knows that something is wrong. Everything is wrong. Her body convulses, writhing away from the hands, and she realizes she is stronger than they are. She *can* get away. She falls to the floor, scrambles away and looks back.

She sees Raymond, the man in the wheelchair who gives out programs at events in the town hall. Appalled by who it is, Angélique screams and wails. She forgets that she is at a play for the grown ups. Seeing the grin on Raymond's face and the joking look in his eye, she cannot stop the blood-curdling shriek from flowing out of her mouth, from her exhausted lungs. She has heard her father call Raymond "retarded", a name she knows is bad because that is what kids at school say to each other in teasing fights. The thought of Raymond has made her scared enough to hide behind her mother's leg whenever they bump into him. Every time, her mother scolds her for it. Her mom says that Raymond can't help the way he is and that they should be extra nice to him. Raymond: whose head hangs over to one side of his wheelchair, who can speak, but not in a way that is understandable to Angélique, whose clumsy hands have just reached out and felt her bare body.

Mme. Coulant, the older usher lady, looks over at Angélique, then looks past her to Raymond and comes running toward her. A few other people from the audience run back to where she is, the sea of heads turning abruptly. It cannot be a part of the performance, though Angélique feels on display as her crying continues.

“What is it?” one man says to her.

Mme. Coulant bends down, trying to cradle Angélique in her arms, but she resists. She searches the faces through her bleary eyes and muddled thoughts for her mother. For the one person who can turn this nightmare around.

“Hilary!” Mme. Coulant calls out her mother’s name. “Hilary Bélanger, it’s your Angélique.”

In a moment, Angélique is in her mother’s arms, her father right beside them, his arm around his wife’s shoulder, looking on with concern. She can barely speak through her sobbing, her whimpering, her lack of breath.

“*Bon Dieu, qu’est-ce qu’il y a?*” her father mops his beaded forehead.

“Angélique,” her mother seems much more calm as she moves her toward the door. “What is it? What’s going on? Where is Janine?”

Suddenly it all comes back to Angélique. “Janine,” she sputters, moving her head to the side, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Sick at home,” she whimpers.

“Honey, calm down and explain it to me,” her mother pleads, but Angélique cries harder and pushes her wet face into her mother’s shoulder. She soothes, “Tell me what’s the matter. Where is Janine? Is everything all right with Janine?”

Moving toward the door, they pass Raymond, who is still grinning in his chair. Angélique points to him. Her tears become angry, humiliated as

she chokes out, "And him." Mme. Coulant's face becomes red with anger, and she wheels Raymond away from Angélique, one hand firmly pressed on his shoulder.

Her father pushes his way ahead of the crowd and opens the door for his wife and child. He takes a man aside and as they pass he says, "For God's sake, find out what happened here with Raymond." His voice is filled with anxiety. This is all he says before he fishes out the car keys. "I'll bring the car around," he says to his wife.

Angélique's sobs slow down once she is left alone with her mother, away from the crowd and the meanness of Raymond. Her mother picks her up and holds her tightly, patting her hair. "What happened with Janine?" she asks.

"She" – sob – "couldn't even look at me," Angélique tries to explain. "Throwing up in bed...and blood."

Her mother's arms stiffen around her. They hear the car pull up and her mother races down the stairs and into the car, never letting Angélique out of her arms for a moment.

"It sounds bad, Pierre," she says. Angélique sees that her father is upset.

"Must be, to push the little one out into the dark. She's so afraid." Her father reaches an arm over and gently touches Angélique's shoulder, without taking his eyes off the road.

It is but a short drive to their home, though it had seemed so far when Angélique was running before. They pull into the driveway and Angélique and her mother are out before the car has stopped running. They run up the steps to the front porch, push open the door, and Angélique's mother moves past her, hurrying to get to Janine. Angélique is halfway up the stairs when

her father rushes in. He breezes past her on the stairs, but Angélique cries out to him. He reaches out and grabs her hand in response, pulling her along with him so hastily that one of her boots falls off her foot.

“Hilary, how is she?” His voice is not soft and gentle, the way it always is at home. Now, her father’s voice sounds stern. The smell of sick pervades the upstairs of the house. Angélique cranes her neck to see past her mother into her bedroom.

“Run the bath, Pierre. She’s running a terrible fever,” her mother’s voice is strained.

They move quickly toward the bathroom, and Angélique’s dad keeps her on his knee as he crouches to run the bath. His eyebrows are frowning, and Angélique can tell everything is not safe yet. She pulls off her other boot and remains quiet with him.

“You’re a brave girl,” he says, but still his voice sounds angry.

Angélique’s head feels heavy. She wonders why her father is angry with her, and if Janine can look at her mother yet. She smells Papa’s cologne mixed with his sweaty usual smell. Getting up, he tries to set Angélique on top of the toilet seat, but she clings to him.

“You wait here one minute, P’tite, till I carry your sister in here, all right?”

Angélique sits back and pulls her knees in to her chest, stretching her nightgown over both knees, rocking back and forth. Her sobbing has slowed down now, but she remembers being pulled against Raymond’s knees from behind, and it isn’t over yet. She sees her father walking toward the bathroom with Janine, naked, drooping over his arms, lifeless. Her eyes are still open, but rolled back in her head. Her mother hastens after them, sleeves rolled up, carrying the bedsheets drenched with blood and vomit,

which she drops in a bundle near the laundry hamper.

Angélique's mother kneels beside the tub, one hand supporting Janine's neck, the other sponging water over her. It feels strange to Angélique to have her whole family gathered in the bathroom. Papa moves toward Angélique, scooping her onto his lap as he slides underneath her and says, "Oh, P'tite," and Angélique still feels afraid. A few minutes later, he looks at his wife and asks, "How is she?"

"She'll make it," her mother says. "Her fever is really high, but the flush is starting to come out of her face. She should come around soon. I think it may be pneumonia though."

"Shouldn't I call a doctor?"

"Why don't we see how this goes first? He'll only tell us to do what we're doing for now, anyway."

"Well, we're calling tomorrow for sure." Her father's voice is rigid with anger.

Her mother nods and gives her father a look. "Angélique, you must be tired, sweetie," her mother appeals to her. She shakes her head in response.

Papa rocks Angélique in his arms. She cannot feel tired now. Her stomach hurts. She needs to see for herself that Janine will get better. If Janine gets better, Angélique feels sure that Raymond will die. But if Janine dies...

Angélique and her father sit in silence for some time while Angélique's mother bathes Janine. After a few minutes, Janine grows fitful, and Angélique's father gets up, carrying Angélique in front of him, and moves toward the tub. He bends down, keeping Angélique near, and, sleeves rolled up, he helps her mother to keep Janine in the water and out of danger of hitting her head on the porcelain sides. Janine cries out, flailing her arms

in the water, splashing her whole family. One of the hooks tears away from the bright blue shower curtain with yellow dandelions spilled across it.

Angélique begins sobbing once more, slowly and quietly, on seeing her sister so crazy and strange. She remembers his hands inside her nightgown searching her as if she had candy she wouldn't share with him. Her eyes are sore from the tears and her breath is belaboured. She rests her head on her father's legs and when Janine is calm, she feels his gruff hands pat her hair. She falls unwillingly to sleep there.

Roused by her father moving her head onto her mother's lap to answer a knock at the door, Angélique feels like she is in a dream. A sob erupts from her, but when she looks up at her mother's face, it seems more pacified.

"Janine is going to be fine," her mother says, with a tired smile. Her mother looks weary, a line of makeup smeared beneath her eyes. "When your father comes back, we'll get her out of the tub and into her pajamas." They can hear her father speaking in hushed tones with a few other men and a woman at the bottom of the stairs. Angélique sits up and looks at Janine, whose eyes are closed now. She feels confused and rubs her raw eyes, as stunted, sobbing breaths continue from her mouth. She thinks she hears Mme. Coulant speaking to her father downstairs.

Her father's voice becomes louder, boisterous almost, which is rare. Angélique has almost never seen Papa get angry. Not when she and Janine argue, or when he is tired from work. She can remember only one time when her father got angry at her Oncle Domi, when he arrived drunk and swearing at their home. Domi, normally so quiet and sweet, had shouted and cursed, taking swipes at her father whenever he got near enough. Her father had grabbed him roughly, restraining his flailing arms, and shook him angrily, as their mother ushered her and Janine away. They heard him

shouting, “Not in front of the kids, Domi! *Cette gueule...pourquoi? Pourquoi?*” Her father’s voice had sounded shaky and mean. It isn’t quite that voice which Angélique hears at the bottom of the stairs, but it is closer to that than to the kind voice she is accustomed to hearing from him. Her father sounds hurt, concerned. Angélique’s stomach aches. She leans her head into her mother’s lap and wails. She lets all of the anger and worry of the night flow onto her mother’s skirt.

“Oh, Angélique,” her mother tries to lift her up, but Angélique clings fast to her mother’s leg. “I know, it’s been a long night. You’re tired. *Pauvre p’tite.*” Her mother uses French words for her daughters only in times of trouble.

“Pierre, what is it?” her mother asks as her father’s footsteps approach from the stairs.

“Later,” he says, but he walks straight to Angélique and lays his hand on her back.

Angélique raises her tear-stained face. Her father’s face is white and she can tell he is still angry. She cries harder. Her mother hugs her.

“Angélique?” Her mother and father exchange a look. Her mother lets out a long sigh, almost a sob. Standing up, holding Angélique in her arms, her mother reasons, “We’ve got to get Janine out of this bath and into a pair of warm pajamas before we do anything else. Her fever has gone down, and we can’t risk it now. Angélique, I have to put you down for a minute while your father and I get Janine out of the bath. You just wait for us on your bed, Ok?” Her mother looks intently into her daughter’s face. Angélique nods. She can’t let Janine die, not after all of this.

Standing in the doorway to the bathroom, Angélique watches her parents lift Janine out of the bath and wrap her in a big towel. Janine’s eyes

flutter open and closed as her mother pats the yellow towel over her body. She is like a baby, Angélique thinks.

“Janine,” her mother sings, “okay, Janine, you’re going to be just fine,” she tells her.

Her father stands back, watching his wife, his frown still visible. He hurries out of the room, past Angélique whose head he touches, saying, “The bedsheets. I’ll get them...and her pajamas.”

Her mother hugs Janine in the towel for a moment, and Angélique turns away to where her father is rummaging in the linen closet. He finds what he is looking for, and goes into the girls’ room to make up the bed. Angélique watches him from the doorway. It seems funny to see her father messing with the bedsheets. His big rough hands fight with the corners of the sheet, and she hears the distinct sound of cotton tearing, her father muttering “*Merde!*” as he yanks his big fingers out from between the sheet and mattress.

“Honey?” her mother calls from the bathroom. “Did you find her pajamas?”

“Just getting the sheet on,” her father calls back.

Angélique goes into the room then, and up to Janine’s dresser. She opens the top drawer and her father comes over, pats her again on the head saying “*Merci, chérie. Comme tu nous aides ce soir si noir.*”

Angélique’s eyes light up. “*Une rime!*” she cries out.

Her father only says the one rhyme. Usually he strings a few rhymes together, making it a game, sometimes with words that are risky to say in front of her mother. Angélique feels a smile starting at her father’s playfulness and takes it to mean that everything is going to get back to normal. Her father winks down at her, and picking out a flannel nightgown, he heads back towards the bathroom.

Angélique stays in her room, and within moments, Janine appears, clad in plaid flannel propped up by her father, her eyes finally open.

“Janine!” Angélique exclaims.

“I feel weird,” Janine says. Her voice is weak and wispy. “I’m thirsty.”

“Oh, Janine,” her mother smiles. “I’ll get you some water.”

“So good to hear your voice, *chérie*,” her father says as he tucks her into bed. “You were so sick. So suddenly sick.” Angélique makes her way to her sister’s bedside.

“I know,” Janine says. “I remember being sick in my bed. What happened?”

“Don’t worry, *bonheur*.”

“Oh,” Janine closes her eyes. “My eyes hurt when I move them. What’s wrong with me?”

“You have a very high fever,” her father says.

Their mother returns with a glass of water. “You’re fluey. Drink a bit of this and see how it makes you feel,” she says, handing the glass to Janine, and helping to prop her up in bed. “Try to sleep. It’s the best thing for you now. We’ll see how you do tonight, and I’ll call the doctor first thing in the morning.”

Janine takes a short sip from the glass, and lies back down. Her parents look at one another.

“Some night,” her mother says to her father. “Some homecoming for you.” She moves close to him, and he puts his hands on her shoulders, but does not draw her closer to him.

“Not over yet,” he looks toward Angélique.

“What is it?” her mother asks. “She’s so tired now, Pierre. It’s been a long, frightening night for her. Do we have to keep her up any longer?”

Wouldn't sleep be the best thing for her now?"

"Maybe you and I should talk about it first then," her husband replies. "Angélique, are you ready for bed? Come, we'll wash your face."

Angélique takes her father's hand. He places her on the toilet first, and then they wash her hands and face. His movements are not smooth, as they normally are. Angélique can feel that there is still something wrong with her father. "Have you brushed your teeth?" he asks her.

She thinks for a minute and shrugs her shoulders. Her father responds by yanking out her toothbrush and squeezing the toothpaste onto it. He moves abruptly, trying to smile beneath the frown that has furrowed on his face from the moment he saw his youngest daughter at the town hall. Angélique opens her mouth and her father brushes her teeth for her, as they used to do when she was much younger. "Still *ma p'tite*, n'est ce pas?"

He takes her into her room, where her mother is looking at Janine, whose breathing is deep and even, and tucks her under the covers. Leaning over to kiss her, he says, "*Courage, p'tite*".

It is not a goodnight Angélique has heard him utter before.

The sun peeks through the curtains in Angélique's room, making shadows of objects in the room on the walls. She sits up and looks over at Janine, who is still sleeping. Today, she knows better than to wake Janine up. Slipping out from beneath the covers, Angélique makes her way to the bathroom. She hears footsteps out in the hall, which surprises her. On weekends, the cereal is left out for her, and the milk is in a small pitcher in the fridge so that she can pour it on for herself. Today, though, when she gets downstairs, her parents are both up and sitting at the kitchen table in their bathrobes.

“Good morning, Angélique,” her mother says.

“Hi,” Angélique grins, and skips toward her mother, burrowing her head into the white terrycloth of her mother’s lap.

“Do you want some cereal?” her mother asks.

“Mmm hmm,” Angélique says. She is excited to have her parents up with her so early on a Sunday morning.

Her mother is busy pouring cereal into a bowl, plugging in the kettle, pouring milk. Her father has the newspaper spread out on the table in front of him, but he is looking at Angélique, the frown from last night still present.

Her mother brings the cereal to her at the table. “Honey, we need you to tell us something,” her mother begins slowly. “Last night, when you ran to the town hall...did anything happen to you?”

Angélique picks up her spoon and refuses to look in her mother’s face. Her stomach feels strange, but she begins spooning in mouthful after mouthful of cereal.

“Chérie,” her father looks up, his voice pleading, and Angélique sees that he is not angry at all.

The kettle whistles, and her mother gets up from the table to make coffee. Angélique stops eating and looks at her father, a big tear flowing down her cheek from her eye.

“It’s all right, Angélique,” her mother returns to the table, putting the two cups of coffee down. She moves toward Angélique, who squirms, jostling the table and spilling the coffee. Her mother sits back in her chair, taking a napkin to wipe it up. “You can tell us what happened, sweetie. What happened with Raymond in the theatre last night?”

Angélique does not want to return to that place in the dark theatre. She knows Raymond is sick – his wheelchair, his tilting head – and that she

should be nice and not hide from him. Shame reveals itself in tears running down her face. She cannot explain what happened last night because she does not understand why Raymond touched her or what it meant.

“Did he touch you anywhere strange?” her father’s voice quivers, and she sees that he is afraid, not angry.

Angélique shakes her head, looking at her mother’s face now. She is comforted to know that because she faced the darkness last night, Janine is alive today. Suddenly, the nightmarish events of last night seem very far away: Raymond, and running in the dark, and Janine’s sickness and blood. They have all been washed down the drain like yesterday’s bath water. They hear Janine calling from her bed, and Angélique smiles in the direction of her parents.

No Good Reason

Right after I was born, I became yellowed with jaundice, and two bruises formed on either side of my head from forceps: stork bites, the hospital workers called them. When my mother tells this story, she always says this last part with delight. Even though I have seen the photo of me at five hours old, I can't quite reconcile myself with the baby there, who looks oddly boxerish after so little time on the planet. My father once, looking at a photo of me sitting in a pinafore dress with curls I haven't had since that age of about two, told me that he could see so much of me still in that young pudgy-faced child. It has taken me years to recognize myself as her, though.

I have found myself looking at old pictures of me more often lately. I feel lost somehow, in the house where I grew up, surrounded by family. I am not myself these days, it's true. And I can tell from the way my mother speaks to me – with more politeness than usual, and stepping in to break up spats I have with my younger sister Jody sooner – that if she doesn't understand my behaviour, at least she is aware of it.

Recently, I broke my wedding engagement. My parents handled the news well, though I could tell that they were concerned I might be making an impetuous decision. To me, it seemed like the light at the end of the tunnel. Because of the initial excitement over the fact that I was getting married, enough people knew about it that there was some damage to repair, but at least the details of hall, church and gown had not yet been decided. For the next couple of weeks, I heard my mother's hushed voice as she broke the news to relatives and friends over the phone. She took her tragic tone. However perilously people responded to her bait, my Mom's voice would resume,

robust and plain as day: “Well I don’t know the reason...it’s not my place to ask.”

I hadn’t explained much. At least, not more than a semi-tearful, “I’ve broken the engagement. I’m not marrying Morty.”

To which, my father had shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and slowly lowered the newspaper he was reading, looking over the top of his bifocals to say, “As long as you know for sure, everything is fine. If you’re unsure – and those tears tell me something isn’t quite right about all of this – well, then you’re done. This is one decision, young lady, you can’t afford to go back on.”

My mother was more sympathetic. She came over to where I was standing and hugged me. “As long as you’re sure, Carmen. Long as you’re sure....He is a solid guy, that Morty. You made a nice couple...and for so many years.” She shook her head as she pulled mine into her shoulder.

My little sister Jody tried to lighten the mood by saying, “What? You’re dumping Morty *now*? When you’ve had years to do it before?” She can be a real tension breaker at times.

I know everything about Morton James Reinhardt. We had been an item since midway through a school dance in grade ten when we made a spectacle of ourselves in the middle of “Stairway to Heaven”. He is a decent person who cares primarily about cars and pets, and who knows how to have a good time. I know that he gets boils on the backs of his legs in summer, which he has to scorch with hot water to get rid of, because he works in sweaty shorts all day as a landscaper. I know that his father left his mother when he was three and that he doesn’t think it has affected him at all. I know that already we fought about money. I know that we always made a strange couple. And I know, too, that we weren’t one of those couples you can tell are together just by looking. We don’t look anything alike, for one thing. I’m

small, with strawberry blonde hair and a muscular build, and he is almost a foot taller than me, has dark features and is overly concerned about his appearance. I swear it took him longer to get ready to go out than it took me, everytime. We got to a point where we either had to get engaged or break up, because every decision we were going to have to make from here on in would mean that one of us would have to compromise something if we wanted to stay together. Suddenly, after the surprising proposal in the front seat of the car when he was dropping me home one night, when I accepted the solitaire on the white-gold band, I realized who was going to be doing all of the compromising. In fact, I sensed that sacrifice would soon replace compromise, which had already replaced most decisions falling in my favour. I know you're not supposed to accept the ring until you know for sure, but I guess I got caught up in the moment. Besides, you never really imagine yourself saying "no" in a situation like that.

I tried to talk to Morty about all of the things I thought would be important to us in marriage. Like how many dogs and cats he was planning to have (he already has two dogs and two cats), and whether or not the pets were more important than the kids would be. Where he thought we would live, whether my going on in school was still a part of the picture. But he didn't want to talk about any of it. He wanted everything to be like in a fairy tale. Once we got engaged, he would shush me whenever I brought up anything important, with a kiss and a "Shh...shh. We're doing the right thing. We can work all this out later." As if the ring and the engagement were all we would need in life.

It had been a really hard decision, breaking up with Morty. And I felt very alone in making it. There was nobody I felt I could talk to about it without violating the trust Morty had in me. Finally, I psyched myself up to

just saying the words to him one night outside my house when he was leaving.

“Morty?” The tears came as I spoke his name.

“What is it?” He had leaned in, arms open, already far too nice for the bomb I was about to drop.

“I can’t...” I stammered, taking off the ring. Then came the deluge.

He didn’t understand right away what I was trying to do. He began brushing tears from my cheeks. Then I held the ring out to him.

Immediately, Morty withdrew from me. He didn’t take the ring, but looked straight ahead, past me. I think he was stunned.

“You’re serious?” he asked, looking at me, crumbling before him.

I could only nod and hold out the ring. Which this time, he accepted.

“You’ve really thought about this?” He was stoic.

“I just...I’m not ready. I’m worried about the future. ...Us. I’m just not sure.”

There was a pause that seemed endless.

Then Morty raised his eyebrows. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. It was the first time I heard a twinge of emotion in his voice. He kept nodding his head and looking down. “Maybe I didn’t think this through. Maybe it isn’t the time.” He sounded awfully distant.

I didn’t believe a word he was saying. I knew he was just trying to make this as painless as he could.

I reached out to him then. I clung to him. When we moved apart, I saw that Morty was teary-eyed, but he wasn’t crying. Then he got in his old green Mustang and sped off.

Once Morty, his mother, and my entire family had absorbed the drastic

change of plans, my mother started to treat me differently. She was cautious around me, to the point of seeming nervous, treating me like a wounded bird, which wasn't like her at all. Normally, Mom has this 'buck up' kind of attitude, which forces the whole family into strength even in moments of weakness. Anyway, Mom mentioned that she thought the two of us should take a weekend trip together, which I agreed to, but which I never thought would happen. A few weekends later though, Mom and I were headed on the road to a family friend's cottage. Jody wasn't even invited along with us, which made me worry about the three days we would spend alone in the backwoods. Sometimes it's good to bring along a buffer. Besides, I couldn't remember the last time I had spent a weekend alone with my mother. Even more than a few hours.

We found ourselves driving northeast of Toronto one Friday evening in late September. It was a long drive, and I kept offering to take the wheel, but Mom seemed on some sort of a mission. I knew that she needed a holiday, but I was surprised at how masterfully she had arranged this weekend. She had called up one of her old friends from university who she didn't see very much anymore, and that was whose cottage we had managed to borrow. It wasn't like it was any sacrifice for her friend, seeing as it was so late in the season. As we drove, it was as if we could see the leaves fading from their rich, dark summer green into limey light greens and yellows.

We stopped at a truck stop at the side of the highway for dinner. For some reason, I always get a kick out of watching Mom eat greasy food at dives like that. I suppose it has something to do with being her kid, and looking up to her as the voice of reason, the woman behind the green beans and broccoli we ate at home.

"You know, I haven't been to Joyce and Harry's cottage in years. I hope

I remember the way once we get to the dirt road. They're always so dark and twisted, those cottage roads."

I nodded, looking across the table at her while I sucked on the straw of my chocolate milkshake. "Didn't we come up here once when I was little?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right," Mom gazed over the top of my head nostalgically. "Do you remember how Harry tried to get you to jump off the dock into his arms? You were such a tiny thing, in your lifejacket, and you kept getting right up close to the edge...you'd look as if you were just about to jump in, and then you'd stop, scream with delight and run further back on the dock."

"Typical," I laughed.

"Daddy was furious. Well, I mean, at first. He was mad at Harry, not at you, of course. He thought you were too small to be forced into doing anything so daring. So he was very smug and full of...glee, really, is the only word I can think of to describe it, when you fooled old Harry."

"That is so typical," I said, fiddling with my straw.

"Of course," Mom continued, again looking over the top of my head, as if she could picture it clearly in the glass reflection of herself behind me, "the next day, Harry got up early with you and me. He had you down at the dock soon after you'd eaten and even before Dad was up, so that by the time he did get up, you were jumping fearlessly from the dock into Harry's arms." She laughed, shaking her head.

"What about Joyce and Harry's kids? I don't remember much about them."

"They had the two boys, both older than you, who were fearless young tykes themselves. They probably had something to do with your finally taking the plunge."

"Yeah, I seem to remember them sort of bullying me around!"

"I guess that's where you learned how to treat Jody," Mom tossed the comment across the table with a wink, and stood up, balancing her purse on one shoulder and the plastic tray in her other hand. "Come on, kid, let's go."

By the time we reached the dirt road, it was pitch black out, and except for a few lit windows in the distance, there were no other cars, no streetlights, and the darkness surrounded us in a silent understanding. I didn't venture to speak to Mom as she manoeuvred the curves and hills of the dirt road. She stopped abruptly a couple of times to shine the headlights on uneven wooden signposts carved with family names. Wherever there were forks in the road, the signs were nailed up tree trunks.

Finally we turned into the gravel pathway to the cottage. It was spooky in the pitch black, and the night air was cool and pine-scented as we opened the car doors. Spilling out of the car, unravelling our legs from their sitting position, we left the headlights on, pointing toward the cottage so that we could search for the key, which was hidden in a crook above the doorway. I felt childish, finding the night scary and sticking close to Mom, who, as always, seemed self-sufficient and unafraid.

We unloaded the car and entered the cottage, which smelled damp and woody. There were big bay windows all around. Mom remarked that a small, wooden deck overlooking the black hole of the lake was new since the last time she had been there. Well-worn beige and yellow striped chairs right out of the seventies, and a wide yellow couch filled the living room area. In one corner of the living room there was a pile of board games, a shelf of old paperbacks and a ghetto blaster. Family photos in clear plastic frames, mostly of the boys at various ages – displaying fish, waterskiing, or just hanging around the dock – decorated the whole cottage. I was busy looking at the

books when I heard Mom, back where the bedrooms were, say, “Oh my goodness,” so I walked to where she was.

I found Mom crouched down in what must have been the master bedroom, looking at a photo of Joyce and Harry. This one was in a glass frame, and had tumbled to the floor where it lay, its glass shattered over the out-of-synch frame. Beneath, the photo of a warm hug and big grins of Harry and Joyce decked out in baseball caps and bathing suits, was still intact. It was a recent photo, I could tell, from the hints of grey and the wrinkles fringing their faces. Mom began picking up the pieces of glass, a stern expression crossing her face. I bent down beside her to help, but she put her hand up behind her, and said, “No, honey. I’ll do this. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“Mo-om. I’m twenty-one years old. I think I can handle it.” The tiredness of the end of the week was catching up to me, but more to the point, my mother’s careful attitude with me was growing tiresome.

“I mean it, Carmen,” my mother’s voice angered, so I got up and left the room, knowing it wasn’t worth it this early in our trip.

Instead, I went and unpacked the groceries, plugging in the fridge and closing its door to start it up again. Mom walked into the kitchen area, her hand full of glass, and I held one of the empty grocery bags open for her, the last bits of glass falling like shards of diamonds out of her hand.

“Dammit, we forgot to bring garbage bags,” she said, truly exasperated.

“It’s Ok. There’s only two of us. We won’t generate that much garbage. These grocery bags will do for us,” I tried to reason.

“No,” she vetoed. “I’ll go into town tomorrow and get some. And a new frame for that photo while I’m at it.”

“Why bother?” I said. “We didn’t break it.”

“Carmen... because we found it,” she replied, making me shrink beneath her gaze. “And they were nice enough to lend us their cottage for the weekend. What do you think of it, anyway?” she asked, looking around.

“It’s hilarious – all this old furniture. I love it, though. How homey it is and everything.”

“Yeah. Joyce always was great at making a place look and feel like home.”

Mom fussed around the kitchen for a few minutes, neither of us saying anything.

“Well, I think I’ll turn in.”

“Already?” I asked, feeling kind of disappointed, though not surprised. “No drink, or not even popcorn?”

“Well,” she hesitated. “All right. I suppose we could make some popcorn.”

“Do you want to play a game?” I asked, walking over to the stacks of board games.

“I don’t know about that. What have they got?” Mom poured popcorn kernels into a pot on the stove.

“You name it.”

“What do you want to play?”

“Umm...Scrabble, Monopoly, or Trivial Pursuit?”

“How about Scrabble?”

I set the board up at the chrome-plated table in the corner. The smell of freshly popping corn filled the room as Mom shook the pot over the element.

When Mom came over with a big bowl of popcorn for us and the salt shaker, she sat down with a sigh, saying, “How have you been doing these past couple of weeks?”

Worried that she was going to make more of a deal out of everything than was necessary, I replied, "Fine. School's going as well as can be expected this early in the term."

"And you've met a bunch of new kids, too?"

"Yeah. They're really cool. It's really been good, actually. I always thought it was so hard to meet people at university, but this year I've met a bunch of people in my classes, who are new to Toronto, or who are just really into going out and everything. I hope it's going to be a good year." I dove a hand into the popcorn bowl.

"That's great. Have you spoken to Morty?"

"Yes." I felt myself stiffen, my stomach tighten at the mention of his name.

Mom waited, munching on her popcorn and then arranging letters on her stand.

"You go first," I told her.

She concentrated on her letters for a minute and then placed C-L-O-U-D on the board. "There," she said. She had not looked into my face since I had deflected her question.

I groaned, only able to put an 'S' on the end of her word.

"How's he doing?" Mom asked, and I had the feeling she already knew the answer to that.

"I don't think we'll be talking for a while."

"Really? Why's that?" Mom looked at me, but I felt like her questions were phony.

I sighed, trying to keep my temper. "He's furious with me. He thinks I'm making a big mistake, and that I'm lost and always searching for what else is out there, in case it's better, and that I'll never be happy, and I'll always be

swayed by other people.” It came out sounding depressed and flat.

“Is it true? Do you think he could be right?” She asked, placing the word L-U-G where the U was on the board.

I glared at her across the table, and instead of responding, built the word S-U-F-F-E-R from the ‘S’ I had placed earlier. “Let’s just drop it,” I said quietly, and luckily she did.

We both picked away at the popcorn and her next word was ‘friend’.
“God! You always get the best letters!”

“I’m having a good night, that’s all,” she said, but I could tell she wasn’t really excited to be playing this game anymore.

Sure enough, when the popcorn was done and there were no more than twelve words on the board, Mom said, “You know, honey, I think now I really am going to turn in.”

“All right,” I shrugged. “Where am I sleeping?”

“Oh, right....there are three bedrooms back there, and I’ve set us up in two of them. I’ve unrolled your sleeping bag on the bed and I’ll leave the light on for you. Go to bed whenever you like.” She kissed the top of my head as she took the popcorn bowl into the kitchen to wash it out. I put the Scrabble game away and she patted my arm, saying “Night” as she went off to bed.

The thought crossed my mind that I might have a few drinks on my own, after Mom went to bed, but I could imagine Mom being mortified that I would drink alone, or something, so I held off, though it was tempting.

I went over to the bookcase to see what sorts of books Joyce and Harry kept at their cottage. There was a lot of science fiction, a couple of mysteries and a lot of best sellers. I picked up one of the mysteries, blew the dust from its yellowed pages, and turned it over to read the back.

THE BODY: of beautiful Jeannette Quincy – the most popular girl at school and the jilted Prom Queen – is found on the beach after the breakfast party following the high school prom.

THE DETECTIVE: Warren Wood, not long out of high school himself, or so it seems to his fellow detectives, is put on the case because of his youth. Can he cozy up to the high school kids adequately to do his job?

THE SUSPECTS: Could it be Lily Marvin, the Prom Queen? Jeannette's boyfriend, the Prom King, Danny James? Was it one of the party crashers from the other side of the tracks? Another boy, such as Anthony Franco, who has been obsessed with Jeannette since grade school?

Geez, I thought, it was a good thing somebody killed Jeannette Quincy and put her out of her misery. Flipping to the back of the book, I found that it was actually a suicide, and that Warren Wood not only solves the case, but he finds a wife in the process: Lily Marvin, Prom Queen. How appropriate. I was glad not to have wasted my time on that one. Replacing the book on the shelf, I decided that a drink was definitely in order. No point in wasting a Friday night after all. On my way to make the drink, I put in a nature tape to fill some of the cottage silence. Pretty soon, the sound of waterfalls and birds filled the room.

As I measured the vodka into my glass, I couldn't help but feel a slice of depression cut into me. The first sip of my drink was sour with loneliness. It was not until I was halfway done with the first drink that I felt a tingle in my thighs, and quit feeling sorry for myself. If Morty were here, he would have more than joined me in this drink. He would have put on good tunes, made good drinks, and we'd probably crack open a deck of cards or another one of those board games. I'd lean across, a sly move, though obvious in its intention, to sneak a peek at his cards, while pushing him back in a kiss. It

was strange to be without that sort of closeness anymore. It made no sense how people had to go cold turkey when they broke up. One day you're holding hands, kissing in public even, unafraid to share your life, and the next you're supposed to act as if you wouldn't go near the person with a ten-foot pole. It was insane how much I missed Morty if I actually allowed myself to feel any of it.

I finished the vodka quickly, thirsty for another, which I poured and drank down rather quickly. I began to feel out of place, wondering what Mom and I were really doing here. I left the glass in the sink, turned off the nature tape, killed the lights and dashed for the comfort of my own pajamas and sleeping bag. My sleeping bag was unrolled on one of the beds in a back bedroom, and I lay there, trying to relax enough to fall asleep. The lonesomeness of the end of the day was heightened by the vodka instead of obliterated by it.

I woke up earlier than on most weekend mornings, because there were thin, half-window curtains, which allowed the sun to shine through a splatter of leaves right onto my pillow. Mom was up, and had kept pancakes warm in the pan for me. I took my time, lazing around, the fresh start of the day a more promising place to be than the end of it. I toyed with the idea of taking a plunge in the lake because the sun was so deceiving.

"I'd dip my toe in first, if I were you," Mom said, seeing me newly changed into a bathing suit and sweatshirt, "but I'd think you were completely crazy if you went through with it."

"Come down to the dock with me," I suggested.

Mom looked up from her needlepoint. She poured herself a cup of coffee before following me to the lake. On the edge of the dock I sat, having dipped one foot in the chilly water. As I saw Mom walking down the steps

toward me, I decided to jump in before she made me think twice about it. When I came up for air, yelping with cold, Mom stopped on the stair, a faraway gaze in her eyes. She threw her head back and laughed in a way I had only seen a few times before, always with her close friends.

Pulling myself, dripping, back up on the dock, Mom was there holding out a towel for me in one hand, her cup of coffee in the other. She was still smiling.

“You just reminded me so much of the little girl who jumped fearlessly off this dock so long ago.” Mom took a sip of her full cup of coffee, laughing into the mug. “And Harry,” she continued her trip down memory lane, “...he worked so hard with you that morning, practically bribing you with promises of chocolate and telling you little jokes so you would feel comfortable enough to trust his arms catching you in the water...Oh, the sight of you two,” Mom’s voice trailed off and the look on her face turned from amused to serious. She drank her coffee avidly.

It was the first time since I had told her about Morty that she was treating me like her daughter. I trusted it was the new environment, and it being just the two of us that made her feel close to me again. Shivering and wrapping the towel around me, I waited only a few minutes on the dock.

“I’ve got to run back and get some clothes on,” I said, smiling at her.

She patted my behind as I went past, sitting on the bottom stair and contemplating the lake.

After I had changed, I went into the front room, surprised to find Mom there, washing her cup at the kitchen sink. “Let’s go to town now, what do you say?” she asked.

“Ok,” I shrugged. “I’m ready when you are. Where is the town, anyway? I don’t remember seeing it last night.”

“It’s not too far, I don’t think, just off a fork in the road,” Mom said, gathering a few things together “All set?”

We drove back over the gravel drive, onto the dirt road that wound and curved the opposite to last night in darkness. I was silent, appeased by the movement of the car, the soft whirr of its engine, which as a child lulled me to sleep in the back seat. Sometimes journeys in the car, no matter how short, felt so right.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Mom interrupted, looking over at me, worried again.

“Oh,” I sighed, coming back to the present. “Nothing, really.”

There was a pause, and I could feel Mom’s scrutinizing glance pour over me. “You were thinking about Morty, weren’t you?” she asked.

“No-o,” I responded quickly, hoping to end the discussion. It didn’t work, though, because a few moments passed before Mom said, “You regret your decision, don’t you?”

I thought about her statement, suspicious of it. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s the impression I get,” she said matter-of-factly.

I let that settle in the air between us. I didn’t feel like dignifying it with an answer, though I did feel my mother was cunning and sly, catching me in a car, up north, away from Jody and Dad and every other escape, to confront me. We drove along for a while, not talking. Moving from the meandering gravel road onto solid concrete, the town came into sight. We passed a convenience store and gas station, Jed’s Taxidermy, a little further along a liquor store, and beside it the grocery/clothing/fishing gear store, where our journey finally ended.

I realized that Mom thought I was sulking because she had found me

out, so instead of proving her right, I put on a good face. I stuck with her in the store, finding a suitable frame for the photo of Joyce and Harry, and picking up a package of red licorice, which I opened and started eating right in the store, something Mom never approved of. I browsed by the magazines for a few minutes, picking up the latest *Cosmopolitan* magazine, something I almost never allowed myself to do. The cover story “How to Leave Your Man” seemed particularly provocative.

It wasn't until we were back in the car and had driven almost to the dirt road that Mom said, “He'll have you back you know.” This time she didn't look at me when she said it. It was as if she had tipped me off on some big secret.

“I know,” I responded equally, avoiding her face.

We drove along the dirt road, tree branches and roadside bushes hitting the car as we passed. A flurry of dry yellowed leaves flew onto the hood of the car, scurrying away from its twigs.

“Honey,” my Mom's voice was concerned. “Will you tell me what happened?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me *why* you broke off your engagement to Morty.”

I could tell she thought I needed this, to be pushed against the wall and forced to face my decision. The lump in my throat snuck up on me, growing, pulling down the corners of my mouth. “No - good - reason,” I spat the words out.

The silence that ensued was wrought with tension and despair. Why couldn't she see, just plain see, without this verbal confirmation of things from me? I knew there was no way of explaining this to my mother. I was barely figuring it out for myself. And so I remained silent, fully aware of her

disapproval, unable to provide her with a reason that would be good enough to explain away an engagement gone awry.

We got to the cottage and Mom quickly removed the bags, slamming the car door, and refusing to look me in the face. She rushed down to the cottage, unlocked it, and was in the back before I had even entered. There was no reasoning with this livid anger of my mother's, I knew, and so I grabbed a pop from the fridge, the magazine I had just bought, and headed down to the dock, where a square of sun still shone.

Surprised and upset by my mother's anger, I looked at the words on the page of the magazine without reading them. She must not have believed me, I began to think. And she must be trying to get us back together. Maybe she thinks we had some big fight, or that he confessed something to me that I won't forgive. She has always thought I was too idealistic and bull-headed in the face of other people's mistakes. I didn't know how I could convince her that it wasn't any of those things. That I had been in a relationship long enough to understand that terrible things happen, which only love and time can pursue to the point of forgiveness. None of these things would get Morty and me back together though. I had broken our bond forever when I had called the whole thing off. And I couldn't regret it. The relief I had felt the day after I returned the ring had proved that. I could only miss him and what we once had together.

I opened the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, hoping there would be some exposé on how to leave your man *and* explain it satisfactorily to everyone in your life. It took about an hour for the sun to move off the dock. The chill of evening made me shiver. As if on cue, my mother called down from the cottage, "Don't you think you should put a sweater on?" I waited it out, a stubborn child not wanting her mother always to be right.

When I could no longer pretend to be reading in the dim sunlight, I hauled myself up the stairs toward the cottage. I found my sweatshirt hanging over the side of the railing near the cottage and pulled it over me, seeking warmth. Mom brought out two pieces of chicken, marinated, which she placed on the grill of the barbecue that she had rolled out onto the deck. I moved inside, noticing that all of my at-home chores had been fulfilled; the table was set, the salad made. There were even wine glasses out. She must have forgiven me, I thought.

“Anything I can do to help?” I called to her.

“You could pour the wine,” she replied. “The chicken will be ready in just a few minutes.”

I did as I was told, the day turning to dusk in the room. An emptiness I had been reluctant to acknowledge all day filled me. The emotions my mother had stirred made me feel angry with Morty. He had let me break things off without so much as a fight. He had simply accepted what I had said as if he had been feeling the same way. And I was angry, too, that without him I felt alone and useless, unsure of who I was doing things for anymore. And angry that he was making my mother treat me differently. And even that he was causing this rift between my mother and me because I had no words to explain the way things were.

Maybe it was a test. All a test I had given him. Well, he had failed miserably, when he had acted like it was perfectly fine for us to break off our engagement. Maybe he was testing me, too. I had probably failed just as miserably. Now that I had done the deed, if I ever did decide to get back together with him, I would have to go grovelling back, and he could turn either way. He could keep up this macho business and not take me back. The thought of that fed my anger. At the same time, I realized that the even

worse scenario would be if he did take me back. There I would be, in the same boat I was in before. It was this needing and yet not needing Morty which blew me away. It was a confusing pushing and pulling of emotion and desire which I had not been prepared for when I broke up with him. Even that made me angry at him. No. My mother was definitely wrong. Morty and I could not get back together. At least I knew that, no matter how hard I tried to convince myself I wanted him back – for my mother and Morty’s mother, for Morty, and even for me.

Mom brought the chicken in on a plate, and we sat down to a nice meal, the tension between us slowly melting with white wine.

“You know that I dated Harry for a while?” She said it out of the blue, diverting the conversation from myself, for which I was grateful.

“Yeah, I knew that, but you never really talk about it.” My mother is a very private person. She has never offered more of herself than she needed to. When Morty and I got engaged, I asked my mother if she had ever been engaged to anyone other than my father, and she had refused to tell me.

“Oh, it wasn’t for very long. Right before I met your father, actually.”

The sudden giddiness in my mother’s voice startled me. I was struck by a million questions I wanted to ask her, but I was afraid she would shut off if I did. At the same time, I felt my stomach drop. I was not sure I wanted to know any of the answers.

My mother grinned as she told me, “He was an awful date, Harry. He couldn’t keep anything straight. He didn’t know what day it was, and he’d always forget what time he had said he would pick me up. I think I spent most of the time we were dating waiting for him to show up.”

Looking around the cottage, at the old striped furniture and the family photos in frames, I suddenly did not want to know any more. There was

something in my mother's grin which made everything she was saying suspect. The more my mother tried to pass off her relationship with Harry as nothing, the less I believed her.

"...but you know Harry. To this day, he says I broke his heart. Acts as if we had something very serious going."

"That must drive Dad nuts," I muttered, feeling that someone should remember the real man in my mom's life at this point.

My mother stopped her banter and looked across the table at me, her wine glass lifted up near her mouth. "Carmen, I hardly ever tell you this stuff. Would you just listen to me?"

I felt stunned, as though my mother had just slapped me in the face. It all made perfect sense all of a sudden. Harry trying to be the one who made me jump into the lake, and Dad being so overprotective. Mom being so freaked out by the photo of Joyce and Harry broken on the floor. God forbid they ever think it was her doing after they were nice enough to lend her their cottage for a weekend. And why here? Mom and Dad hadn't seen Joyce and Harry in years. It dawned on me that my mother's behaviour toward me since my break-up with Morty might have more to do with her than it did with me. I tried to think back to the last few weeks, but Mom and Dad seemed to have gotten along the same as always.

"Did he ask you to marry him?" I barged into Mom's memories.

"Carmen, what makes you ask such a thing? I told you we were never very serious."

"Maybe he was, and you just didn't notice," I offered, suddenly wanting to get to the bottom of this.

"There was this one time, after we were all married, that your father and I were at a party with Joyce and Harry... It was the end of the night, and

we'd all had a few drinks. Joyce ended up getting so angry with Harry that she went into the bedroom with another man, I remember. Some pharmaceutical salesman or something, that one of our other friends had brought. It was an awful situation. And none of us knew *what* to do. Harry was a mess and...he never did anything exactly. But he was looking for comfort, a shoulder, of course. And he was looking to me for it, so I was trying to help in this ridiculous situation. It was so awkward, I remember. And everyone had had far too much to drink....Well, I suddenly got up and got your father and said that I thought we had better leave. I just got a strange feeling about what might happen if we stayed. Of course, nothing did happen. We left, and everything was fine. Though Joyce ran off for a few weeks and Harry was calling our house a lot, but we hadn't heard a thing from her. She came back and they worked it out. But it just broke your heart to see Harry so --'

I got up to clear away the dishes to the kitchen. I was unable to listen to these stories from my own mother, and yet I could not silence her. Was she trying to tell me not to let Morty go? Was she telling me it's all right to let him go because there are other, better people to meet? A surge of anxiety hit me. The fact that she had forced me to think about these questions made me feel sick to my stomach. These are things children should never know about their parents, I thought, and yet I couldn't deny that I was intrigued at being invited to see this window into my parents' past.

"Joyce was going through a mid-life crisis," Mom explained, bringing in the salad bowl, and mistaking my concern for her relationship with my Dad for that of Joyce and Harry. "And they really have worked it all out. Well, you saw how happy they looked in that photo."

"Pictures can be deceiving." My tone was cynical, I knew, but I couldn't

seem to curb it.

I shivered in the realization that my mother might have desired Harry after she was married to my father. After she had had me and Jody even. That she may have regretted her marriage altogether. Maybe she relished basking in Harry's attention, which led Joyce to somebody else in the first place. Worst of all was that I had all of these questions I could never bring myself to ask, knowing I would never get the true answers, and fearing them at the same time.

And what about my father? Did he sit through that party drinking highball after highball getting blitzed to obscure what was really going on? Did he sit there and uselessly let it go as far as Mom wanted it to, testing her? I couldn't imagine it as she had explained it. My father must have swept in and saved her from messing it all up. It must have been her fault and he must have salvaged everything.

"I just thought you should know that everyone has first loves, sweetheart. And they don't always work out-"

"I thought you said it wasn't serious between you and Harry," I interrupted her, belligerent, unable to take this any longer.

"Well...obviously it wasn't," she tried to pass it off again. The wine must have affected her, because she leaned toward me and gave me a squeeze. Then she tried to sweep my hair behind my ear, but she only captured a few strands in her grasp.

"It's not the same at all," I moved away from her. "Don't pretend you brought up all of this stuff about Harry just to help me. Yes, I love Morty. Yes, I could have married him even. These are things I am willing to admit, unlike you. But I *will* be able to move on. And I *won't* need him anymore after. Certainly not to flirt with me to keep whoever I do marry miserable

and crazy with doubt. That's not my style. I take after my father in a lot of ways." The sting of my words was suspended in the air between us.

"If you really want to know," I tried again, quieter this time, "I couldn't marry Morty because I feel too young and selfish. There are too many things I want to do that he doesn't want to do, like travel, and go on in school. If I married him, I would be giving up a lot. And I would regret it later and end up resenting him. And that would be worse." I stood there, as emotion hit me, and slowly moved my hands up to my face. My mother moved toward me, but I put my hand up to stop her. Then I left the room slowly, as my face caved with emotion, and tears drained from my eyes. I closed the door to the bedroom so that Mom wouldn't follow me in.

A breeze of sadness blew over me, through me, as I realized that what seemed like an impulsive "yes" was really a misguided belief in the fairy tale – in the world where innocent prom queens sweep unsuspecting detectives off their feet – and I lay on top of my sleeping bag crying into the pillow until I fell asleep.

I woke up disoriented in the middle of the night. The light was still on in the room, and I saw a glass of water beside the bed, and a teddy bear that hadn't been in the room before. I knew Mom must have left them there for me. I took a drink of water and changed into my pajamas. My eyes felt puffy from sleep and crying, and I picked up the teddy bear, which smelt like the cottage, and gave him a squeeze before settling into my sleeping bag for the night.

The next morning when I woke up, Mom was sitting at the kitchenette table, sipping a cup of coffee and gazing out the bay windows. It was an overcast day, boasting clouds hanging low over the lake.

"The coffee's made," Mom said, getting up to clear her coffee mug from

the table.

“Thanks.” I saw that she had packed up all of her things, which were leaning neatly in a pile in the corner of the room. I wondered how long she had been awake.

“What? Not swimming this morning?” she teased.

“It looks way too cold,” I was relieved that she wasn’t going to talk about last night. I poured myself a large mug of coffee.

“I didn’t make breakfast this morning,” Mom explained. “But there’s bread for toast.”

“That’s all right, I’m not hungry anyway.”

“You should really eat something before the long car ride,” she said, and I could feel tension still there between us, exactly where I wished it wasn’t.

“All right.” I took it upon myself to let her know things were fine with me. “Let me make us both some toast then...or, why don’t I make us french toast? I have it down to a fine art you know,” I started fidgeting near the half-hearted spice rack, “Look, they even have cinnamon.”

“None for me thanks, honey,” she said. “I ate some toast earlier, but you go ahead.”

“No, I wanted to make it for you. I can just have a piece of toast too, and then we can get going sooner anyhow.” I began to think that getting out of this cottage might make everything easier.

It was not long before we were once again driving along that winding dirt road, away from the cottage. Looking across at my mother, her hands poised on the steering wheel, her back straight, posture upright – she never was one who seemed relaxed at the wheel – I imagined by the look on her face that she had to get that other man out of her head before we got home to

Dad. I sat silently, experiencing alongside her the ebb of an old boyfriend clamped onto her heart. And I began to realize that with the distance of time and the proximity of her daughter's broken engagement, my mother was not simply being nostalgic or reliving her past, but that she was reconciling herself to it. I began to see myself in her, maybe only five years down the road, and maybe twenty-five. There I would be, amidst memories of Morty, wondering what might have been, knowing, even feeling that love we had once shared.

And I suddenly remembered that yellowed baby at five hours old, who had battled into this world. Not that I remembered *being* that baby, just that I could understand how I must have felt. How shocking it must have been to wake up, not inside a pool of warm water and blood, where Mom's food trickled into me through her, but under the stark glare of lights and eyes, being spanked to spur breathing, having to learn everything, from how to see straight to how to suckle, alone.

All the Rage

Dolly's self-destructive phase came to a halt when a cyclist ran into her '86 Dodge. Of course, she hadn't meant for that to happen. In fact, at that particular hour she had been far too exhausted to be truly self-destructive. She had been driving home from Midnight Madness at the mall where she worked as a Scent Consultant for Corinne Cosmetics. Seeing a green light ahead and no headlights moving toward her, she had made a left turn, noticing the cyclist only as she turned. In a strange moment, she had realized that he was going to hit the back of her Dodge. She had tried to speed up to avoid the inevitable, but the whole ordeal had been devastating, remaining in her brain in slow motion: hands turning the steering wheel, headlights fanning his dark clothing and then the irony of knowing what was going to happen and being helpless to do anything except watch him faceplant into her car from her rearview mirror. The rest was a mess of tears and explanations, people milling around, mostly avoiding her, 'the criminal', and trying to administer first aid to him, 'the victim'.

"Leave him alone, would ya? Just leave him alone!" She remembers screaming at the small group of spectators. Angry, crying, beside herself. She imagines how she must have looked at the time. Having finished a late shift at work, the circles under her fortysomething eyes would have been a dull heather colour, and bulging, pulsating from worry and tears. The curl would have fallen out of her dyed red hair, which she had pulled her hands through as she dragged on smoke after smoke. With the moisture from her tears, heavy makeup had made a landslide in cakey pieces down her cheeks. She had warded off many idle spectators with her yelling, somehow even

managing to keep hold of her victim's hand. He looked so boyish lying on the pavement, unconscious, with his brown hair going prematurely grey around the tops of his ears. His eyes were shut firmly, his legs and arms flailed around him, one arm at a precarious angle. By way of his hand, Dolly tried to be his lifeline, tried to mend what she had broken through her yearning, aching, absolute desire for him to be all right. Please, just let him be fine, Dolly had pleaded. Let him live out his normal, bike-riding life.

The worst part for Dolly was a man who had been driving by in his brand new black BMW. He had unfortunately witnessed the whole event, and opening his car door to show off the tan interior and the cellular phone in his hand, he had yelled, "I'm a doctor and I've just called 9-1-1. The authorities should be here any time now." Then, he stepped out of his car, swaggering in his taupe silk suit toward Dolly and her victim. The car alarm activator attached to his keys made a bleeping noise as he said, "Lady, I'm a doctor. I think it would be best if you'd shove off so I can take a look at him." So much for bedside manner. Dolly had stood up then, sickened by more than the smell of Armani cologne on the doctor.

The police had arrived promptly and reprimanded Dolly for reckless turning, or some such thing. Luckily, the cops had been warm to her, probably because of how distraught she looked. Then the ambulance had arrived and carried off her victim, a Mr. Lloyd Rade, and though she wanted to follow him to the hospital to see how it all turned out, she was sent home to deal with her guilty conscience instead. The police officers seemed worried about her being on the roads any longer than was necessary, so they even followed – *escorted* – her home. It was probably for the best. At home, there was only Tabouli, a huge grey Persian cat who never judged Dolly, her nutritionist, groomer and litter box cleaner.

Surprisingly, the night of the accident, Dolly slept better than she had in weeks. Guilt usually kept people up at night, she had always thought. But somehow, the ordeal of her young victim prince, the rude Armani doctor and the concerned police officers had thoroughly exhausted her. Her dreams were less fitful than usual, as there was no sign of Buzz in them, and she had managed that black-hole sleep of youth – straight through until morning. Buzz was Dolly's ex-husband, or he would be soon, she supposed. They had been married for six whisky-binging, whore-spying, butt-pinching years, until six months ago. Buzz had come home late as usual, and Dolly was sitting in her bathrobe at the kitchen table enjoying a cup of cocoa before bed.

"Hey sweet thang," Buzz was hamming it up for her, rye whisky thick on his breath. He slid his hand inside her bathrobe and squeezed her breast, hard.

"Aw, dry up," Dolly had recoiled from him. "Keep your cotton-pickin' hands to yourself for once."

"Don't you ever..."

"What? Turn you down? Pl-ease. I'll bet I'm not even the first one tonight to turn the likes of you down." Dolly didn't know where she got the courage to confront Buzz like this. The unwritten rules in their marriage had always been that she tolerated his drinking and messing around, and that she was the reliable one who saw that the bills got paid and that a hot meal was put on the table every night.

Buzz had stood in the kitchen like a dummy, his shell of manliness suddenly stripped from him. Dolly had just stared at him. She had always thought that if it came to this, things might get nasty. She might end up calling in sick to work for a couple of days, and then, when her swollen face

had healed enough so that the bruises were only a fading yellow, she would return, well maquillaged, telling everyone that in her delirious sickness, she had bumped into an open cupboard door. Instead, she saw that all along she had had more power than she was aware of.

“This changes everything, ya know,” Buzz spouted, looking at his feet and twiddling his thumbs.

“Yer making me sick. Now get out.” It wasn’t what she had intended to say. Well it was, but she had never thought she had it in her, so it was not premeditated. She felt her face drop in the aftermath of what she had said, and she wondered if she wasn’t asking for it. *It being whatever Buzz wanted it to be.*

She had been partly right about what she thought would happen next. Buzz lunged at her like a wild dog, baring his teeth, throwing the chair next to hers, which was normally his, down on the floor. And he had grabbed her the way men do, his hand crushing the flesh right through to the bone of her bicep, and flung her down to the floor as well. But she had been wrong about the next part. Then he had stopped. Suddenly stopped. As if God was right there above, where she always hoped He was, answering her prayers. Buzz had walked backwards, pointing at her, until he was standing against the drawers, and in a moment of terror, Dolly had thought, my God, he’s going for the knives. But he didn’t. He stopped there, watching her cower from him between the two chairs on the floor. Miraculously, it seemed to Dolly, she had not been sobbing. She imagined he thought he had put her in her place – on the floor there, where he had thrown her alongside his chair like an angry child who knocks his toys around a room. After a moment of motionless silence, Dolly had stopped covering and stared back at Buzz. He looked afraid – she supposed of what he was capable of doing. And his fear

made her angry. What was he so afraid of when she was the one who could have been killed or at least raped or maimed by his own stupid hand? So she stared directly into his eyes. Stared defiantly. For more than a minute. Until Buzz turned away, with a slight cough, and then ran out of the house. He ran away and she hadn't seen or heard from him since.

The first few days after Buzz had left had been the worst. Dolly's emotions went through the roof. She didn't know whether to be angry or frightened, glad or depressed, so she spent those days skyrocketing through all of her emotions. Most days when she returned from spritzing customers at the mall, she had expected to find Buzz sitting in the living room, drink in hand, watching television as if nothing had happened. She had half expected him to jump out from behind a door, drunk, accosting her in some way, for sex or money or simple revenge. Or else, at the very least, she had expected his clothes to have disappeared suddenly from the closet. But none of these things had happened.

In the weeks now turned to months, Dolly became increasingly self-destructive. It didn't help that her mother had given her the I-told-you-so speech every Sunday afternoon since, over the phone from Saskatchewan. What provoked Dolly's careless attitude was that she realized since Buzz had left that she didn't miss him. Not the touch of him, or even the knowledge of him beside her in bed. Not his income from the factory or even the cute way his mouth bunched up when he told a story and tried to make different voices for all of the people he was talking about. She could live without Buzz fine. She should have. They both should have. And it was that 'should' that made her feel destructive, because she could not believe how unaware and stupid she had been for six years of marriage and for the two years she had dated Buzz before that.

The nothingness of her sham of a marriage and the nothingness of Buzz's leaving her subsided from anger into annoyance, and she had turned it all inwards. In six months she had binged and purged herself on so much food that she ended up a size eighteen, where she had previously been a fourteen. Other than her weekly phone call with her mother, Dolly made little effort at keeping up with her girlfriends Gail and Enid. Their well-meant spontaneous visits sent her spiralling into depression. Withdrawn and indifferent to other people, Dolly became less and less appealing, as a friend, a scent consultant, a woman and even as a daughter. This last she could tell by the way her mother had managed to cut their former lazy long-distance Sunday afternoon chats into ten minute check-in calls.

Stretching and yawning in bed the morning after the accident, Dolly couldn't believe how well-rested and at peace she felt for a change. For one night anyway, Dolly had swum through the abyss of her shame and guilt and come up for air instead of trying to drown there. For one night, Buzz hadn't invaded her subconscious. Dolly thought she could finally admit that many marriages were just as hers had been, where the two people only care about each other the way you might nurture and care for bad habits.

It wasn't until she had swallowed her first cup of coffee that Dolly went out the back entrance of her apartment to the parking lot. She sat in her beloved green Dodge, whose dashboard was decorated with dust motes, tapes and their mixed-up cases. Empty packs of cigarettes and chocolate bar wrappers she hadn't bothered to carry in to the garbage littered her front seat. She noticed a piece of yellow paper, folded and curled, sitting in the passenger seat, which she picked up casually. Her professional nose pinpointed the odour of stale cigarette smoke and Aqua Velva on the paper, and she realized it smelled exactly as her hand had smelled after holding Lloyd Rade, victim

prince's hand last night at the scene of her crime. A stab of guilt stung her as she realized that in her act of will, of trying to be Lloyd Rade's lifeline last night, she had stripped him of this piece of paper. She debated with herself for about five seconds on whether to open the note or not. Carefully, she unrolled the paper. She didn't recognize the handwriting, which her gradeschool teachers would have called chicken scratch, written in blue ballpoint ink.

*This sorry state I'm in
Comes from blindness and from sin, but
It's nobody's fault but my own
It's nobody's fault but my own*

*If I take my life
And get out of your sight,
Will you love me more
Or will you, baby, still be sore?*

Dolly smoothed her hands over the paper and read the words over and over again. There was a despair in the words on the page that struck her to the core. Then thousands of possibilities encroached on her mind. Was this Lloyd Rade's suicide note? And if so, had he purposely sped up on his bicycle to ensure that he would drive into the back of her Dodge? Was it a plea to the love of his life? Had he been riding over in the dark to push it through her mail slot? A romantic. Dolly imagined that she knew Lloyd Rade was a romantic. She could tell by the way his hair was growing grey just above his ears. And by the way he had been knocked cold last night. It was a sure sign. Dolly felt suddenly as if she had been destined to have Lloyd Rade bump into the back of her Dodge so that she would find this note. It made her feel understood, somehow. It gave her something that mattered.

All morning, Dolly couldn't get into her regular routine. The paper

had not reported the accident, thank goodness, but she found she didn't have the patience to delve into it any deeper than that. She tried dusting her apartment, cleaning fanatically the way she sometimes did on Saturdays, but the restless sick feeling of dread kept creeping into her gut. She knew she had to call the hospital and find out what damage had been done. Finally, she mustered up enough courage to dial the hospital.

"Hello? I'm calling to check up on a man who was brought in unconscious by ambulance last night. To the emergency? He was in a cycling accident and his name was...er, Lloyd Rade."

"Lloyd Rade? May I ask who's calling?" a young woman's voice asked.

"Yes," Dolly replied, a little jarred. "I'm the one he had the accident with, and I was really hoping you could let me know the status of his condition."

"Oh, you're the one who hit him?" the girl's voice asked. "Just a minute."

Dolly thought she heard the voice change from receptive to cool in that instant. She crossed her fingers behind her back and held her breath until a different voice came on the phone. Her heart pounded with fear.

"Hello?"

"Yes, I'm calling about a Mr. Lloyd Rade?"

"I'm afraid we can only give out information regarding Mr. Rade to his immediate family at this time," the clerical voice recited.

"What? Could you please tell me something, anything, please? Just a hint even." In Dolly's experience, people in these kind of positions were tough to get through to, so she went for the human approach. "I've been worried all night...I'm the one he had the accident with," she repeated.

There was a pause and a sigh. "Well...he's still in here, and that's all I

can say," the voice rang off.

Dolly sat back in her chair, reached absently for a cigarette and lit up. Christ, she thought, you've really blown it now, Dolly Lampton. You've gone and practically killed a guy.

She set about immediately cleaning herself up, fixing her face and putting on her navy slacks. She was going to the hospital, and that was that. Dolly Lampton doesn't damn near kill a man and not see him through his rough spots.

When she got to the hospital, Dolly found Lloyd's room in a hurry, by acting hurried and a wee bit frantic, and telling the receptionist she was his aunt. She thought the woman gave her a good once-over glare before sending her on her way, but assumed it was just her own insecurity. Lloyd was in a private room, but he was either sleeping or still unconscious, Dolly couldn't tell which. There were a few tubes sticking out of him, which she took as a bad sign, and there was a gauze patch on his forehead, probably covering stitches. His right arm was also in a cast. At least he hadn't broken his nose, she thought, and she immediately hoped he hadn't broken any teeth either, remembering the way he had hurtled into the back of her car.

A nurse came in, a young wisp of a thing, and she smiled cautiously at Dolly as she took Lloyd's pulse and blood pressure. Dolly looked anxiously at the nurse, "Is he going to wake up?" she asked, her voice raspy.

"I expect so."

"Anytime soon?"

The nurse giggled. "Are you a relative?"

"Well no, I'm not." Dolly didn't know why she didn't follow through with her lie. There was something about this nurse, the way she had giggled

and treated Dolly like a human being instead of like a criminal, or just some overweight loiterer. “But I am concerned, very concerned. You see, I’m the one he had the accident with last night, and I can’t seem to do anything today. Not until I find out what’s wrong with him, or at least until I talk to him,” Dolly babbled.

“That could be a while, ma’am. He’s suffering from a bad concussion, and partial blindness in that left eye. He’s also got a broken arm, as you can see. And he woke up in a terrible mood today, so I’m not sure you want to be hanging around waiting to speak to him. Not to be mean, but he might not want to speak to you.”

“So he’s awake.”

“Yes.”

“What about that blindness? Is that forever?”

“No one can say for sure, but I doubt it. These bad concussion things with stitches over that left eye – it usually means he’ll regain his full eyesight.”

“Do you have a break or anything coming up?” Dolly asked.

“In a bit, why?”

“Well, you’ve been so nice, telling me all of this, and I just wondered if we couldn’t go for a coffee over your break. I mean, it’s on me, if you wouldn’t mind and all. It’s just that, well, I have a note I found...of his, from last night. And, well, I don’t know if it mightn’t be suicidal.”

“Let me see the note.”

Dolly rummaged through her purse until she found it. She handed the yellow piece of paper to the nurse, who she really liked a lot, and watched the expression on her face break into a smile. “What?” Dolly asked.

The nurse giggled and put the piece of paper in her pocket. “I’ll come

back in ten minutes and we'll go get a coffee," she said, patting Dolly's arm as she left the room.

It wasn't until at least half an hour later that the nurse returned. Dolly was pacing outside Lloyd's room then, wondering whether the friendly nurse had forgotten about her. Lloyd had not woken up, but a hulking man had come in, asked Dolly who she was and what she was doing there, and practically kicked her out of her chair, saying, "I'm on duty here." Dolly had no idea what that meant.

"Sorry I took so long. You never can tell around here," the nurse said. "My name is Dawn, by the way."

"I'm Dolly. Now can I buy you a cuppa joe?"

"I'd love it."

They walked to the cafeteria, where Dolly bought two cups of coffee and a massive chocolate chip cookie for Dawn, saying, "You need this, with all that hard work you're doing."

Dawn smiled. When they sat down, Dolly said, "I'm dying to know about that note. Why were you laughing?"

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Dawn reached into the pocket of her red cardigan for the note. She smoothed it out on the table. Just as Dolly thought Dawn was about to explain, she asked instead, "You've never heard of Lloyd Rade?"

"No." Dolly inhaled on her cigarette and pursed her lips in thought for a moment, pretending that she might have heard of him. Coming up with a blank, she blew out the smoke, saying, "Not as I can remember. Not before last night in the accident." Dolly reached into the middle of the table where the chocolate chip cookie sat between them, and absently tore a piece off for herself.

"I was just checking, because Lloyd Rade is *all the rage*," Dawn began, and Dolly saw that Dawn was younger than she had first thought, probably in her late twenties, not even thirty yet. Dolly thought it must be the responsibility of her job that made her seem so adult. "He's the latest and greatest pop star. Those big green eyes, that dark hair --'

"...with the grey spots over his ears," Dolly added.

"Yes!" Dawn's eyes brightened. "And his music. It's all over the radio. Tune your car radio to C-ROC 97.7 FM on your way home. You're bound to hear it in no time."

"But what does this have to do with the note?"

"I think you caught Lloyd on his way home from the studio. If I'm not mistaken, he's recording a new album now. My guess is that he was working on some song lyrics and he was keeping them with him when you had your run-in last night."

"Oo-hh," Dolly looked sideways toward Dawn and began to laugh.

"And here I thought his note was speaking to me. Fate! Destiny! I thought it was a real sign from God, that note."

Dawn laughed too. "You and a gazillion teeny boppers!"

Looking across the table at one another, Dolly and Dawn mimicked each other in laughter, a laughter which built and rolled into momentous cahoots right there in the middle of the cafeteria. They got to laughing so hard that other people looked their way. Dolly began wheezing and hacking but she couldn't stop laughing even as her face turned pink and tears streamed down her face.

When they calmed down a couple of minutes later, Dolly wiped her eyes and said, "Gosh, I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time. I suppose I was just projecting my own bad luck and timing on Mr. Lloyd 'all-

the-rage' Rade. And no wonder that bodyguard practically ejected me from the seat next to his bed. He probably thought I was some gawking old lady fan."

"Everyone's trying to avoid a fan mob scene, that's all. I'm surprised you got as far as you did."

"I've been worried sick about him—"

"Well I guess so, since you thought his song lyrics were a suicide note!" Dawn joked.

"...and nobody would tell me anything over the phone. I only knew he was still in here because I begged the nurse to let me know, then I had to fib to find out where his room was." Dolly pulled the note from where it was lying on the table in front of Dawn. She read it over, her smile quickly fading.

"What's the matter?" Dawn asked.

"Aw, it's nothing really. It's just I *really* thought Mr. Lloyd Rade was speaking to *me* when I thought this was a suicide note, that's all."

"You're not half bad, Dolly. At least you cared enough to see him through. And not just because he's your favourite rock star."

"Heck no. I may not have heard Lloyd Rade's music, but I'll bet he's got nothing on old blue eyes."

Dawn looked puzzled.

"Frank Sinatra?" Dolly explained.

"Oh yeah, him. Anyway, you ought to give Lloyd Rade a listen first, before you decide. He's not half bad either."

"Oh I will. I'll even go right out and buy the tape, I'm so happy he's going to be all right."

"What's going on with you, anyhow?" Dawn asked, seeing Dolly pull out her third cigarette in a row.

"It's my husband, Buzz. I haven't seen him in six months."

"That's terrible."

"Not really. That's what makes it so much worse. He was a no-gooder, that Buzz. You know, a lot of other women, a drinker, very unreliable. I just wished I'd realized it sooner. That I didn't love and need him, I mean. Now he's gone, it doesn't matter one cigarette ash, except that I don't know whether to expect him back, ever. It's kind of got me all dangling from a string like."

"Have you tried to track him down?"

"Hell no. Good riddance, sort of. He was like a tequila shot, you know? Salt, bitter and sour all in one shot. Yep, like a tequila shot without the sweetness of a good night's sleep afterwards." Dolly smiled sadly.

"Well then, you've just got to say 'Buzz be damned' and quit thinking about him. You've got to plan strategically for how you will deal with him whenever he does come back, and find a way to move on anyway."

"Easier said than done." Dolly drew long and hard on her cigarette. "At first, I was sort of half worried he might come back and hurt me or something, you know? But no more. I don't think he's coming back at all anymore. And now my life's just like when a song skips over and over on the same line, you know? Only my life's been stuck on the line from Blue Moon, 'without a dream of my own'" Dolly sang the line, briefly. "It's been that way for six months now."

"You sure have a way of putting things, Dolly. ...But once you resolve to move on, you'll see. It will all work itself out. You'll quit feeling like you're tap-dancing around your life and start taking charge of things again. That's what I always find, anyway."

Dolly realized that she had become to Dawn like those people you meet

haphazardly on trains or buses, who sit next to you and enchant you with stories from their lives. She always noticed how people dumped a lot of their problems on you, especially the hard stuff, probably because they were never going to see you again. It was sort of like worldly therapy. "You are a sweet young thing, you know that?" Dolly said.

"Thanks." Dawn pushed her chair out, moving to get up. "and thanks for the coffee and the treat, too. I've got to get back to my shift now, Dolly, but it sure was nice meeting you."

"Do you think it's worth checking in on Lloyd on my way out?"

"Might as well." Dawn shrugged.

As they walked back to the ward, Dawn looked at Dolly and said, "If you don't mind me asking, what's your natural hair colour?"

Dolly was taken aback by Dawn's frank question. "I suppose it'd be all grey around by now, if I let it. Not even salt and pepper anymore, unless it's white from worry," she laughed, fiddling with her coppery red strands.

"It looks cool the way it is, but have you ever thought of doing anything so kooky as going au naturel?" Dolly winked at Dawn in response.

At the door to Lloyd's room, they saw that he was awake, speaking to the bodyguard. "Go on," Dawn elbowed Dolly. "Ease your conscience. And good luck," she said, waving as she moved down the hallway toward the nurse's station.

"Hey," Dolly walked past Lloyd's room toward Dawn, "if you're ever at Hilldale mall in the west end, be sure to stop by the Corinne Cosmetics counter in Eaton's. There's a free makeover in it for you and I can get you some great discounts."

"Thanks, I might just take you up on that."

Dolly walked back toward Lloyd Rade's room, butterflies dancing in her

stomach. She marched right into his room, stood beside the bed and said, “Hello, Mr. Rade?”, at which point the bodyguard stood up.

“Listen, lady, this is a private room.”

“I know,” Dolly smiled and reached her hand out toward the bodyguard. She felt very nervous, for some reason. “It’s just, well, I’m the person who was in the accident with you last night,” now she turned towards Lloyd. “And I am real sorry. Real sorry about it. I’ve only just found out that you’re a heartthrob musician, so I didn’t come here to try and bother you in your recovery. I saw in a flash last night that you were going to ride your bicycle right into the back of my car, and I couldn’t do a bleeding thing about it. I watched it all unfold in my rearview. A frightening sight I can tell you, but I’m happy to see you only needed a few stitches way up high on your forehead there. Your pretty face is still in one piece, I mean....Anyway, Mr. Rade, I wanted you to know that you made things matter to me once again. Oh –’ Dolly took a breather for all of three seconds to fish out the note she had found. She knew that to stop would be to lose her momentum, and get flustered. So she kept right on talking. “And it was this got me scared as a hare in hunting season. I thought it was a suicide note, maybe, and if it was, I certainly didn’t want to be helping anyone commit that sort of act. Anyway, the nurse, Dawn, explained to me that these were maybe lyrics you were working on. So, even though they spoke to me and even pushed me to look at things in a whole new way, I thought I should give ‘em back to you.” She looked at Lloyd’s and the bodyguard’s faces briefly. “And Mr. Rade?...I sure am sorry about the kafuffle last night with me, my car and you and your bicycle.”

The bodyguard was giving Lloyd a questioning look that Dolly thought meant ‘do you want me to lose this loonie?’. He was the first to speak. “We

won't be pressing charges, lady, so consider yourself lucky and maybe you'd best be on your way now, so as Mr. Rade here can get his rest."

"Hang on a second," Lloyd said. He sat in his bed, looking at Dolly, a look of amusement spreading across his face. "Let me see that piece of paper." Dolly handed him the note. He looked down at it, mumbling, "It's this left eye I'm having trouble with. Hurts when I read."

"I am awful sorry about that."

"Yeah, well so am I."

"It's likely to get 100% better, though, isn't it?"

"We hope so."

"And I hope so too."

"You know, miss – what's your name?"

"Dolly. Dolly Lampton."

"When you first stormed in here and started on that speech about last night and finding out who I was, Dolly, I wasn't sure that I liked you. But when you told me about these lyrics, and how they spoke to you, that just warmed my heart. I'll bet you're the lady Rex said he saw sitting next to the bed, watching over me while he was out of the room for a minute. This the one Rex?"

"Yeah."

"And I'm not going to press charges, seeing as everything should be back in tip top shape soon. Here, you keep these lyrics as a memento. I'll even sign 'em for you if you like."

"But don't you need that? To write the song?"

"I was just taking it home for the night to work on it. It's all down at the studio, so that's ok." Lloyd signed the note and handed it to Dolly.

"You've been mighty nice about all of this."

Lloyd nodded and smiled at her, teeth intact.

"You take care of yourself...and each other," Dolly smiled at the bodyguard. He seemed to need a little sunshine, too. Those bodyguard and bouncer types were never allowed to smile unless they were lording it over somebody. "Get lots of rest. I'm going to listen to C-ROC all the way home now to hear what all the rage is about." She made her exit, what she imagined was a suave navy slacks and white sweater blur out of the room.

She did tune in to C-ROC, hearing Lloyd Rade's latest single, "Joy Planet" and even though Dolly didn't see what the big deal was – far too much of that electric guitar, in her opinion – she liked it just because it was his. When she got home, she sat in the midst of her good fortune and decided it was time to change the locks on her apartment. Just so she wouldn't have to worry endlessly about Buzz and when he would or wouldn't come back.

Over the next month, Dolly brought in more perfume sales than any other Scent Consultant across Canada. With her shining smile and her timely perfume squirts, she charmed more women, boyfriends, lovers, and husbands, so that she made Consultant-of-the-month at the mall. Her manager Lissie, a young university graduate, could not believe it.

"Dolly Lampton, I've been watching you over the last few months, damn sure you were either going to quit or be fired because of your lack of enthusiasm and cranky mood toward the customers. I don't know what's making you tick now, but whatever it is, I hope it's a Timex – get it? It keeps on ticking," Lissie chuckled to herself as she walked by.

Mall humour, thought Dolly, shifting her weight and pinching her cheeks to make them blush a little more under the fluorescent lights. That

nurse Dawn and Lloyd Rade, thought Dolly. They are the folks behind my mission. They had unplugged her own depression, making her realize that no matter how good or bad you feel, there is always the unexpected. Fate, destiny, whatever you wanted to call it, had forced Dolly's self-destruction to the wall. In harming someone else, Dolly found a way to forgive herself for her messy marriage. Accidents *do* happen and so, people began to matter to her again, because you never could tell.

Dolly had even taken Dawn's advice and changed her hair back to its natural colour. A sophisticated grey, it was. Her girlfriend Enid had helped her get it right. The fact was, Dolly thought, she had looked and acted a certain way because of Buzz and his attention, which was so often concentrated on someone or something else. Now, Dolly realized, she was who she was. She and Gail had started power walking every morning, and Dolly was eating right again. She was beginning to feel like she wasn't half bad, but it was still an upward climb.

A few months later, when Lloyd Rade's new album came out, Dolly could have sworn that in the third chorus of the single "Laying Blame", he threw in her name, singing: "It's nobody's fault but my own...Dolly knows, it's nobody's fault but my own." Knowing life goes on, and living up to it, were two different things, she decided.

A Small Test of Will

*'Traveller beware of the water and food
travelling thru lands of the sun
if a strange woman speaks be sure to be rude
and all political opinions shun'*

Anonymous

The night train from Yogyakarta to Jakarta was certainly oppressive, but compared to the harassment Anya and Phoebe had endured for three weeks, it seemed tame. Pairs of people were jammed into small vinyl two-seater benches and there didn't appear to be an empty seat anywhere. Usually, one person covered the footspace with newspaper as a shield from the debris gathered on the train's previous excursions, and stretched out there. The other person had to master the vinyl bench, maneuvering around a small table that jutted out, and the window, which had to be open above for fear of suffocation. It was a sweltering hot night as the train plodded through the countryside, through backyards and fields where people actually worked. Bugs and dirt, sand and grit flew through the pollutant-stained windows so that halfway through the journey they could taste the filth – it had become a lining in their mouths. It didn't surprise Anya and Phoebe that the train left two hours late and that it stopped every ten or twenty minutes, though they found it annoying when, at two in the morning, the train stopped to let vendors come through. The vendors loudly announced their dried fishheads and rice, crying out, "Nasi, nasi!", disturbing everyone from their snatches of slumber, forcing them to rouse and keep a close eye on their backpacks.

Phoebe and Anya sat in their seat, unwilling to resort to the floor, switching sides to take turns resting their heads on the table. It proved the only possibility for getting any rest at all that night. The fumes and filth

poured in on top of their heads as they rested, causing Phoebe to wake up dramatically, shaking her head from side to side.

“What’s the matter?” Anya leant over awkwardly to touch Phoebe’s shoulder.

“Eewww...” Phoebe shuddered. “I was just dreaming that I got lice and scabies from all of that crap that’s flying in the windows. Will you check my scalp?”

“Really? I don’t know what lice look like, but I guess so.” Anya examined Phoebe’s follicles carefully, staring at the strands for several seconds to ensure that nothing moved. “No,” she said, moving strand by strand away to make sure. “You look pretty clean to me.”

“Here, let me check yours,” Moving her fingers through the hair slowly, Phoebe became unnaturally silent.

“What is it?”

“Well,” Phoebe began, “I’m sure it’s nothing, but there is this grey stuff on the hair near your scalp. I just wonder if it’s eggs, that’s all.”

Anya spent much of the ride scratching her head after that, the power of suggestion enough to make it true. Her long hair had become a natty mess from intense sunshine and salt water anyway, she tried to soothe herself.

“I’m glad I didn’t wear a white t-shirt,” Phoebe smiled, looking at Anya’s white t-shirt with blue printing on the front.

Anya looked down at herself. “I don’t even want to know, do I?”

“It’s just...your shirt looks grey next to your tanned skin, not white, the way it did at the beginning of this trip!”

They laughed. “I guess I’ll have to get rid of it, then,” Anya joked.

As daylight shuffled in the train windows, they watched through groggy eyes as a countryside awakened. They were surprised to see nudity

revealed to them in the early morning, as people dumped water in buckets over their bodies before beginning their daily toil in the rice fields. Suddenly a rock crashed through a window just behind where they sat, disrupting them. There was mild confusion in the seats behind them, as the rock appeared to have struck someone. Seeing the blood seeping down a man's cheek, Phoebe rushed for the first aid kit in her backpack, grabbing a towelette. She moved toward the injured man who backed away from her, but his friend, another man, accepted the towelette nodding to her. He cleaned his friend's cheek for him.

Other night travel had been as bad in different ways, and it seemed the only way to move through this country was at night, like spies through the alley. On night bus rides along winding, two-lane highways, no matter what the hour, there were huge swells of traffic, mostly trucks and buses. The buses would pass at high speed into the glare of oncoming traffic, causing the kind of swerving close calls which make you lean back in your chair, pressing your right foot uselessly into the floor of the bus and leaving your heart pounding long after the bus has secured a place in its lane. With just one more night to overcome, this train was but a small test of will. Jakarta signified freedom at least. Anya and Phoebe took comfort in their tickets onward, feeling that Indonesia had failed them as they had likely failed it.

Two women travelling unaccompanied: they had heard the warnings, followed the guidebook's advice diligently, and still, at the end of the day, they couldn't deny the animosity the Indonesians felt toward them. Having been the kind of kid chosen in grade school for experiments with kids from other schools because she was easy to get along with, Anya felt discouraged by this foreign perception of her. The Indonesians looked at both her and Phoebe and saw dollar signs. They heard the name "Canada" or saw the flags

on their packs and tried harder to persuade them to buy their goods, launching into stories about their poverty and short life expectancy. And in return, they were only as good to the Indonesians as they could be, buying what they thought could possibly be used or given away as gifts, with the size of their backpacks infringing on their bleeding hearts.

Their perception of Canada and western culture changed as they travelled in the East, as well. Everything is made so easy in the West, that Anya and Phoebe never had to confront their own personal dirt and grime before. Just throw laundry in a machine and wait for it to come out clean and fresh. Here, they took responsibility for their filth, scrubbing urine-stained, polluted clothing with their bare hands. Wipe with toilet paper and flush it all away; blow noses in tissue and toss that away too. Here, the only paper products were specifically sold for tourists, and the disposal systems couldn't handle the harshness of paper products, which didn't flush or dissolve. They had to remind themselves of why they had made the journey in the first place. To experience the ugly, as well as the beautiful; the difference more than the similarity. Wasn't the purpose of these travels to attain that changed perspective of the world everyone talked about back home? They hadn't realized how that would compromise them before, and it seemed a conversation they couldn't quite bring themselves to have.

When they had landed in Bali, they felt the promise of change. They had hoped to be welcomed, but found that they were targets instead. Through a rainbow of smiles, they had been short-changed at the money exchange, and smiled back, unaware. By the second time, they were catching on.

Phoebe took her traveller's cheque to the counter, signed it in front of the clerk and smiled as she waited for him to make the exchange. Counting the money she had been given, a frown clouded her face. She looked up and

saw bills scrunched up and sticking out of the clerk's left hand. As Phoebe pointed to bills, which she knew must be hers, chaos ensued. Suddenly, there was a distracting hubbub of three or four clerks pretending to try and help Phoebe out, while the main clerk pointed to something behind Phoebe to try and divert her attention from his thieving hand. He then handed her a few more bills but not the full amount, as Phoebe watched some of them flutter to the floor behind the counter. Confused, and clearly not getting a fair deal, Phoebe left. Anya had lucked out only in that she had been slightly less ripped off because Phoebe had caught the money changer in the act.

Fuming outside, Phoebe said, "Do you believe that? Did you see that?"

"Sort of. What happened?"

As Phoebe explained, Anya counted her money. "I got ripped off too," she said, in an attempt to console Phoebe.

"I'm just so mad at the way they do that. He was so sly, and even when I caught him, he *still* gave me less than the rate. And then he had the nerve to grin, as if he'd done good business in the process."

"Yeah, good business, all right. He's got a few drinks and a meal on you tonight!" Anya joked.

"For him and the three or four other clerks in there."

Within their first two days in Kuta, Anya and Phoebe found going out for the necessities of food and water was craziness. Grabbed and mocked, jostled and prodded along streets jam-packed with children, beggars, and strings of vendors, they were begged to buy silver jewels, balloons, t-shirts, watches – just about anything you could think of, really. The vendors often carried their wares so that they could follow and harass tourists, trying to break them down with persistence. Speaking French had been one of their most valuable tools. Most of the local people knew English as a second

language, but Phoebe and Anya managed to make decisions and dodge the onslaught of vendors by speaking French. If the vendors didn't get you, though, there was a fair chance that the beggars might. Their tricks of distracting tourists while they picked pockets had been well documented in the guidebooks. They went from showing you a garment while a young child unzipped your hip pack, to calling out to alert you to catch the baby they had just thrown at you. Of course, you would catch the baby, dropping whatever it was you were carrying in the process, for them to pick up. The girls soon found leaving the guesthouse a chore.

Those first few nights, Phoebe and Anya were disappointed to find that American films were shown in all of the restaurants during dinner. They thought they were trying to escape North American culture for a while. The movies were played with the volume so loud that it made speaking across the table during a meal difficult. It all became clear when Phoebe, whose back was to the screen, said:

"Look, Anya. Look behind you."

Anya turned in her chair. There was a row of vendors who had been alerted by the cranked volume to hurry over to witness Sharon Stone pumping and grunting in orgasm.

That night, when they were walking back to their guesthouse, they were followed and jeered for part of the way by some of those vendors.

"Come on, baby. Come on, don't you want to fuck me?"

"Lovely," Phoebe muttered.

When they moved onto the path to their guesthouse, the vendors left them.

"That was so gross," Phoebe said.

"Well, no kidding," Anya said, angered by the incident. "They

assume we're just like Sharon Stone in that movie. They just think white girls are all over-sexed and easy, and we just prove their point by being unaccompanied here."

Soon after, they decided to move up into the hills of Bali and along the coast, leaving the tourist zone to taste Indonesia's true culture. In the frustrating circumstances in which they found themselves, Phoebe and Anya were soon planning meals around which American movies were being shown in restaurants. Escapism had become a motif.

Rumbling through the country at night, memories of all that had happened there and inklings of what was to come germinated within the girls. Anya felt disappointed in herself for having lost her nerve in this country. It seemed strange that the place where her friend joined her on her travels was the place that had made her lose sight of who she really was. She looked down at her ring finger with scorn.

"Listen, I think we should buy fake engagement rings," Anya had suggested one day.

"Really?"

"Well, just to avoid some of those dirty looks we get whenever we try to visit temples or shop or even just go out for a meal. I mean, I know it's dumb, but it might alleviate some of this...nastiness."

"You're right. We might as well."

It had been easy to find a street vendor selling fake engagement rings, and they had bought ones they thought suited them. Phoebe's was thick with a single piece of glass, and Anya's consisted of three small pieces of glass on a thin band. In the days that followed, Anya twisted the ring around gingerly, gazing at its tarnished superficiality. Her finger was metamorphosing beneath it from the heat. It made her finger turn a tawny shade of

embarrassment. At home, such an act would have disgusted or enraged her. She remembered heated discussions in university classrooms with professors and students over empowering women, taking back the night, so to speak. Here, the ring was a sign of her weary defeat. She was sick of the groping and pleading she had too long suffered. Her new view was humbled, and she wasn't sure there was any getting back to the way she used to feel. Phoebe's presence was the only comfort she had found here. That they had survived this together – the violation of self, through a midnight break-in, sexual and physical threats acted upon as if in jest, plus the begging, jibing mockery that was dished out to everyone – had bonded them.

"I've started having a recurring dream since I've been here," Phoebe said one morning to Anya as they were getting ready to leave the guesthouse for the day. Anya looked over at Phoebe from where she was tying her shoe. "People keep shoving poisonous spiders into my mouth one after the other, while they drag me around the circumference of a tree and tie me up so that they can stare at my naked body. Their glaring eyes char holes in my nose, nipples, and navel."

"Yikes, that sounds pretty bad. I bet it's from the way everyone is constantly staring at us everywhere we go, like we're some kind of circus freaks or something."

"Yeah, and I've been having that dream for three or four nights now. Sometimes I can see them coming for me, and I try to outrun them, but they always capture me and do the same things."

"Yuck. Why didn't you tell me before now?"

"I've been having a lot of really weird dreams in the past couple of weeks, I think ever since that night in our room."

Anya and Phoebe had been sound asleep for some time, when there was a crash at the door to their guesthouse room loud enough to wake them both abruptly.

Anya had been the first to speak. “Did you hear that?” she had asked into the too-still darkness.

It had taken Phoebe several moments to compose her fear and reply, “I heard it, too.”

At first Anya had thought that perhaps it was the crunching noise of the water bottle, which was on the floor between their beds, and simply Phoebe taking a swig, or else a figment of her imagination. Upon hearing Phoebe’s response, though, she had switched on the lamp beside the bed and they had begun speaking in French. Within seconds, the sound of footsteps echoed on the verandah in front of their room. There was definitely somebody outside who wanted to get in. Hearts in their mouths, they were paralyzed in their beds. What had they heard of the police here, except that they were corrupt? It became all too clear that they were each other’s only defense. They both stared at the two wooden doors, which were locked by a single bar of wood slid across them, anticipating the person’s next move. There was another bang, as someone pushed against the flimsy doors. Unmistakably now, they had not been dreaming. They seemed to have lost the power of voice, though, and whoever was outside wasn’t making any sound either. Memories of home, a safer place, a better time, filled their heads with dread about their impending doom. Lying in the beds where they had enjoyed several hours of peaceful slumber, they watched as a piece of wood chipped off the door and hit the ground. One of them screamed. It had since become impossible to remember who had actually uttered it, as sanity was suspended in the moment. The next thing they heard was footsteps

retreating, running through the slop of the dump which ran next to the room where they were staying, over the crackling sound of plastic bottles which had been disposed there. It took several minutes before they trusted that the footsteps had carried the person away. Phoebe lay for the rest of the night, as she had lain when she first heard the noise: her arms crossed over her front, fists clenched. There would be no sleeping in that room for them.

When they relaxed enough to look at the time, they were dismayed to find daylight so far away: it was only 1:30 in the morning. They left the light on, going over and over the incident, and eventually making jokes in their fear. What else could they do to get through the night? It takes seconds for terror to rip through your soul, but hours, days, weeks for it to disappear. Still speaking French, they mulled over how horrible it would be to die here, like two shock victims; morbidity adding to the ambiance of the room. A few hours later, when the night had turned to grey, they turned the light off and lay in silence, not sleeping. Every sound of the slurping dump, rooster calls, panting dogs, footsteps passing on the way to the outhouse, made them anxious and alert. They abandoned any effort toward sleep and turned the light back on, spoke a little more. Around the Muslim call-to-prayer hour, they were told to shush by somebody outside. It felt like an insult.

The morning after that night, Anya and Phoebe decided to find a different guesthouse. They were up, dressed and out of that guesthouse by 7 a.m. Walking up and down Monkey Forest Road, they looked over many rooms, a heightened perception for safety having swept over them. One room was nice and had a secure lock, but it was buried back from the road in a rice field, so they turned it down. Finally, sweat trickling down their backs and brows, exasperation consuming exhaustion, they took a room which was closer to the road, and bartered a good deal for it. A perfect contrast to their

former guesthouse, it was there that they met their first Indonesian friend, Ketut. He worked at drumming up business for the guesthouse, offering tickets to various Balinese dances in town and in the surrounding hills. Ketut brought them a breakfast of sweet tea and toast on the patio to their room. Whenever he saw Anya or Phoebe sitting out on the front deck of the room, he would stop for a chat.

“How are you Miss. An-ya?” he said, with a self-conscious smile.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Don’t you have any questions about my country for me?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I was wondering why so many people have the same name here. We met a waitress last night whose name was Wayan, and there are two stores down the street with ‘Wayan’ on their signs, and you told me there are four Ketut’s that work here. In Kuta I met a man named Yoman, and here I’ve heard and seen the name many times, too.”

“Haven’t you heard about the Balinese family?” he asked. “It doesn’t matter, girl or boy: Wayan is the oldest child, then comes Malay, third is Yoman and youngest, Ketut.” He grinned, “Little Balinese boy, Ketut, that’s me!”

“What if there are more than four kids?”

“More than four, you got to make up the names,” Ketut explained.

When Anya retold the story to Phoebe later, Phoebe couldn’t stop laughing.

Later, on a bus ride, they met up with a British girl, Siobhan, who befriended them.

“You’re travelling alone here?” Phoebe asked, incredulous.

The girl nodded proudly.

“How is that?” Anya asked.

“It’s not so bad,” the girl said. “I try to wear a sarong most days, keep myself covered up, and I even learned a few words of Malay. Once you know that, you’re home free. The vendors and the men giving you problems just leave you alone then.”

“That’s good. Do you think you could give us a quick lesson?” Anya joked.

“Haven’t you...you know, had any *incidents*?” Phoebe asked carefully.

“Well, I mean, there was this one time,” the girl began. “I was staying in Candidasa, over on the other coast? And I was friendly with the guesthouse owner and his wife at the place where I was staying. I felt quite safe there, though the room I was staying in only had a long curtain for a door.”

Phoebe cringed. Easy access, thought Anya.

“Well, and I’d already stayed there one night, but it was the second night when I was joined in bed by a man.”

“Oh, how awful.”

“What happened?” Anya asked.

“Well the worst of it was that my glasses were on the floor beside the bed, and I couldn’t find them when I reached for them, and it was bloody dark in there, so it was hard to figure out at first, being just woken up and everything. Anyway, he rolled around in the bed, sort of grabbing at me – you can guess where he was trying for – and I just kept pushing him and pushing him away, yelling at him to leave.”

“That’s terrible,” Phoebe said, suddenly feeling that their night wasn’t so bad.

“Well it turned out rather funny,” the girl continued. “I mean, I was a

lot bigger than the man and so I finally knocked him out of the bed and onto the floor, and after that he finally did leave.”

“But weren’t you scared? Didn’t you think he might come back, with just that curtain between you and whoever?” Anya asked, distressed by the girl’s lighthearted attitude.

“Not really. I sort of took it as a joke,” she said. “As someone just trying it on to see what they could get.”

“You didn’t stay there after that, did you?” Phoebe asked.

“No. I moved to a different guesthouse the next day. I told the proprietor about it, and he just rolled his eyes as if it happened all the time, and he laughed, which I didn’t like very much. I mean, I thought he was my friend, and I didn’t really want to have to leave yet.”

“It makes me so angry,” Anya began, “how they just seem to want you to swallow their perversion while they giggle and ‘try it on’. And you’re just some Western whore who wants it, and that really it’s just all a big joke.”

The British girl shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know,” she said indifferently. “I felt much worse when I was travelling in America because of all the guns.”

When they were alone, Anya asked, “Did you think it was weird, what that girl said?”

“I think she was crazy!” Phoebe said.

“Maybe she’s just been travelling too long and has lost touch with reality.”

“Maybe we’re just desensitized though, living so near the States and everything.”

While they could concede that at home, walking alone at night meant bracing yourself against the possibility of physical and sexual violence, the

difference in Indonesia had been that the anticipation of the worst had been replaced by real fear. And in what they had presumed a more primitive, more innocent country.

With all of the strange politics of travelling in Indonesia, neither Anya nor Phoebe had been feeling well, and it didn't help that they were taking anti-malaria pills. Their doctors had warned them that common side effects of malaria pills included nausea, disorientation and wild dreams. It seemed strange and almost dangerous that the medicine supposed to armour against sickness could make you feel so bad. Every week, when Malaria Day arrived, Phoebe especially felt worse than she did the rest of the week.

Feeling sluggish from the heat, travel and foreign food, Anya and Phoebe sought out Lovina, a town on the coast which the guidebook recommended for its lavish beach. The thought of a beach meant a break from sweating, which was constant in the unrelenting heat, and they looked forward to swimming. When they got there, they found more vendors than bathers, and the sand was filthy with cigarette butts and garbage. The vendors were more poverty-stricken than they had been in Kuta, crying as they unfolded bundles of clothing carried in immaculately-folded piles high on their heads. Phoebe had ventured into the sea there, hoping for a swim, but she walked in up to her chest and then ran out, covered in a film of dirt. The heat made it impossible to do anything very strenuous. And the simple action of taking a walk meant taking a lot of sexual flak from leering men smoking on street corners, driving by, or doubling on bikes – always doubling, sometimes even with the guy in back steering while the guy in front pedalled. It was amazing how leisurely many of the men's lives seemed to be. Meanwhile, Anya and Phoebe saw groups of women shovelling gravel

into baskets and carrying the heavy loads on their heads over to construction sites, while the men made lewd proposals to them from their streetcorner perches.

Braving another night bus to get to a place called Solo, Anya and Phoebe were dropped off in the middle of a street in the dead of night. Hoisting on their backpacks as the bus rode off, they heard the sound of a screaming man before he actually caught up to them. Standing so close to Anya that she could feel his hot breath on her chin, he screamed foreign words into her face. He looked over at Phoebe, who was taller than Anya, and cackled at her. Frightened, Anya did what came naturally, what she would have done back home: yelled at him, fought him off with words.

“Hey! What’s your problem? Leave us alone!” she shouted.

The man drew back from them, the look in his eye changing from crazed to angry. Clearly, it wasn’t the local custom for young women to yell at men. The man took their response to mean they were challenging him to a physical fight. He grabbed and shoved Anya, who teetered with the weight of her pack, while Phoebe shouted, “Hey!”, and grabbed the man’s arm. Then the man held Phoebe back behind his curled fist, as Anya tried to jump in between them, her back to the man. There was no one around to help them, so when they had the chance, they ran down a nearby alley, the sounds of cackling and nastiness echoing behind.

In the alley, they encountered a rake-thin old wino, who motioned for them to follow him. When he smiled, they could see that his teeth, what was left of them, were broken and bloody. Though petrified, Anya and Phoebe were caught between him and the accoster just left behind. The advantage was that they were two on one, and the wino seemed too skinny to be anything more than helpless. Apprehensively, and several feet behind, Anya

and Phoebe followed him. He led them to a guest house, rang the bell for them, all the while smiling and nodding. The huge gate opened, and they were relieved to be welcomed by a matron-like Indonesian woman wearing a purple sarong. She smiled sleepily, ushering them in under her purple-robed arm, nodding to the wino, as Phoebe slipped two thousand rupiah to him. They could have hugged that woman, they were so happy to see the serenity of her face and the security of a home that night.

The next evening in Solo, Anya and Phoebe went to see a Hindu dance performance. As the performance carried on, with colourful costumes, makeup and a variety of players, Anya noticed a creature running back and forth across the aisle. At first she thought it must be her eyes playing tricks on her in the dim lighting. She decided not to point it out to Phoebe for this reason. The performance carried on, five or six men in bright satiny coloured fabrics danced holding masks in front of their faces, deep knee-bending up and down. In the next scene, a cast of women with their hair all up in buns, clad in bright dresses, did an intricate dance with fans, getting into a circle and dancing toward the centre and back out. Phoebe caught sight of the creature darting back and forth from row to row, and automatically her feet shot up onto her chair, knees to chest, pointing it out in panic to Anya. Neither of them could identify the animal in the light, but it looked too big to be a rat and not much smaller than a skunk. Anya glanced sideways at Phoebe sitting in that uncomfortable position and laughed. Phoebe sometimes overreacted here. She would use the toilet at almost every restaurant they went to, which was usually back near the kitchen. Then, when her meal arrived at the table, she would eat three bites of it before giving in to disgust because of the grungy state of the kitchen she had seen.

Suddenly, the creature zoomed into their row before Anya had time to

move her feet, and the tail flew up under her skirt around her ankle for an instant as it breezed past. She drew a breath in and looked over at Phoebe, eyes wide with fear. It was Phoebe's turn to laugh. Anya was sometimes too nonchalant about things here. She was willing to try different foods from the vendors on the street, and she usually forgot to specify no ice in drinks. Phoebe was so conscientious that she kept her mouth closed in the cold water showers for fear of parasites.

When Anya and Phoebe left Solo for Yogyakarta, they felt spooked and decided it was time to move on. They were freaks in this country, taller than most of the men, sometimes dressed so that their arms and legs showed, which the guidebooks said was all right, but which evidently was not; and, they were unchaperoned females. They represented a place of exploitation. People relished letting them know they were unwanted, from the baby who clutched his father in complete terror, shrieking at the sight of their white bodies and angular faces, to the Asian tourists always trying to take photos of them, with their pointy noses, pale skin, round faces, and lumbering bodies. This wasn't the experience everyone, even the guidebooks, had promised, and they felt they were to blame.

So, Anya and Phoebe had made it to paradise – at least that was what other travellers called it. And sometimes, when they think back to it now, they think this is true. One especially good night sticks in their minds. They planned a hike to Mount Bromo for sunrise. Phoebe and Anya were awakened at 3 a.m. by hostel workers, who drove them in a Jeep up the mountainside near Probbolingo. Without instructions or directions, they were dropped off with other tourists, who, like them, were making their way up to Bromo. The pitch black of night was lit up for them by a full moon.

They were two of a daily, ever-changing pilgrimage of people who trekked over strange, rough terrain up to Mount Bromo to watch the sun rise. Ignoring the mocking persistence of vendors wanting money for a horseride to the stairs leading up to the crater's edge, Phoebe and Anya suddenly felt a certain peace for the first time in this country. Up the more than hundred stairs, away from the vendors, the volcano brooded over a live flame, billowing smoke all around them. For the first time since they had entered Asia, they were wearing long sleeved shirts and jackets, as the air was cooled by night and altitude. The chatter of others revealed to them that for some, this was their second try at a decent sunrise, the days being unpredictable. They walked along Bromo's precarious ledge, which certainly would have been off limits in North America, as darkness became light. Somehow, being up at such a high altitude at that early hour made them feel a part of that born day. With the clouds parting in the grey morning light, daylight erupted to the pinkness of dawn, reminding them of the distance they had travelled to get there and the distance they still needed to go.

Josephine and Zachary Were Here

The heat swirled around her skinny ankles first, clinging to her thin legs, moving up and through the rest of her body, causing a shiver to travel the length of her spine and forcing the white-blond hairs up on the back of her neck. Stepping off the air-conditioned bus, Darwin's heat struck Josephine. She inhaled quickly through her nose, which always made her sneeze, and then carelessly grabbed her hair and began twisting it into a bun before slinging her backpack over her shoulders. She was one of those young women who could afford to be haphazard about her looks because she had been graced with a certain natural beauty and style.

Once she reached her destination, Josephine never knew what to do next. She felt overwhelmed. The heat and indecision hit her in a head rush. There was a freedom to travelling which she had hoped for, but never truly expected. Since starting this trip, she had heard the story of Arthur Rimbaud. He was a nineteenth-century French poet who had exiled himself from his country and spent much of his life travelling. She had come across the quotation 'What am I doing here?', which he had written home from Ethiopia, and understood what he had meant more completely than she ever thought possible.

Josephine had left Canada only six weeks earlier. In some ways, she felt the country had exiled her, she had fled in the midst of such a harsh and deep depression. Having been laid off from her job as an administrative assistant at an advertising firm, and feeling that she would never be given the chance to reach her potential, depression had washed over her. The job was not even what she had wanted in the first place, but with the employment

situation the way it was, being a “glorified secretary”, as the big wigs referred to her position, had been a start. Dreaming of scaling her way up, eventually putting together a portfolio of her ideas so she could become an underwriter, Josephine thought that – despite having a university degree and diploma – her job at least held hope. Which was more than many of her friends could say at this point.

Trying to find a new job was even more depressing than being laid off. Josephine pounded the pavement with full force. What she found was that unless she wanted to work at the Dairy Freez or get a paper route, there wasn’t anything out there for her. She came close to getting jobs, going through two and even three interviews at times, but she never landed the positions. Instead of moving to one of the big cities like Toronto or Vancouver, which supposedly had more to offer, Josephine had decided to cut her losses and spend her funds on travel. She would take herself away from it all. Flee the scene of the disaster. Wake up and smell the flowers. And she decided to run as far as the money would take her. Seeing as it was February, the other hemisphere seemed just far enough. Thus, she had found herself landing in Melbourne, Australia, six weeks ago, after a long flight with stopovers in places she wished she hadn’t overlooked.

Another lone traveller, a young man, stood beside her ready to hoist a pack on his back.

“G’day,” he greeted her.

“Hi...phew, is it ever hot here.”

“Yeah, but you had to expect it, venturing to the Northern Territory and all. Where are you off to?”

“A hostel. I don’t know which one. Any suggestions?”

"I've heard Frogshollow is all right. Shall we?" He led the way to where a slew of minivans was waiting to pick up newly arrived backpackers from the bus.

It's as easy as that, Josephine thought.

"The name's Zachary," the young man said to both Josephine and the driver, as they settled into the minivan.

"I'm Josephine."

"David...And you lot are from where?" the driver asked.

"Canada."

"Sydney."

"You're an Aus, then, mate? We don't get many of our own stopping in at the hostel."

"Yeah, thought it was about time I checked out the Territory."

"It's worth it. I'm from the West Coast, myself. Haven't been able to tear myself away from here in two years now."

"Do you reckon there's any work here?" Zachary asked.

"Depends what you're looking for. There's always something if you're willing to settle."

"Not in Canada," Josephine muttered.

"Too much snow and wild dogs, isn't that right?" The driver winked in the rearview mirror at her.

Josephine had left Canada with the bitter taste of grief in her mouth, and not only because there were no jobs. Just over a year ago, she had lost her closest friend, Adelia, to leukemia. Since then, she had withdrawn, making excuses to exclude herself from her friends' lives, almost as though she were afraid to get too close to anyone again. When Josephine had explained to her

parents that she was going to take the money she had made and travel, her father had tried to dissuade her. The thought of her leaving concerned him. But Josephine was determined to go.

"I need to get away from here. There are nothing but dead-end jobs, and I can't stop thinking about Adelia here. Everywhere I go, everywhere I look, there's a memory of her. Besides, I've always wanted to travel." She had sounded matter-of-fact.

"Why don't you go back to school instead?" her father had suggested.

"It's up to her, dear," her mother had cut in. "She's a grown-up now. She has to do what she wants to do." Josephine was surprised her mother had sided with her.

"Running away is not an answer to anything. It never is. It just can't be healthy."

Her father had sat, the rest of the night, in silence. Josephine knew that he worried that she had lost her mind. That she might never return. Or if she did, she might never return the same. Through the clatter of doing the dishes, her father had sat, silent, while Josephine shot him pleading glances. Pretty soon, he had removed himself to the den, where he put headphones on, listening to music as he read the paper and dozed. Nobody disturbed him anymore that night and he didn't dare go up to bed until the rest of the house was dark and quiet. Ignoring his discouragement, Josephine set about gathering information for flights and hostels. The sooner she left, the sooner her father would get used to the idea.

On the condition that she call home at least every other week, Josephine had bid her parents farewell. She had called them on day three of her trip, feeling isolated and out of sorts once there was nothing to distract her from herself. With both of her parents on the phone, her Dad had

sounded supportive, and he had even waited until her mother had hung up the extension before sneaking into the conversation: "I really am proud of you, Josie." It had given her the courage to stick it out.

Meeting Zachary and David felt easy, and Josephine sensed that Darwin might bring her good things. Already, she was hopeful about striking up a friendship with Zachary. She hadn't been nudged by friendship in any real way since she had been travelling, and she realized how much she missed it. It made her think of the friends who had tried to console and help her since Adelia's death. She had given them almost no means of getting near her. No wonder she felt so distant from everyone.

Travelling made everyone transient, or more transient. You could meet people and spend a day, or several days together, seeing the sights, sharing a drink, and wake up the next day to find they had moved on. It had taken Josephine a few days to figure out and trust the pattern. Sometimes it worked out for the best, if you met up with a person who drove you crazy, but for the most part, it had left Josephine feeling small and disposable. Even the exchange of addresses, which seemed genuine at the time, turned out to be fickle a few days afterward, when Josephine realized she would probably never hear from a person she had known so vaguely. It took real effort to be friends.

Signing in at the front desk, David had asked, "You two travelling together?"

"No," Zachary gave Josephine a sidelong glance.

"Just making sure. Sign here, give me fifteen dollars each, and you're on your way. I should tell you about some of the hostel's features, I suppose. We have three spas around the back to beat the heat, and if you come by the

front desk in the morning, we'll tell you if any day tours are going on, in case you want to join."

David handed them room keys, for rooms at either side of the hostel it seemed. Josephine's heart sank. She smiled and said, "See you," to Zachary.

"I'll come by your room in a little bit, how 'bout?"

"That'd be great."

David smiled knowingly.

Unlocking the door to her room, Josephine saw by the clothes strewn on the bunks that two other people were staying in the room. She put her pack down, placing some books on the top bunk of the other bed in the room to secure it as hers. She heard a crash on the other side of the wall and then a muttered, "Bloody hell!"

She inhaled deeply through her nose, which made her sneeze. Then she called, "Zachary?"

"Josephine?"

"Yes! Where are you?"

She heard a grunt, and then Zachary's eyes appeared at the very top of a board, which was being used as a wall to make two separate rooms. "I'm in the room opposite. Gee, you could be a real voyeur at this hostel," he laughed.

"Don't get any funny ideas!"

"No worries. I'm on the top bunk here, reaching to see over this wall at you, and besides, the fan in this room is about to take my head off! Do you suppose David planned this?"

"It's possible..." She smiled.

"Well... good. Do you feel like checking things out with me today?"

"All right. How about I meet you in the lobby in ten minutes?"

“Cool.”

As they walked through the town centre, Zachary spoke about his life. He was the fearless third child of a minister and his wife. The minister sounded like a strict, faithful man who tried to keep his family virtuous and moralistic. Instead, Zachary explained, his younger sister was pregnant now, at nineteen, and unmarried, though she lived with her boyfriend. His older sister lived in Guatemala, where she bought and exported clothes to Australia, and had adopted a Guatemalan child. Zachary had run off to the Territory. Only his oldest brother, who had just gotten married, had managed to live up to his father’s standards in any way. And possibly only by marrying. As for his mother, Zachary described her as “a bit thirsty herself.” Really, though, it was only his father who posed much of a problem for him.

“It’s hard to live under the constant reminder of judgment, especially from a person like your father,” he explained.

“Especially if you don’t think you’re such a bad person,” Josephine added.

“Exactly, Jo. Do you mind if I call you Jo?”

“Not at all.”

“Call me Zach if you like.”

As the heat of the afternoon became more oppressive, Josephine and Zachary continued their walk around Darwin. It was colourful, overlooking a harbour, and very small. There seemed very little to do in Darwin except be lazy.

“This would be the perfect place to work.”

“What would you do?”

“Exactly. It doesn’t seem like there’s too much around here. I love it. You say ‘G’day’ to people on the street in Darwin, and they all say it back. You don’t get that in Sydney.”

In the evening, they found a pub where they decided to go for a schooner of beer and a bite to eat. They sat at a table with two older British backpackers and Zachary introduced himself and Josephine. Being with him made Josephine feel refreshed. There was a simplicity to Zachary that Josephine felt she had let fall by the wayside somehow. He liked *everybody*. Josephine loved his sense of freedom. The way he could just accept anybody who cared to share a table with him, no matter how they acted. Whether they stayed for a mere moment or hung on as she did, he seemed to be living up to his reason for leaving his father’s home. He didn’t want other people’s judgment, and so he didn’t deal it out, the way so many people did.

After a few rounds of beer, the British backpackers challenged them to snooker – longs and shorts. Playing pitifully, no thanks to the schooners they had drunk, Josephine and Zachary left every one of their balls (shorts) on the table. One of the British guys nuzzled in towards Josephine’s ear and reprimanded, “Nobody ever gets away without penalty after such a poor display on the table.”

“Oh yeah? What exactly is the penalty?”

“You’ll have to run around the table in your knickers,” he told her. “Better hope you’ve put on a clean pair,” he joked, looking at her as if he could see right through her t-shirt and shorts.

Josephine smiled and shrugged good-naturedly, “Umm...I don’t think so.”

Nevertheless, she moved closer to Zachary, who explained, “Actually Josephine, that *is* standard...we should really have to pay for it.” But he

placed his arm carefully around Josephine's shoulder, freeing them by association from having to expose themselves to the vast pub company, warranted or not.

The next morning, Josephine found herself looking for Zachary. She couldn't find him anywhere, though, and she realized that she shouldn't count on him. In fact, she was surprised to find herself feeling a strange sort of dependence. To curb that feeling, she signed up with the hostel for a day tour to Litchfield National Park, which turned out to be just what she needed. There were a bunch of other hostellers to spend the day with. Josephine had never seen or been to a desert, and the outback was full of beautiful, new landscape. There were termite mounds – huge, free-standing sand pillars where the termites could hoard water to survive through the dry season. And waterfalls, whose pools brought relief from the heat, as long as they weren't full of crocodiles.

Returning from the trip that evening, Josephine went up to her room. She decided to shower and change, convincing herself that she shouldn't worry or bother about Zachary, who still lurked in the back of her mind. Besides, she could find somebody else to eat dinner with.

Josephine was sitting on her bunk, running her fingers through her wet, long blonde hair, when Zachary strolled by her room.

"Hey there, Jo," he called into the room, through the open door.

"Hey. Where did you go today?"

"A mate of mine has some family who live in Darwin. He thought they might be able to help me find a job or something. I was just making a few calls. What about you? You look like you've caught the sun," he said, looking at her pink forearms.

"Yeah, I went to Litchfield with the hostel. It was really good."

“Cool....Do you feel like getting some dinner at the pub?”

For the next few days, a pattern formed for Josephine and Zachary. The unwritten rule seemed to be that they would occupy themselves separately during daylight hours, but, come dinner time, Zachary would always drop by and the two of them would spend their evenings together. They both acted as if there were no expectation in their friendship, as if it were purely haphazard that they spent so much time together. Josephine felt an anticipation in her heart every evening, though. An agonizing and unmistakable doubt if Zachary happened to be late and it seemed he might not show up.

“So tell me what *really* brings you all the way over to this side of the world, Jo....What are you running away from?” Zachary asked on the fifth night. They were sitting at the pub where they always went for dinner and drinks.

Guilt swept over Josephine, and she hoped to evade his question. Her face gave her away, though, revealing her tactics. Zachary caught her eye in that moment, as she tried to think of a way out, or of how to get away with an optimistic response.

“It’s no good *not* having any hang-ups you know, ” Zachary said, gently teasing her as he looked across the table.

Josephine laughed. Automatically, Zachary dug to the root of her, without wading through all of the surface facades, and he wasn’t going to let her get away with anything short of the truth.

“Well, I’m running away from a lot, when I actually let myself think about it. I don’t know if you really want to get into it, though,” she provided him with an out if he wanted one. She felt coy, silly, getting into all of this

with someone she hardly knew. But he was the first person who had bothered to ask.

"Well, I can tell you, I'm running away myself," Zachary began, offering himself up first. "I just got out of a four-year relationship...well, that was ten months back now. And all of those months since, I would have taken my girlfriend back at any moment. Then when I decided to move up here, she came back. I stopped in Byron Bay for a few days on my way up, and she came that far with me. Things got really intense there, but in the end, I just put her on a train and sent her back home."

"You put her on the train? That sounds bad...like you packed her up and sent her on her way, or like she was a child or something."

Zachary laughed sheepishly. "It sounds so, doesn't it? I just realized that she was only back because she thought I was leaving forever, so she wouldn't have me to toy along or fall back on anymore. She wasn't really back because of anything to do with me. Although, to be honest, six months into our break-up, I thought I should talk to someone or do something, because I was so depressed...I couldn't seem to get over her."

"I know what you mean," Josephine said reflectively.

"Been there yourself, have you?"

"Well, sort of. My best friend died of leukemia sixteen months ago." She looked over at Zachary. Usually, that statement in itself was enough to lose a lot of people. But Zachary was just looking at her, hanging on to what she was saying. "She was such a good friend. I mean, I've known her since grade two...since I was seven. And we've always been close, even though we went to different universities. All my life it was 'Delia and Josie' or 'Del and Jo'. I feel like I lost half of myself or something."

"That's terrible, Jo. I can't even imagine what it must be like."

"You probably can, since you've been missing your girlfriend so much. The thing is, I started to lose sight of who I was, because I was working so hard at keeping busy so I wouldn't miss Delia. I guess I pushed just about everyone else away from me."

"Like you thought you didn't need anybody anymore?"

"Yeah, but the truth is, I need people way more than I wish I did."

Zachary noticed Josephine's discomfort, as if he knew what she were thinking, but he took a sip of beer, letting the moment pass. He was even gracious in difficult moments, thought Josephine.

"To needing people," Josephine raised her glass, trying to lighten the mood.

"I'll drink to that," Zachary raised his glass to Josephine's with a friendly grin.

They left it at that, and stayed outside at their table, away from the loud music and crowd of the main pub room, lingering over beer as they basked in their friendship. Eventually, Zachary said, "I think I'll head back to the hostel now...did you want to stay?"

Josephine felt disappointed. She had hoped that Zach would want to hang around some more with her. It seemed early for them to be going back, and she hoped she hadn't scared him off by giving up too much of herself. Maybe he was just tired, though. They had been out late almost every night all week. "I guess I'll go back now, too," she shrugged, getting up.

They were almost back at the hostel before Zachary said, "You may not believe this, but I brought a bottle of champagne all the way up the coast with me. And if you're willing, I'll get it and we can break it open tonight." He stood still in the middle of a road, looking innocently sideways at Josephine, who was giggling.

“Sure!” she exclaimed, feeling immediately better about Zachary’s wanting to leave the pub.

He ran to get the champagne from his room while Josephine settled at a picnic table outside at the hostel. From where she sat, Josephine looked in to the reception area, where a handful of people sat, glued to a television set. She wondered at their fixation. Was it boredom? Or was it that they felt deprived of familiar things since their landscape had been moving.

Zachary ran down the stairs from his room to where Josephine was sitting and put the bottle on the table. He hurried through the reception area and into the kitchen, returning with two plastic mugs.

“Let me get this straight,” Josephine began, “you came all the way up the coast with a bottle of champagne in your pack?” It sounded fishy to her.

“Well, I hadn’t intended on it, exactly, but when I stopped in Byron Bay on the way up the coast, I met up with my brother and his wife. They were honeymooning there.”

“You interrupted your brother and sister-in-law on their honeymoon?”

Zachary looked up from where he was struggling with the cork and laughed at Josephine’s reaction. “Well, it wasn’t exactly like that. They were married a month ago...a big family affair it was, even my sister came in from Guatemala, and she hates to fly. Anyway, my brother did take his honeymoon in Byron Bay, but they were holidaying really, going into their third week there. They didn’t mind...you should see the heaps of stuff they loaded me up with when I left. They gave me personal size coffee, toothpaste, and they were the ones who gave me this champagne.” The cork popped off easily, and he filled the cups.

"Nice of them," Josephine said, accepting a red plastic cupful from Zachary.

"Yeah. My brother's the oldest, and we've known his wife for about five, six years now, so they've become sort of parental and caring like that. They're going home to Sydney at the end of the week, so they just wanted to wish me well and keep me stocked up...make sure I was gonna be all right," Zachary explained. "A toast," he said, raising his glass, "to running away."

"I can drink to that," Josephine smiled before facing the bubbles in the red plastic.

Zachary had a way of cheering Josephine up that wasn't too obvious and which didn't leave her feeling obliged to him in any way. She found herself unable to stay away from asking questions about Zachary's large family and the wedding that had been the occasion of the summer for them.

"What kind of a wedding was it?"

"In a word, huge. In two words, traditional."

"Have you ever visited your sister in Guatemala?"

"No, but that's my next trip. Her daughter really took a shine to me, and I've promised to visit them. You can't believe the stories that come out of their mouths though. Kathy, my sister, was telling a story about how they had to wait for months to get glass to repair windows in their home. Her daughter, Lucia, started saying, 'Mommy, why did we need the windows fixed that time? Was it because of the bombings or the earthquake?' She just said it, out of the blue, as if it were nothing. And there was my mom, reaching for the bottle as she heard the story."

While Zachary didn't dominate the conversation exactly, he filled more than his share, sensitive to how Josephine had told him she was feeling about people. By the time they called it a night, they had long since finished

the champagne and the crowd by the television had dispersed. The hostel was quiet but for the buzzing of a flickering fluorescent bulb in the reception area. Josephine was surprised, when she entered her room, to find new roommates asleep in the opposite bunk.

Over the next few days, the hostel seemed to quiet down, and even the town felt quieter to Josephine. She considered moving on, but felt compelled to stay because she was having so much fun with Zachary. Thoughts of change had crossed Zachary's mind, as one night when they were sitting at an outside table, he mentioned that he was thinking of going camping for a couple of nights with friends of friends he had met. Josephine's heart dropped. She felt disappointed that he would decide so suddenly to leave. Somehow, it was easier being the person who left, rather than being the one left behind. She knew, all the same, that she had no right to be disappointed in him. He had done everything to renew her faith in friendship. Reluctant to show how she really felt, she tried to be quietly supportive of his camping idea. The hostel worker, David, came over and joined them. At first Josephine found David amusing, but the more attention Zachary gave him in conversation, the less charming she found him. When she couldn't stand it anymore, Josephine decided to go to her room.

"Well, goodnight," she said, standing up and stretching her arms above her head.

"What's wrong, Jo? You never turn in this early," Zachary said, reaching for the hem of her t-shirt playfully.

"I'm just feeling a little bummed, that's all. Might as well go to bed, sleep it off," she explained.

"That time of the month is it?" David piped up. Josephine frowned.

"Well if I decide to go tomorrow, then this is the last I'll see of you," Zachary said.

"I know, ya bum," Josephine said amiably. "Should I give you my address now?"

"Why don't you just leave it in the mail pile here for me and I'll get it when I'm back. Definitely leave it, though." Josephine thought she detected a sadness in his voice. With the hostel becoming so quiet and Zach's talk of camping, Josephine thought that she should be moving on. A bud of loneliness had sprung back into Josephine's life, making her bolting instinct kick in. The thought of Zachary leaving her now left her feeling empty.

She hadn't been in her room long when there was a knock at the door. Zachary stood there looking at Josephine in her boxer shorts and t-shirt. "Come on, you're not really off to bed, are you?" he asked. "Come to the spa with me."

"I'm not as into the spas as you are," she smiled.

"Ah go on, Jo. Least just come and keep me company."

Josephine paused. "All right...twist my arm," she said, picking up her key and leaving the room.

At the spa, Zachary stripped down to his boxer shorts, unabashed, and climbed in. There wasn't anybody around. He leaned back and sunk down, completely submerging himself in the water. Josephine sat at the side, dangling her feet in the water.

"Paddling your feet, are you?" Zachary teased her, as he came up for air. He moved slowly toward where Josephine was sitting on the ledge and took hold of her ankles. He placed them on his chest, rubbing the backs of her calves with the lukewarm water. "You haven't told me why else you ran away," he began. "Is that why you're feeling so bummed tonight?"

Josephine felt immediately self-conscious. "Oh, no..." she sighed, "I don't know. I'm just feeling strangely alone today, that's all," she paused and took a deep breath. She could feel her voice deepening with emotion, though she refused to let the tears well up in her eyes. Zach was still caressing her legs, as he moved side to side in the water.

"I just don't seem to understand anything anymore. Nothing seems to have any meaning. Friendships, relationships, they all seem so destructible or finite, do you know what I mean? I don't know, I just felt like running away to places where I didn't know anyone so that I could see whether it's still possible to make decent, basic friendships. Something like that." The silence that followed worried her. It probably didn't make any sense.

"You have to want what you're looking for," Zachary said enigmatically. "As for feeling alone...well, I can understand that," he raised his eyebrows. "Part of accepting friendship is accepting that people are going to disappoint you. Spreading your wings as you are is a great idea. You may just find that you've changed when you get home. That you don't need or even want the same things from people anymore. You're braver than you think, Jo."

"Maybe. I've thought a lot about it on the long bus rides I've taken since I got here. But there's even a loneliness in changing. Do you know what I mean?" Josephine asked.

"Yes...I do."

Josephine felt impulsive, like hugging Zachary and never letting him go. She wanted to tell him to forget his camping trip, to stay and make roots with her. "Maybe I will join you in there," she smiled.

"Let's skinny dip, shall we?" Zach asked, standing tall, a coy expression on his face. He wriggled out of his boxer shorts and threw them onto the

concrete side. “You don’t have to if you don’t want,” he said quickly, sensing apprehension.

Josephine felt a natural reluctance overcome by impulse. She couldn’t help but smile at Zachary’s throwing off his clothes without thought. Boys were always so willing to expose themselves if they thought you might. She removed her clothes slowly, feeling shy as the layers fell away, and eased herself into the spa with him.

“I didn’t think this was going to happen,” Zachary admitted, lifting Josephine’s legs around him and bobbing her around the pool with him. He leaned into her, kissing her fresh on the lips. Their kisses were caressing, desperate, necessary.

When they finally gave in to soggy, wrinkled flesh and blue lips, Zachary suggested they sleep side by side on a patch of grass in the park across from the hostel. He ran to his room, grabbing sheets to cover them, and giving Josephine his sweatshirt to wear, as she shivered from cold for the first time since she had set foot in Darwin. Their kissing and passion continued, a little more awkwardly, as neither one of them wanted to upset the balance of what they had.

Sex seemed so big, somehow. Did Zachary expect it? Josephine never felt sure of what to do in these kinds of situations, not that she had allowed herself to get into many of them. She felt herself entwined in feelings of hope, longing, desire, which she hadn’t felt in almost two years. All of these feelings made her resist the impulse for sex. Everything with Zachary fell into place without fanfare or need of explanation. Now, to bring sex into what she had with Zachary, would be to introduce the inevitability of all that Josephine was striving to free herself from. Josephine wanted to keep everything with Zachary green and yet ripe, almost and not quite.

Slowly drifting from passion toward fatigue, they dozed off, Josephine wrapped in Zachary's arms. They were unable to part that night. When they rose and went to their separate rooms at dawn, Josephine's hair still damp from the spa, they kissed goodnight naturally, as if they were accustomed to being a couple.

The next morning, Josephine bustled off in her usual manner, into the city centre, running errands and writing letters in the park where they had slept. She secretly hoped Zachary would pass through, discreetly looking for her. She couldn't describe how she felt about Zachary because it barely made sense to her, this longing and then the resistance. Josephine's instincts for rejecting people seemed to fade in the face of the promise of Zachary. She felt a renewed vitality she had long ago lost. All day, she was reluctant to return to the hostel, afraid both that Zachary might have disappeared on his camping trip without a trace, and that he might still be there, waiting for her.

The Sharkey House

Mostly, it has been women who have been lost and forgotten, whether by force, choice, or ignorant oversight. They have been the silent partners, the people excluded from decision making, wars, and history. While their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons have gone off to make heroes of themselves, it is the women who have stayed by the homestead looking after children, elders, and the household in general. And it used to be the women I most worried about. But in my own lineage, it is the sorry absence of certain key males that leaves me worrying, for a change, about the men.

The story goes that my biological great-grandparents were a very happy couple. There was some family resistance – on my great-grandmother’s side – to the two of them marrying. Eventually though, they married and settled into a house considered quite large for just two people, in Puce, Ontario. Thus began the family tradition of stubbornness and persistence.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if you married a Scotsman?” Frances remembered her older brother Malcolm’s apprehension at the thought of her marrying Patrick Sharkey, an Irishman of fluctuating faith. They had supposed he was Catholic, until he had attended a wedding at their Protestant church. After that, he began attending Protestant service regularly. Many people in the town thought that once he had set his eyes on Frances Dougal, Patrick had switched his faith. He had been considered a bit of an odd sock back then. Having just moved to Puce from Chatham, a bigger town, the word from there was that he was a loner. Not one for idle chat, he could be found at taverns occasionally, but never without paperwork. In response to

Malcolm's doubt about Patrick, when they were still only courting, Frances had said: "Marry him? Who said I was going to marry him?"

"I can see it in your eyes. It's the way you look at him, Francie. What is it about him?"

"It's everything, Malcolm. Give him a chance. Even *you*'ll learn to trust him."

They had both been right. She had married Patrick Sharkey – in the Protestant church, though people continued to speculate about his true faith – and Malcolm had learned to trust him.

After twenty-one years of marriage, Patrick Sharkey's death came as a shock, especially to Frances. He was only forty-three years old, had appeared in good health, and he had a young family, his daughter being but two years old. Patrick was found collapsed over his desk at the insurance company where he worked; heart failure, they had said. Shortly afterward, Frances had been called to the lawyer's office because Patrick had died intestate. The law stated that a man's assets went directly to his next of kin, unless otherwise stated. And in Canada in 1919, a man's next of kin was his brother or his son; a case of patriarchal recognition only. A young lawyer, Edward McGillivray, had taken it upon himself to sift through Patrick Sharkey's desk at the insurance company to locate and gather all of his assets. Frances Sharkey went to the lawyer's office feeling glum. All of the *business* of a death in the family seemed so drawn out. It forced her to face over and over again the reality of her situation as a widow and a single parent.

"Mrs. Sharkey, it would appear that Patrick has family back in Ireland."

"Yes, I knew that he had family. He spoke only seldom of them though."

"I've found an address, the address of a Mr. Liam Sharkey among his papers. Do you know who this is?"

"I believe it is his brother."

There was a pause. "I hate to tell you this, but by law, I must correspond with Liam Sharkey."

"To tell him of the death, of course," Frances nodded.

"Well, not only that, I'm afraid. I must write and tell Mr. Sharkey that he is entitled to Patrick's house and all of his assets."

"Goodness, I never thought...I mean I just assumed. What exactly does this mean?"

"If he wants, it means that Liam Sharkey can move into the house himself, with all of its furnishings already there. There's the possibility that he will simply want to put the house and its contents up for sale and keep the profits himself, or share them with you, as the case may be. Does he know you or about you and Hazel, Mrs. Sharkey?"

"Why, I'm not sure."

"I'll see to it that he understands he has a sister-in-law and a niece then."

Frances looked surprised. She had always assumed that Patrick's assets were her assets, even though she had known about this law. Patrick had only ever spoken of his family back in Ireland in a very general way, if at all. And so she had never thought to feel threatened by the law.

Several weeks later, the letter deciding Frances' fate was delivered by a sympathetic Edward McGillivray. He had practically bowed his head in shame as he removed his hat to greet her on the porch.

"Oh, Edward!" Frances had greeted him with a smile. Because of his youth, she found it difficult to remember to address him as Lawyer McGillivray, or even Mister. It was not often that lawyers made such trips to your home. They mostly preferred you to visit them, to conduct business from their offices, so that they could be near all of the files and work that ensured your leaving promptly. At least, that had been Frances' experience in the past five months, since Patrick had passed away. And it was with mixed emotion that she faced Edward on her porch that morning. "How nice of you to drop by. I've been waiting to hear from your office." Two-year old Hazel was perched on her hip, squealing with glee, excited at the prospect of company. She was a sociable child who took after her mother in many ways.

"I sincerely apologize for this, Mrs. Sharkey. I did mention you and Hazel to him in the letter I wrote."

She had been afraid of this moment. Despite her outward confidence, the doubt and wonder had nagged at her in the weeks it had taken Edward to correspond with Liam Sharkey, who resided in Macroom, Ireland. But she had never truly expected to see this look of pity on the face of her lawyer. Frances Sharkey was not a woman to be scorned. She would never faint in the face of bad news, or break down in front of anybody, making a public display of herself. Even at her husband's funeral, she had been careful to shed only what she considered an acceptable amount of tears. (The rest she had shed on her own, or with her brother and sister-in-law, Malcolm and Marjorie.)

"I thank you for delivering this in person, Mr. McGillivray," she had said very formally. Looking him directly in the eyes, she had reached one hand out, into which Edward had deposited the letter. "Good day, Mr. McGillivray." She had waited for him to tip his hat to her, which had taken a

moment – he seemed rather taken aback by her insistence on composure and grace at such a time – before she had turned and walked back into the house, closing the door behind her.

Frances Sharkey sat at the kitchen table reading the letter for at least the twentieth time. It was not illiteracy or lack of comprehension that provoked this response in her, but utter disbelief. A disbelief so strong that she could feel it stir like bile in the pit of her stomach, and it made her feel like pitching the everyday plates and glasses and even the flatware at the walls (the good china and silver had thankfully belonged to her own mother).

It is with deep regret, the letter read, that I must inform you that your house has been repossessed by your deceased husband's brother Liam Sharkey.

Who was this monster, Liam? She knew as the thought occurred to her that she was being unfair. Dear Lord, she thought, have mercy on the soul of Patrick, who departed from us far too soon. She caught a sob in her throat before it evolved into anything more. Have mercy, my Lord, on me, too, as I try to raise our young daughter Hazel without Patrick or the home I have known for twenty-one years. And do forgive my sinful thoughts against Liam, this brother-in-law I never knew.

As per Ontario Property Law, the house was left to Patrick Sharkey's next of kin, his brother Liam Sharkey, the letter continued. As I have now located and corresponded with Mr. Sharkey concerning the matter of the house, I must issue you sixty days' notice to relocate, and put the property immediately up for sale. At the end of sixty days, an estate sale will be held, the profits of which will also go to Mr. Liam Sharkey.

Of course, Frances was far too sensible to hurl anything at the walls though the urge was strong, because she didn't want to upset the baby, and she wouldn't want the town catching wind of it. Anything for the gossipmongers in Puce, and as it was, she had provided them with loads lately. First, after nineteen years of marriage, Frances had found herself pregnant with Hazel, a miracle, a dream she had long ago given up. Now, two years later, Patrick had died suddenly, widowing her and leaving their baby fatherless. And this business with the house. She would have expected Patrick, who was normally fastidious about details, to have made a will long ago. But then, the thought had never occurred to her in any serious way, either. She was sure Patrick would have wanted the house to be left to her should anything ever happen to him. And that Hazel would be more than well provided for. Frances felt an anger inside she did not altogether understand. How could this be happening to her? She had always been a good Protestant. She had listened to her mother diligently for years, and she knew that the situation she now found herself in was, simply, absurd.

But it didn't make any sense. Suddenly, this home, the home she had made and shared with her husband for twenty-one years was no longer hers. She tried to make herself understand that it never had been hers, though this struck her as particularly preposterous. Especially as she looked around at the drapes, whose material she had chosen herself, fitted, pinned and unquestionably sewn all on her own. Or the piano, which she could see through the doorway from the kitchen, standing so stately in the living room. Why, it wasn't Patrick – bless him – who had ever laid a finger on it. Not to dust and tune it, and certainly never to play it. He had bought it especially *for her*. As a gift in their first year of marriage, when they were still young and hopeful, because he had fallen in love with her, a Scottish Protestant, whose

organ playing he had first heard when he had been a guest at a wedding. At least, that had been the seed of it.

More importantly than its contents, it was the walls and the roof of the house that had never belonged to her, and always only to her husband, in the eyes of the law. How had Patrick perceived it? She had assumed the two of them were on the same wavelength. That they shared everything. That even what was never spoken aloud was understood. Had she been naive? It didn't seem right or fair that this should be happening to her. She was annoyed with herself for never pressing Patrick to tell her more about his family in Ireland. What kind of people were they? How could they turn her out of her home? And as she wondered about the Sharkeys, she realized they likely had just as many questions about her, or none at all. The array of questions that sprang to Frances' mind were neither charitable nor Christian, she knew.

Our deepest condolences to you at this time. Should you have any questions, please direct them to me, the letter signed off.

Condolences. It seemed all anyone could offer Frances lately. Quite frankly, they were not enough. At the kitchen table in the home she would never own, which she had certainly loved, Frances Sharkey got out her good stationery and a fountain pen and began composing her own letter to Liam Sharkey. She would simply send it through her lawyer. It was a plea in a way, but she felt, for her daughter, that it was the only thing to do.

Several weeks passed before Frances was called to her lawyer's office again. She had been advised to begin packing up her house as a precaution, in case there was no change in her situation, but she had absolutely refused to comply. She felt sure that it was easy for Liam Sharkey to ignore her and

even pretend that she and Hazel did not exist, but she had utter confidence that the letter she had sent him would change his point of view.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Sharkey," Edward McGillivray invited.

"Thank you, Edward."

"I'm afraid it's still bad news."

"What? What have you heard?" She was again surprised, disbelieving.

"Liam Sharkey has simply responded to your letter by having his lawyer send us a letter very similar to the last one, stating that legally they have every right to the assets of Patrick Sharkey and that they intend to follow the law."

"So that's it then."

"Yes. That's it."

Frances sat back in the chair, a frown crossing her face. "Excuse me," she explained. "I know this is the law, but I'm simply quite shocked....I never imagined I could be treated so coldly by relatives. Granted, we've never met, but still. The idea of it, having loved and married his very brother..." Her voice trailed off.

"He's been very formal the whole way through," Edward explained. "We haven't heard a word from Liam Sharkey himself. Just from the family's lawyer. The first letter expressed their grief at the sudden news of Patrick's death, and then it got right down to business."

"Do you suppose we have corresponded with the right people?", she asked, incredulously.

"I am quite confident that we have, Mrs. Sharkey."

"Of course...I don't know what I was thinking. All right then. It's only two weeks until we must be out of the house. I'll have to begin packing us up, I suppose." She stood up to leave.

Mr. McGillivray nodded.

"Thank you again, Edward."

* * *

Frances knocked lightly at the front door as she opened it. "It's only us," she called into her brother's home. She put Hazel down in the hallway, and unbuttoned her coat, the young girl fidgeting, excited to go and find her older cousins.

"Well, hell-o," Marjorie greeted them, wiping wet hands on her apron and pushing a few stray hairs back over her ear. "Hazel sweet," she leant down to receive a wet press of baby lips against her cheek. "Duncan, James and Charlotte are in the back room." Standing upright, she said, more to Frances than to Hazel, "I don't know what Colin and Robert are up to...How are you? You look awfully pale, Frances." Marjorie moved forward, helping her sister-in-law with her coat, giving a light, brushing kiss to her cheek.

"I've been better. When will Malcolm be home, do you know?"

"The usual time. Soon. Are you all right?"

"Oh yes, I'm fine. I've just been doing some packing."

"You've heard back from the lawyer then?"

"Yes." Frances looked away from Marjorie, concentrating very hard on picking lint from her cardigan to avoid sympathy. She wasn't sure she could be strong if other people were pitying her.

"Come in. Come in and I'll fix us a cup of tea. We won't talk about it until Malcolm gets here."

As ever, Frances was grateful for her sister-in-law's sensitivity and competence. She acknowledged Marjorie with a look, afraid that words would bring forth emotion.

They were finishing their second cups of tea when Malcolm arrived home. Marjorie had filled the time in between peeling carrots and potatoes, adding to the pot of stew for dinner. She would not have any of Frances' protestations about not needing to stay for a meal every time they came for a visit.

"What a bonnie sight this is!" Malcolm exclaimed, walking into the kitchen where he kissed his wife and his sister. He saw by the polite smile his greeting had received (it was an expression their own father had often used upon returning home at the end of his work day) and the look in Frances' eyes, that all was not well. "How is everybody today?"

"Francie's heard from the lawyer," Marjorie stepped in, bridging the gap.

"And?"

Frances took a deep breath. "It's you brothers, you see," she began, immediately regretting the approach she was taking. After all, Malcolm and Marjorie had been absolute pillars of strength for her through her every ordeal of late. "No, that's not exactly right. It's Patrick." She was surprised at the tone she was taking. Instead of sorrow, which she expected, she heard anger in her voice. "No, it's not even Patrick. It's that brother of his, Liam. He's stuck to his original plan. The house and its contents will be sold, except for what was mine before the marriage, and the piano, and Liam Sharkey is insisting on keeping all of the profits. Putting his own sister-in-law and niece out of their home."

There was a pause.

"I see," Malcolm said.

There was another pause, as sister looked brother straight in the eye. Strength provokes strength. When Malcolm had had to tell Frances that her beloved husband was dead, she had quite literally not believed him, though she knew it was not a matter her brother would ever joke about. He had finally shouted it at her, forcing her to face it, taking her in his arms in the same moment, as a parent might do when scolding a young child.

"Legally, he has every right, we must remember," Malcolm began. "The house belongs to *h i m*, though it is hard to understand how he could put the two of you out of the home you made with his brother. Especially when there's no one else in Canada from their family waiting to move into that home. I assume he must have his reasons though." Malcolm looked at Frances.

"Patrick hardly told me anything about his family, and we haven't any photographs. It's his lawyer that has been dealing with Edward McGillivray here, as well. No word directly from him. It's just I assumed, always just assumed that our house was mine as well...would always be mine. I never considered his family. They seemed so far away."

"No point in blaming Patrick's brother, Frances. It's simply the law. I hoped so much for your sake that this Liam would see to looking after you and Hazel. I suppose you're easy to forget since he's never met you, and with just the one child and all. No point crying over spilled milk. Let's see, then. What will we do? How much time do you have?"

"Malcolm...can't we all eat dinner first, before we get into the business of the matter?" Marjorie asked.

"All right, all right. But Francie, just tell me one thing. How much time do you have left in the house?"

“It’s down to two weeks now. Two weeks until the estate sale.”

They called the children in for dinner then, so the actions of washing dirty hands and searching for Colin and Robert took precedence over Frances losing her home. Dinnertime was usually hectic at the Dougal house: a potato went airborne from between Duncan’s fork and dish, Hazel squealed with every funny face made by her cousins (and there were plenty of faces made), and Malcolm sat solemnly at the head of the table, his attention called by his children almost the whole way through the meal.

After dinner, Frances cleared up and washed the dishes, while Marjorie helped Hazel finish her meal, and Malcolm horsed around in the back room for a few minutes with the other children.

Leaving the children in the back room, Malcolm, Marjorie and Frances reconvened around the kitchen table for a cup of tea.

“You’ve got two weeks to move, then. They don’t give you much time, do they?” Malcolm said.

“It would only be prolonging the inevitable anyway,” Frances responded. Marjorie reached over and touched her arm.

“Have you thought about what would suit you, Francie?”

“To be honest, I don’t know what to do. The money will be tight for a while. Our savings are small without the house. I thought I would start offering piano lessons again. At least it will give us an income.”

“Yes, that sounds sensible. Right then, you and Hazel will move in here in two weeks’ time.”

“How could we, Malcolm? The seven of you are cramped in here as it is. We’ll be like sardines, the lot of us.”

“Nonsense. Families make room all the time. Kin is kin, Frances, never mind about those Sharkeys. It’s what mother and father taught us, and

it's what I stand by. We'll move Duncan into Colin and Robert's room, and Charlotte can move in with James. You and Hazel will have to share a room, I'm afraid, but that's the best we can do for now. How does that sound?" This time, he directed the question to his wife.

"Charlotte in with James, honey? I don't know..."

"Nonsense. It will be fine, for now. They're only six and five, and they're good children. It will be fine. In a few years' time, we can move Hazel and Charlotte into one room, the boys into the other, and Frances will have her own room. I've been thinking about it all through dinner and it's the solution for all of us."

"What about the piano? Where will it go so that I can give lessons?" Frances asked.

"That's a problem, but we'll work something out. We have a few weeks. I thought maybe we could build an insulated porch where you could hold your lessons. That way, the back room is left for the children."

"Wouldn't it be easier if..." Frances' words faded. There were no 'ifs'. Really, there were hardly any alternatives that she could think of. That was why she had shown up here in the first place.

"Malcolm, Marjorie," Frances took hold of each of their hands. "I will, with the savings I have, pay for the materials to build that insulated porch. Of course, Peg, I will do my share of the cooking, cleaning, baking, and looking after the children. Hazel and I could not be more grateful to you than we are right now. I simply don't know what we would do without you." Tears filled her eyes, and Marjorie squeezed her hand, nodding to her and saying: "We wouldn't have it any other way, love."

"Course we wouldn't," Malcolm held his sister's hand, and forced her to look into his face through her welled-up tears. "We wouldn't have it any

other way, Francie, like Peg says. I hope you can wash your hands of this house nonsense and get on with your life. Hazel needs you most now."

In the course of a few months, Frances' outlook on life had changed dramatically. She was thankful for her brother's constant kindness to her and Hazel. It restored her faith in humanity in the face of the unsettling of her life.

* * *

As moving day drew near, Frances found herself reflecting on her life with Patrick. How hard it was to pack his things away. To pack up the years they had shared into cardboard boxes, knowing she would be walking out the front door and out of the life she had shared with him forever. The house signified many things to Frances as she packed up the contents she and Hazel would be able to take with them into Malcolm's home.

Frances had crossed the house's threshold almost twenty-two years ago on her wedding night, and had, ever since, considered it her own. *Made* it her own. She had spent her days in the house, transforming it into a home with her touch of dried flower arrangements on tables, the smells of her fresh baking wafting into its walls. Once, she had even sanded down the wood by the fireplace to smooth its rough edges. Up until a few years ago, she had taught piano lessons from her living room in the afternoons. Patrick had spent so much less time in that house than Frances. It seemed strange that the house had always just been his. People in the town referred to it as "the Sharkey house", but Frances had considered herself one half of the Sharkeys they were talking about. She hadn't considered herself as a temporary housekeeper or as a person who meant so little. She did not like to think in those terms. She did not like what it made her.

Patrick, so private and reserved, to the point of rudeness at times, was really very shy. A shy Irishman? It hardly seemed possible to Frances when she first met him, but Patrick, who flustered and blushed all through their courtship was truly bashful. It was in the privacy of his own home, with Frances, that Patrick occasionally crept out of his shell. The surprising bursts of attention he had showered on Frances, though fewer and farther between in the last few years, had reassured her immensely throughout their marriage. It was the unexpected flowers, or the sudden hike of her skirt as she prepared a meal, or his sneaking up on her from behind and pressing himself against her, holding her close to him, sometimes for a minute or more, that made her constantly sure of her husband's love. Rarely were there words. Compliments did not come easily from Patrick's mouth, nor did consolation or idle chit chat. Though, occasionally, there was a bewildering, almost disdainful sense of humour. Mostly this was revealed in mutterings under his breath, and sometimes at the expense of others. Frances had learned early to fill much of the silence in her marriage, but she had been careful to allow room for silence too, because she had never considered that she didn't know or understand her husband completely. Now that he was gone, his silence left her in ultimate wonder.

Leaving the house felt like leaving Patrick. Grateful though she was to her brother, Frances felt that moving in with the Dougals meant obliterating what she had become as a Sharkey. It was not that she worried about regressing, for she had always been and always would be a Dougal herself. In fact, it was nothing tangible that she could define, except that walking out the door of her house for the last time, Frances knew, meant packing up what she had known and loved about her Irish husband. Moving out of her house made her more grief-stricken and confused than she had felt since Patrick had

died. Living with Malcolm and Marjorie meant that Hazel would grow up a Dougal. Fine as that was, she would never understand or witness the romance of a Dougal gone Sharkey.

The day that Frances and Hazel moved out of the Sharkey house was the day the estate sale was being held. Despite Marjorie's attempts at dissuading Frances from attending, Frances could conceive of it in no other way. Just as many people have open caskets at funerals to make the loss undeniable to surviving friends and family, so Frances felt about her home. She would not give up so easily. Walking through her home, as people milled about, looking at the rooms and their furnishings, Frances acted like a perfect hostess. She found herself graciously promoting her husband's former belongings to prospective buyers.

"What a wonderful oak desk. So many little drawers when you open it up. Really quite intricate. I often used to write letters there in the sunshine of the late morning."

"A lovely coffee table. It served us so well."

"The dining table is exquisite. So large, it can really fill a room."

"Yes, you would have to cover the corner of the living room. The carpet looks so faded around that one area...that's where the piano used to stand."

By the end of the day, Frances felt hollowed out, as if she were but a shell of herself. She had hoped that the realization that her belongings were not hers – never had been – and seeing the house empty and ready for new owners would free her somehow. Free her of the sadness she felt about Patrick. Without the house, she thought it would be harder to keep Patrick alive for Hazel. Quiet and reserved, and now with his belongings bought up by other people, there seemed very little of Patrick left on earth. He had

never told Frances specifically that he loved her, or that he loved their daughter, or even that he loved music, but she knew all of these things were true. The fact was, Patrick Sharkey, an insurance man, knew what it meant to die without a will. And while it remained a puzzle to Frances, she did not feel duped by her deceased husband so much as she felt lost. There were so many questions she now wished she had asked.

* * *

It was a big change for Frances, moving in with the seven Dougals. Instead of the comfort of her quiet and spacious home with the dried flowers on tables, there were six children running around and two adults to cater to. Hazel thought she had found heaven, waking up every morning with her mother – right there in the same room as her – and joined at breakfast by her cousins.

The insulated porch, where the piano was to be located, took longer to build than they had anticipated, causing an anxiety in Frances to which she was not accustomed. Ever since the estate sale, Frances had become distant. Slowly, she became gaunt and pale, as her purpose dwindled in the mayhem of her brother's home. She focussed much of her energy on cleaning and dusting the house, not wanting to take over Marjorie's kitchen.

"Couldn't we introduce her to somebody?" Marjorie whispered to Malcolm in bed one night. "She's dying of loneliness."

"Loneliness? In this house?"

"*This house* is swallowing her up."

"The porch will be finished soon enough." Malcolm became defensive. "It's the best I could offer her."

"It's not that, Malcolm. She's grateful. And helpful, my goodness. Ever so helpful. Cleaning gives her about the most joy I've seen since she arrived."

"She's grieving. A widow, let's not forget."

"Exactly right. That's what I mean."

"I'll see, Peg. I'll see what I can come up with."

After this, Malcolm began spreading the word about Frances' piano lessons around the town. Several sympathetic mothers signed their children up for lessons, and Frances became slightly more cheerful. Rather than stoke the fire by introducing Frances to men, Malcolm thought working relationships with mothers and their children would appease her. His plan backfired when he was hounded by several irate mothers who had promised piano lessons to their children while the porch was still incomplete. Soon after, Frances began giving piano lessons from the front hallway, where the piano was being stored in the meantime. It was a challenge, with the Dougal children and Hazel running through at inopportune moments, Colin and Robert camped out on the stairs, snickering and laughing at some of Frances' nervous pupils.

On the day the porch was finally finished and the piano moved in, Frances sat right down and played the hymn "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" in complete exultation. She was happy, grateful to have her own space in this house at last. She had Malcolm move her settee onto the porch, and even decorated the piano with dried flowers in one of her old vases. Frances began to close herself off on that porch, spending most of her days there, practising the piano, cleaning and dusting her space meticulously. It seemed odd to the Dougals that their sister, aunt, mother, spent so much time isolated on the porch. Marjorie didn't think it was healthy, but Frances told her she felt

better out there. When Frances began spending many nights in the course of a week sleeping on the settee, it was the last straw for Marjorie.

"You'll catch your death out here," Marjorie said sternly, finding Frances sleeping on the settee one night. Marjorie had lit a candle, causing great shadows of light to illuminate the porch.

"I find it easier to sleep out here," Frances responded, having awakened to the footsteps as they approached the room.

"I'm not surprised. Your own little corner of the world stamped out here with the piano, your lessons and now even your settee here." Frances could not escape the resentment in Marjorie's voice.

"I'm sorry, Peg," Frances soothed.

"There's no need for sorry here. We're all family."

"For invading your home, Peg. I'm sorry for taking up so much room and requiring more built just for me. It's selfish."

"Don't be silly. You're an easy houseguest and Hazel fits right in. She's a doll. And you've wonderful cleaning skills, besides."

It was the word 'houseguest' that made Frances uneasy, though she suspected she acted like one, sleeping out on the porch which she truly did consider her own. It dawned on her, there, in the middle of the night, that this porch belonged to Colin and Robert, aged eleven and ten years old, more than it would ever belong to her. She saw that Marjorie did not realize that yet, and even hoped she would never have to feel so small and useless in the aftermath of what she considered a happy marriage.

"I'll try to be better, Peg," Frances was at a loss for the correct response.

"Nonsense...there's no need for that, I've told you. Now let me get you another blanket at least, if you insist on sleeping out here."

As Marjorie's footsteps padded away, Frances felt a growing divide between them. She had always known this living situation was not ideal, but she had never expected the argument to come from Marjorie. It *was* the best thing for Hazel, too, she knew. They all knew that. Having lost her father, Hazel had gained an entire family which she loved, and where she got spoiled with attention, being the youngest.

Marjorie returned with a blanket, and tucked Frances into the settee as if she were a child. Then, leaning over her, Frances saw a tear on Marjorie's cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Francie, I don't know what made me so mean. After all you've been through, it's the least I can do to keep things nice between us."

Frances fought the resistance of the blanket tucked around her to sit up and hug Marjorie. There were so many words in the Dougal house. She had forgotten how many words.

* * *

In time, Frances blended in with her brother's family and home. She and Marjorie remained each other's confidantes, and Frances made sure that her moods and especially her moments of grief were kept to a minimum. With time, it became easier to accept day-to-day living. Hazel thrived in the Dougal house.

At Marjorie's persistence, Malcolm occasionally invited single men over to dinner, but with the hectic bed schedules of six children, Frances usually got away from the table at her earliest opportunity under the pretense of telling stories to the children before bed. She had become a favourite at bedtime with her nephews and niece, because she could tell great, adventurous tales about people in lands far away, right from her own head. Careful never to appear ungracious or ungrateful, Frances did return to her

Dougal ways, making sure to always keep up her end of the conversation. It was, after all, through conversation as much as interaction that people could understand one another.

What happened to Frances and Hazel Sharkey shortly thereafter gets blurred into memory and happy ending. Frances did meet someone else, who courted and married her, and who also adopted Hazel. She buried Patrick Sharkey for good, moving on in life with another man. Perhaps it is out of love and respect for Hazel's stepfather that so little about Patrick Sharkey has been preserved.

* * *

It is my mother's account of this story which I know. I have heard my grandmother, Hazel, talk with great love and respect about her stepfather who showered her and her mother with gifts. Of her biological father, I have only heard her admit that she does not know much more than his name. My mother has been the one able to shed light on the Sharkeys. With less reserve and more open to possibilities, she and I have tried to piece together what we know about them, and why they would put their brother's wife and child out of their house. When my mother tells me the story, she is puzzled, if not outwardly outraged, by Liam Sharkey and his actions. We are interested in understanding Liam Sharkey, because in so doing, we expect to understand Patrick, my great-grandfather. But when I pose questions about him – did he leave his family in Ireland on bad terms? did his family even know about his Protestant wife and daughter in Canada? – there are no answers, only speculation.

It is Patrick, poor Patrick Sharkey, whose story has been lost, left to generations of embellishment and supposition. The facts are that he died

when my grandmother was two, after twenty-one years of marriage to my great-grandmother, and their house, by law, went to his brother back in Ireland who accepted its profits. The rest cannot be verified by anybody still alive. The Patrick Sharkey who survives in our family has been given a generous dose of the benefit of the doubt. For who can persecute a man whose only means of expressing love (and everything else, it seems to me) was through silence and rarely with words? How can we blame a man whose luck was so incredibly bad throughout his whole life? First, he moved from Ireland to Canada alone (so we believe), and when he got here, he was labelled deviant of faith, perhaps because love conquered faith for him. For all we know, he was simply a lapsed Protestant who found his way back. Finally, after nineteen years of marriage, when his wife gave birth, he knew his daughter for only two years. And he died alone in his insurance office, leaving his wife, intentionally or not, homeless.

I don't doubt that my own version of Patrick and Frances Sharkey is overly romantic and hopeful. The idea of being akin to a mysterious man leaves us room to create and recreate him. One day we can make him a deceptive scoundrel who intentionally neglected his wife and child, and the next day we can forgive him wholly, making Canadian law the villain. While Grandma Hazel regresses in old age, suffering from dementia, it is the past – the distant past – that remains at the forefront of her mind. That the little we know of Patrick Sharkey is still intriguing, still mentioned in conversation, despite the unanswerable questions he has left us, proves the perseverance of even the slightest memory. Patrick Sharkey has become the lonely ghost of love that we pass down from generation to generation.

Vita Auctoris

Jennifer Chambers was born in Edmonton, Alberta and grew up in Toronto, Ontario. In 1993, she received an Honours Bachelor of Arts in English Literature with a minor in French Language and Literature from the University of Western Ontario. After this, she took a year off to travel for six months in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Europe. She is completing the Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.