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For home—

by

Daryl Sneath

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

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Canada

10 32 783

and everyone who makes it so

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Beaverton

At Beaverton River, on Simcoe Lake shore
Post office, two churches, and also six stores,
One teacher, one doctor, one lawyer for all
One wharf at the harbour, town pound, and town hall,
Steam boat and propeller, three schooners that sail,
And stages bring passengers, light freight and mail,
Shoemakers and bakers, and carpenters build,
Bricklayers and painters, enamel and guild,
Do turning, and planing, and carding of wool,
Do grinding and sawing, they tan and they full,
Waggon Makers, and blacksmiths and tailors abound,
Coopers and butchers, and farmers all round.
In summer it's lovely to view the road lake,
The groves and the islands, and fishes they take.

— A.G. Churchill,
Poetical Dictionary, 1860

Weh guk sahran (Foreigner)—

She folded and tucked the hand-drawn map of the route from Beaverton to Pearson International into the inside pocket of the fall jacket he was wearing, and then drew the zipper to the top.

‘Just in case,’ she said. And he smiled. It was a standing joke between them.

Next, she handed him the prescription sunglasses and told him to make sure he wore them because the sun was not what it used to be. Then she squeezed the skin cream into her hands and reached up to his nose with it and his cheeks and his ears and told him to rub it in. Closing his eyes, he circled his palms on his face and the lotion disappeared, all except for the slivers of white which remained thin along the line of greying hair by his temples on either side. Like the autumn whitecaps that have now begun rolling in and lining the shore with foam, as though the fall wind were somehow rinsing the lake of summer.

‘Young ha say yo,’ he said and bowed, which was supposed to mean ‘How are you?’ in Korean. Literally, ‘Are you in peace?’

She placed the tweed cap on his head while he was forward, and wiped away the remaining lines of lotion with a finger.

‘Is that a custom?’ he said. ‘Should I wait for him to put a hat on me and touch my face?’

She rubbed the residual lotion into her own hands and swatted him softly on the shoulder. Still bowing, he took her hand and kissed it. The fresh clean smell of aloe and the unchanging softness of her skin. He inhaled deeply through his nostrils. ‘God bless the senses,’ he said.

She smiled, faint lines at her eyes and mouth, and tussled her own short hair which also had streaks of grey in it. She never saw the point in makeup or dye, never saw the point in pretending or in making things what they are not.

‘*An* young hasayo,’ she said. ‘And remember you’re only supposed to say *An*-young. He’s just a boy. Hasayo is for older people.’

He unzipped the jacket, reached in and took out the folded map and a pen from the inside pocket. ‘Hmn. Beautiful and smart,’ he said. ‘How did I get so blessed?’

With his eyes still on her, he turned his head slightly and grinned. To strangers, his voice might have seemed touched with sarcasm, but beneath the playfulness was his constant sincerity, often joking but never saying anything he didn’t mean.

He put the sunglasses on, and said, ‘*An*, young,’ and wrote it down.

With two hands, she held the case for the glasses at her waist, and smiled. Except for the marks of age, he was the mirror image of the teenage boy she had met thirty years ago.

Never one to join, she had reluctantly signed up for the Global Awareness Club at the urging of her young English teacher whom the students all called Map, short for Mr. Mappins, the club's founder and supervisor. Map was a new teacher from the city and eager to bring the outside world into the halls and minds of the rural Ontario high school. She took to him instantly. Recognizing her keenness and ability, Map would often give her literature to read that wasn't on the course, but asking her not to tell anyone about it. She thought the reason for asking her this was that others might get jealous and think he was giving her special treatment. Really, he wanted to make sure no one who might protest the titles of the books would discover where she got them. And although she thought her maturity would prevent her from such typical teenage behaviour, she even found herself coming to have one of those kinds of crushes that high school girls so often get on their young male teachers.

Bordered by farms of sheep and cattle and hay, the school was as isolated physically as she was socially. Often alone at lunch in an empty classroom, she sat with her sketchbook writing poems or shading in imagined overseas landscapes of places she'd rather be. Or she sat on the hill behind the track in the months of spring and fall with Map's copies of Kerouac and Ginsberg, reading lines out loud to herself like *under the burden of solitude, under the burden of dissatisfaction and the only people for me are the mad ones...desirous of everything at the once.*

The young Charles walked into the club's inaugural meeting with the same tweed hat he had on now and a pair of large round sunglasses. The only thing missing this morning in this picture of him thirty years later was the scarf of hand-knitted wool he had stylishly looped around his neck that day.

‘Charles Foster, everybody,’ Map had said, sitting on the teacher’s desk in his brown pants and beige shirt and beard, clapping and smiling as Charles entered the room, the boy, tall and thin as the man was even today. ‘Remove the chapeau and come on in, Mr. Foster,’ said Map. ‘And I won’t even ask about the glasses and the scarf.’

‘My father gave me this hat,’ said Charles. ‘It’s for Scotland. And my mother gave me the scarf for France. And the glasses are for any place where the sun glares off the desert sand.’ He grinned. ‘The posters all said, Come Prepared to Travel the World. This is all I could manage. Look, I even brought chopsticks,’ he said, pulling them from his pants’ pocket. ‘Where’s the food?’

Map licked his right index finger and drew an invisible check in the air the way he did, and said, ‘The four of us were about to change the world, Charles. Any ideas?’

‘I was serious about the food,’ Charles said. ‘I’m starving. We could start there. Students Against Starving.’

At fourteen and in the typical throes of adolescent woe, it was the first time she could remember a real person, *real* being anyone beyond the pages of a book, who made her smile. She had always felt so out of place and so misunderstood, feeling as though she were slowly drowning in the remote and stagnant pool of her stillwater town. And so she often imagined herself as Woolf or Ophelia with the heavy stone about her waist or the madness. Yet, there were also gasps of hope in which she would dream herself to Africa like Laurence, or to Antwerp or Surinam like Aphra Behn, and then suddenly in her mind she would be on the roads and within the cities and on the coasts and the oceans of the world. And she would smile and be happy. But she knew that happiness like that

was rare and never lasted, and so until then she had given up without ever really trying to find it.

The other two students at the meeting were similar only in their feelings of isolation. One was Candice Westcott, with her flat limp hair and her oversized shirts that hid her burgeoning shape, who won the math competition and the science award every year. The other, Travis Prophet, was often seen trying out school projects, like a homemade kite or a small wooden car propelled by some ingenious engine of elastic bands. Each of them felt awkward and shy and alone in their own separate ways. But somehow when Charles came into the room, they began to feel more comfortable, at ease even, laughing at his entrance and finding an immediate and unspoken connection with him, and then with each other. It was the effect Charles always seemed to have on people, and the kind of appreciation he seemed never to have to work for. And by the end of the first meeting, they were all friends, and none could imagine a time since or beyond that each wasn't or wouldn't be a constant in each of the others' lives.

Charles sat down beside her that day and said, 'Your name is Ethel Hamilton. I've seen you on the hill with your books. I'm Charles.'

'I know,' she said.

Everyone in school knew who Charles was. He was not part of any particular social group, but neither was he an outsider to any. He seemed to fit in with everyone, and with every situation. And, as it often is with people who are very well known, he did not know many of the people who said they knew him.

Charles unwrapped the scarf from his neck and draped it around Ethel's. 'You look cold,' he said. Her arms were crossed and she seemed almost huddled in the desk. 'I live in Ethel Park, in Beaverton,' he said. 'Maybe it's named after you.'

'No,' she said, smiling again and almost surprised at the sound of her own voice. 'It's named after my great great aunt.'

'Well,' he said. 'It must be fate.'

'I don't believe in fate,' she said.

'Perfect,' he said. 'Neither do I.'

This all came to Ethel at once the way memory does, and she could see and hear it all in an instant as though it were being filmed before her on a life-wide screen of picture and sound. Faded and fleeting in the same moment, the memory was gone, and Charles was older again and sitting on the bench in their front hall of thirty years with his hat on and the sunglasses sliding down his nose, holding the pen and the paper and looking up at her.

'Nickel for your thoughts,' he said. 'Yours were always richer.'

'Oh, it's nothing,' she said. 'Just a memory.'

'All these years and that's all it takes?' he said, again with the grin.

'All what takes?' she said.

'A memory. To make you smile like that.'

'No,' she said. 'I'm smiling at you, Charlie. I'm always smiling at you.'

'Now you shouldn't go poking fun at the old and confused you know. I'm doing my best,' he said.

'You're not old,' she said.

He licked his right index finger and checked the air with it, the way Map used to do. ‘An young,’ he said, and put the pen to the paper. ‘What’s next?’

She placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. ‘And I know you are,’ she said.

He looked up at her.

‘Doing your best, I mean,’ she said. ‘We both are.’

‘It’s all we can do,’ he said, touching a hand to hers. He tapped the pen twice on the paper and said, ‘An young. What’s next?’

Stepping forward so that a knee touched his side and a hip touched his shoulder, she cleared her throat and put on her best Korean accent.

‘Jeh eeruh muhn,’ she said.

‘Jeh, ee, ruh, mun,’ he said and wrote. ‘Okay.’

‘Lebland Pasta.’

‘Leb, land, Pasta. Right.’

‘Imneeda.’

‘Im, nee, da,’ he said. ‘Sis boom bah!’

He stood then with resolution, held the folded paper at arms’ length and practiced the greeting out loud. ‘An-young. Jeh eeruh muhn Lebland Pasta imneeda.’ He squinted and brought the folded paper in close and then out again. ‘Where’s my name?’ he said.

She laughed. ‘He won’t say Reverend Foster,’ she said. ‘He’ll say Lebland Pasta. Like Kim does.’

Charles returned the paper to the inside pocket, and said, ‘I thought a name was supposed to sound exotic in another language. Make you sound exciting or mysterious

or—’ He adjusted his minister’s collar so that it would show above the jacket. ‘Or at least inspiring. Instead I get bland pasta.’

Ethel smiled and pinched his chin. ‘You’re going to be late.’

‘I’m always late,’ he said and he took her hand and kissed it again and then up her flannelled arm to her neck where he buried his face in and growled. ‘It’s my trademark,’ he mumbled. His lips tickled and she tried to wriggle free, both of them laughing, and then he kissed her cheeks repeatedly and she did the same to him.

He smiled softly and sighed. ‘I’m glad we’re doing this,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ she said and put a hand on his face.

They kissed then the way they did, in love as they had always been. And then she held the door open to their century home and watched him descend the steps and stroll down the short stone path to the driveway and the waiting sedan, never hurried in anything he did.

‘Sah-rahng-ahhh,’ he said and held a hand out the window as he drove away.

‘I love you too,’ she said, and closed the door, and turned to ascend the stairs of the quiet empty house.

Young-shin was fourteen years old, and he was saying goodbye to his family for the first time. At the Departures Terminal of the Pusan International Airport, his mother wept, looking down at the floor with a handkerchief to her mouth while Young-shin’s younger sister, who was also crying, hugged her mother’s waist. Young-shin’s father stood steadfastly beside his wife and daughter, hands clasped behind his back, eyes and mouth rigidly forward and straight. The expression and posture of a soldier at his post. He watched his son pass the ticket in and bow to the man behind the counter. Young-shin

then slowly moved with his baggage towards the threshold of the waiting tunnel and before entering, he looked back at his mother and father and sister. He bowed deeply and when he stood his eyes were heavy with tears. The corners of his father's mouth quivered, but only slightly, so slightly that his son did not see. And then Young-shin picked up his suitcase and entered the tunnel. Before he was completely gone from sight, his father turned and took his family home.

Flying north over the jutting peninsula of his native land, Young-shin looked down through the gaps in clouds at the rolling peaks of the Taebaek mountains and the long winding rivers of Nakdong and Han, and the cities built into hills, and the squares of green and brown farmland and the sparse crosswork of country roads between. Landing in Seoul, he would transfer to a larger plane and then fly fourteen hours to Detroit where he would have to wait for yet another plane, which would then usher him into Toronto where Charles Foster would be, waiting with his hat on and a sign with Young-shin's name blocked in both Korean and English letters. But before boarding the plane in Seoul, Young-shin would think very seriously about trading his ticket in and flying back to Pusan. He had not yet even really left, and already he wanted to be home again, to be sipping hot *cha* and eating the *joban* his mother so thoughtfully prepared every morning, to be walking down with his father to the North Harbour to fish with him off the pier the way he did every Saturday during the summer months. But even as he thought of going home, he knew that he could not. He knew that his family, particularly his father, was counting on him to go to Canada and study hard and return in four years with the ever-sought-after competitive edge of an English education. And so he went through the next terminal and back into the air and over the ocean to the North America he had only ever

heard stories or seen pictures of, and he fell asleep dreaming of what Canada would look like from the sky.

On the ground, strapped into his backpack and clenching his passport, Young-shin made his way through the tunnels and corridors of Pearson International, following the flow of the most ethnically diverse river of people he had ever seen. At home, there were very few people who looked different from him. Only the American soldiers and the few tourists and the young ESL teachers from the U.S. and England and Canada. Here, everyone seemed to be from a different place. This can't be Canada, I must have fallen asleep and missed my stop, he thought, remembering his early morning and evening trips to and from school on the subway back home. But then he saw the red and white flag with the maple leaf, and he recognized the signs from his years of English classes that spelled out the words Welcome and Toronto. He repeated the words to himself out loud and smiled at the familiar foreignness of them.

Passing through customs and then through the final gate to where the hordes of people scurried about with their rolling baggage and waving hands, Young-shin stopped with his own large suitcase and surveyed the steady stream of bodies for someone standing still and alone. Young-shin moved his head up and down and back and forth, peering through the stream of rushing people, those waiting for the arrival of loved ones peering back from the other side, barely visible, like a far shore on the other side the madly rolling rapids of a narrowing river. Soon the number of people diminished and the current slowed, and above the crowd Young-shin could see the sign with his name on it written in English and childlike Korean.

Holding the sign up over his head, Charles caught sight of Young-shin. He was tall for his age, Charles thought, and slight, dressed in black pants and a grey fitted sweater with a tie underneath. His shoes were squared at the toe and polished to a shine. Charles called out, 'An young!', and waved. Charles was smiling, almost laughing, and as he made eye contact with Young-shin, he bumped his way through the crowd of strangers to the boy. 'An young,' Charles said, setting the sign down against a post and taking off his hat and holding out his hand all at once.

Unexpected and pronounced with the typically slow and drawn out Ontario accent, the greeting sounded unfamiliar to Young-shin who took it for an English idiom he had not yet learned.

'Hello,' Young-shin said, and bowed. Then, feeling very awkward and almost ashamed, he shook the hand extended by Charles. He could not understand why a man his father's age was taking off his hat and offering a hand of welcome to a boy more than thirty years his junior.

'Did you have a good flight?' Charles said, louder than normal and slower.

Young-shin recognized the sounds *you* and *good* and *fly* and then excited, he said, 'Yes. Good ply. Good ply, Lebland Pasta.' Young-shin spoke loudly in return, wanting to match Charles' volume. He had heard from one of his teachers that because everything in North America was so loud the people there tended to have poorer hearing.

Equally excited by the successful communication, Charles smiled and pointed to himself. 'Yes, that's me,' he said. 'Reverend Foster. That's me.'

The boy bowed again and said, 'I'm Kim Young-shin. Berry nice to meet you.'

Charles laughed in spite of himself and bowed in return. ‘Yes,’ he said, unable to repeat the boy’s name as he had heard it. ‘It’s a real pleasure to meet you too.’

Embarrassed and confused by Charles’ laughter, Young-shin thought he had made a mistake, that maybe what he had said was not formal enough for a boy to say to a man and so he corrected himself. ‘Excuse me, Lebland Pasta. I mean it’s rear preja to meet you,’ he said, trying his best to mimic the sound of Charles’ voice. ‘I mean, real preasure to meet you.’

‘No, no,’ Charles said, waving his hands and wanting to erase the idea of correction from the boy’s head.

Again there was confusion and Young-shin looked at the ground. ‘It’s so shame, Lebland Pasta. My pronounce is berry bad.’ He looked up then at Charles and said, ‘But I work hard. I promise. I make ebbery one proud.’

And suddenly it was as though Charles were listening to his own son, Thomas, ten years ago. At the time, Thomas was at the end of his final year of high school, keen and excited by the possibilities that lay before him. After graduation, he and his girlfriend, Amber, spent their summer in Seoul, teaching ESL classes to children in return for room and board.

‘Don’t worry, dad,’ Thomas said before leaving. ‘We’ll be alright. We’ll work hard over there. I promise. We’ll make everyone proud.’

Charles put a hand on Young-shin’s shoulder and looked at him, and somehow in that moment Young-shin was filled with an overwhelming sense of comfortable familiarity and kinship, as though he had known Charles his whole life, as though Charles

were a favourite uncle of his whom he looked up to and spent a great deal of time with, fishing and practicing Chinese and listening to the wonders of the opposite sex.

Through the constantly sliding glass doors behind them, the sky seemed to darken in an instant. The air cooled and on it was the smell of rain. There was thunder in the distance and a small wind lifted from the ground. A few leaves from the median trees and a plastic bag swirled about on the sidewalk by the doors and for a brief moment, one of the leaves took flight and then the bag after it.

‘God’s about to water his garden,’ Charles said, reaching for the boy’s suitcase. ‘We’d better go.’

‘Oh no, Lebland Pasta. I take. Sank you.’

‘But the bag looks heavier than you are,’ Charles said with his grin. ‘And you must be tired. Let me help.’ Charles reached for the bag again and this time, Young-shin let him take it, not wanting to disobey.

The two walked out, Young-shin a small but clear step behind. They paused under the awning where Charles donned his tweed cap again.

‘I like your hat,’ Young-shin said. ‘Rooks like Sean Connelly.’

Charles stroked his imaginary beard and said, ‘Foster. Charles Foster.’

Young-shin gave an appreciative laugh, recognizing the attempted impersonation from when his father tried to capture the Scottish accent with his Korean name.

And then the rain started, heavy and thick and smacking the pavement. Still beneath the awning, Charles looked out into the parking lot and scanned the rows of cars, locating his. ‘I hear you like the water,’ he said, and held his hand out to catch the rain. But before Young-shin could answer, Charles was gone. Leaving the suitcase beside the

boy, he ran out into the drenching downpour and returned in his sedan less than a minute later. He popped the trunk, pushed the passenger door open and said, 'Come on there, Young-shin, we've still got a ways to go.'

Young-shin put the suitcase in the trunk, took his backpack off and climbed into the car. He looked at Charles and then out the window. And then back at Charles.

'Don't worry,' Charles said. 'Mrs. Foster thinks I'm crazy too.'

'No, not crazy, Lebland Pasta,' Young-shin said, and looked out the window.

They merged onto the 401 and Young-shin was amazed by how narrow the highway was and by how few cars there were and by how steady their movement was upon the road.

'No, not crazy,' he said again. 'Too nice.'

The car was quiet for most of the way, neither of them feeling the need or the pressure to speak the way the recently introduced often do, comfortable and content within their shared silence. Northbound on the 404, Young-shin noticed a blue sign with a white fish and hook symbol on it. His eyes widened with excitement. It read, Burd's Fishing, and as he repeated and translated this to himself his eyes furrowed, wondering at first if he had read the sign correctly and then thinking if he had, how strange it was that people here fished for birds.

As they drove the hour and half home to Beaverton, it continued to rain and the cityscape faded behind them. The roads became even narrower and the cars even fewer, and the air smelled clean and of the earth as the horizon filled with the valleys of trees and the far reaches of fields.

At the end of the drive and rolling slowly into Beaverton, the first thing Young-shin noticed was that there were no streetlights and very few people walking around.

Those he did see, were all white. Almost opposite to the way it was in the city they had just come from. And he wondered in that instant how two places, so close together and of the same Province, could be so vastly different. And in that same moment, he realized, although he had never really thought about it before, that to some degree there was the same difference between country and city back home.

The silence ended as Charles began speaking about the town. ‘This is the main street,’ he said, ‘but it’s called Simcoe. Main Street runs west over there,’ he said pointing left, ‘down towards the lake. And it runs east, up a ways and over there. The lake is called Simcoe too. I know it sounds confusing right now, but you’ll get the hang of it. Soon you won’t need the names of the streets at all, like most of the rest of us around here. One day you’ll just wake up and it will be like you were from here, and you’ll just be able to go where you need to go.’

Charles was wanted to tell and show the boy everything at once. But it was all too much and too fast for Young-shin to comprehend, even if English were his mother tongue. Still, Young-shin was very polite and he listened to every word, nodding and making sounds of appreciation.

‘Oooh yes, I see,’ he would say. ‘Mn-hmn. Berry interesting.’

As Charles drove east along Simcoe, he pointed out and historicized many of the street’s buildings. He was excited to be showing someone his town again. When Thomas was younger, and on more than one occasion, Charles had subjected him to the same kind of tour.

They drove past the flower shop and he explained how it was at one time the town’s theatre, and how the old Hamilton Hotel was now a real estate office and a fitness

centre. The Farmer's Kitchen was once a clothing and shoe shop, and Gillespie's Hardware was known many years before as Cameron & Cameron's. The stores on the south side of the street seemed always to be changing their names and types of business, known collectively at one time as Hamilton's New Block and then as Brunning's. At the intersection by the town's modest bridge, there was the Old Mill Gateway, a stone and wooden archway that marked the place of the old Proctor Mill before it burned to the ground. There was a skateboard park and basketball court now at the bottom of the hill, by the river where the mill had been, and Charles told Young-shin never to toboggan there. And even though Young-shin did not know what the word 'toboggan' meant, he assured Charles that he would not.

Driving back across Simcoe, Charles pointed out the oversized portrait of Clint Eastwood painted on the brick side of a Bar & Tavern that for years had been the CIBC and before that, the Sterling Bank of Canada. What he didn't mention, however, was that Ethel had been the one to paint it. He knew, although he did not know the reason for it, that she liked to keep that to herself.

After reading in *The Beaverton Express* about her graduation from the Ontario College of Art & Design, the owner of the restaurant at the time had called Ethel with a proposition. He wanted her to paint a larger than life Eastwood on the west wall of his tavern, and if she could paint him in his dusty hat and trademark western glare, it would go perfectly with the wild west feel he was aiming for. Beside the portrait he wanted her to write, *Go Ahead, Make My Day*, in large letters and, *Come On In*, in smaller letters below. Thomas was still only a toddler at the time. She had been commuting back and forth between Beaverton and Toronto for two years, and although she and Charles had

been able to make it work somehow, now that she was finished, she just wanted to be home. At one time in her youth, it had been the place she wanted most to leave, but now, with the family she had and the happiness, it was the place she wanted most to be.

Ethel took the job and when it was finished, the owner was overjoyed with the result, and said he would be honoured if she would sign her name at the bottom of her work. Not wanting to attach her name to something so commercial, for fear of what her teachers might think, Ethel told the owner it was customary these days for the artist to personalize a piece of work with a title rather than a name. And so in the bottom right-hand corner of the wall she wrote, Beaverton's Eckleburg. She couldn't help smiling to herself every time she went by.

Charles continued to highlight buildings on the street as he drove—the post office and the library and the war monument on the lawn beside the town hall. The monument was a statue of a Canadian soldier standing atop a plaque that listed the names of the men who had fought in the World and Korean wars. Behind the town hall and the library and across from the Presbyterian Church, was Alexander Muir park, named for the North Street school principal and composer of 'The Maple Leaf Forever.' After explaining this, Charles attempted a verse, conducting himself with a finger, the way he did in Church, and using his head as a metronome. Unsure if Charles was meaning to be serious, Youngshin clapped and pretended to recognize the song.

Like most of the drive home from the city, the car was quiet again. Only the rain on the roof and the wipers, the steadiness and near silence of both. As they approached the Presbyterian Church, Charles leaned forward in the car and squinted through the window. Stopping in front of the library, he parked the car, sat back and sighed.

‘I think your English is better than some of the boys who have been born and raised here,’ he said. ‘You’ve certainly been brought up better.’

Again, not really understanding what he had said, and before Young-shin had a chance to respond, Charles was gone. He jogged across the road to the Church and stopped at the sign on the lawn. Young-shin watched him through the car’s water-streaked windshield. Someone had rearranged the letters and numbers on the sign again, and Charles went about fixing them in the rain. The Church had recently purchased the sign and was yet to receive the transparent cover which could be locked in order to prevent such graffiti. The message was meant simply to announce the time of the weekly service. Sunday 9.30 to 12.30.

Last week the vandals had taken every character off except for the *S*, the *u*, the *t* and the *d*, which they cleverly flipped around for a *b*, and arranged the word ‘butS.’

‘They might as well have written tubs,’ Ethel had said. ‘Or stud. I can’t believe the ignorance in this town sometimes.’

This time, they had managed to triple their syllable count and spell the words correctly. They had even been ingenious enough to push the *n* and the *y* together to make it look like the word *my*. The message read, ‘eat my load.’ As Charles collected the discarded letters and numbers from the lawn and rearranged them on the board, he wondered what Ethel would make of such a phrase. No doubt she had seen it and left it for him to fix. She had predicted the graffiti and thought the money used for the sign could have been spent better somewhere else. Upon correcting the message, Charles returned to the car. The tour of the town was finished for the day and soon he and Young-

shin were pulling into the Foster's North Street century home. In the driveway Young-shin waited for Charles to leave the car, and then he followed.

Ethel was in her studio, the small bedroom on the second floor that overlooked the street, working on a black and white picture for Charles' fiftieth birthday. She heard the car pull in and soon she was in the doorway, smiling, almost laughing the way Charles had been at the airport.

'Hurry up! Hurry up!' she said. 'You'll be soaked to the bone.'

Once inside, Young-shin bowed and told Ethel what a real pleasure it was to meet her, and then he hugged her the way he had been shown to do, and said, 'You hab berry beautipul home, Missus Pasta. Sank you so much pore your kindness.'

Ethel put a hand to her mouth and her eyes began to water. In that moment, she felt happy and heartbroken and furious and forgiving all at once. It had been ten years since she had last felt the embrace of her own son, Thomas, and now standing in front of her was a boy from the country he had been killed in. Yet the way Young-shin spoke and what he said, however accented and broken, reminded her instantly of Thomas, and of his genuineness and his infectiously thoughtful demeanour.

'So sorry,' Young-shin said. 'So sorry. I say something wrong.'

'No, no,' Charles said, setting a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'You didn't say anything wrong. You just remind—'

Ethel looked at Charles then and he stopped. Stepping to the side, he returned his rain-wet cap to the rack by the door and Ethel stepped forward, putting her own hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Thank you, Young-shin,' she said. 'I'm just so happy that you are here.'

The next morning Young-shin woke in his new bed and as he rubbed his eyes he could smell the hardwood floor of his new room and the leaf-scented breeze through the propped-open wooden window, and he looked out to the tall and swaying old trees in the large backyard lawn that sloped down to the narrow and calmly flowing Beaver River. He had never been surrounded by so much space.

It was Sunday, and he would go with Mrs. Foster, who insisted that he call her Ethel, to hear Mr. Foster, who wanted to be called Charlie, give his sermon. Church was something Young-shin was accustomed to and so he went willingly. His mother was a devout Presbyterian, and she took him and his younger sister every Sunday back in Pusan. The minister even gave them homework to do, booklets of fill-in-the-blank questions and short answers for the story he had talked about that week. For some reason, though, Young-shin's father seemed always to have an early morning meeting and never went with them. Later, Young-shin would discover that those meetings always took place at the Dong Nae Country Club where his father was a year round member. Sometimes during school vacation, when his mother would go out to the grocery store, Young-shin would leave his room and his advanced mathematics or English grammar and take his father's putter from the golf bag by the door and practice putting on the living room area rug of their high rise apartment. The first time his mother caught him, she snatched the club and struck his right calf with it seven times before prodding him back to his room with it. The second and last time she caught him, she took the putter, snapped it in two and threw it off the balcony. The next day, Young-shin's father bought a new one and put the whole bag in the trunk of his car. Although publicly resolute and wanting to appear as the 'head' of the family, he almost always yielded to the decisions his wife made

concerning their children. At home, she was the head. He knew that whatever she did was out of love, and so he never questioned her on it. He never said a word to Young-shin or his wife about the broken club, and that Sunday he went with his family to Church.

The Beaverton Presbyterian Church was relatively small to begin with, built to seat around two hundred people, but over the years the number of regular attendants had diminished and the pews had grown emptier and emptier. To outsiders, it would seem much more institutional and far less intimate than it actually was. Most of those who remained were active members of both the Church and the community.

During service, the majority of the few who attended gathered in the centre rows near the front, but there were some who had their favourite seats in the back or on the side, separate but still together. The original Church had been demolished due to the disharmony between some of the Presbyterians and the Methodists of the day, denominations that many saw as so similar in their practices of worship that they felt a union of the two would be mutually beneficial. But for others the practices were not similar enough. The Continuing Presbyterians, as they called themselves, did not want to amalgamate under the banner of the United Church. They were Presbyterians and they did not want to change, even if the change were only nominal, and so they continued being Presbyterians and erected their own Church in 1927.

Today, there were Sundays when the choir outnumbered the congregation. Following the opening hymn, ten or fifteen children would be called to the front where Charles would tell them a story, and then they would follow their teachers, four or five adults, down to the basement of the Church for Sunday School. Sometimes there were

only ten or fifteen people left, and of them, there were always three or four older men who slept throughout the sermon, waking only to the nudging elbows of their wives.

Charles began and ended every sermon with a quotation from somewhere other than the Bible, almost always found and suggested by Ethel. He stood in front of his small congregation on this first Sunday of September and began, ‘My wife Ethel recently taught me about the eighteenth century French philosopher, Voltaire. What I learned seemed to fit perfectly with today’s sermon.’ Charles looked at the open notebook in front of him and then back to his congregation. ‘Voltaire said, “Tolerance is a consequence of humanity and since we are all formed of frailty and error, let us pardon each other’s folly.”’

From here, Charles moved into the retelling of one of the Parables, as he always did. Today, he told the Parable of The Wheat and Tares and at the end he said this.

‘There is no place for a judge where there is no law and there is no place for a critic where there is no art. Think back to the dandelions that invaded so many of our lawns in early summer. Some of us went to our sheds, gassed up our mowers and pulled the ripcords with a vengeance.’

He stepped out from behind the lectern and mimed the action of starting a mower, and quiet laughter lifted from the pews.

‘Then we mowed those dandelions down,’ he said, ‘and spread the seeds to our neighbours.’

And there was more laughter as he pushed an invisible mower across the front of the platform from which he preached and threw a handful of confetti out into the congregation. When he returned to the lectern, he paused and looked at Ethel who was

smiling up at him. Kim was sitting beside Ethel, as he did almost every Sunday, and Young-shin was beside him. Although Young-shin was confused by the confetti and had understood very little of what Charles had said, he still enjoyed being there. Looking at Kim, Charles couldn't help wondering how old he was. Despite the greying hair, he seemed never to age. He could have been Young-shin's brother or his uncle or his father, and the three of them there together could easily have been mistaken for a family. And although there was no relation among them and they knew very little about each other, to Charles, in that moment they were.

Friends of the Fosters, Kim and his family were only one of four other Asian families who lived in Beaverton, and they were the only family from Korea. His parents had owned a successful restaurant in Seoul, but in the years following the Korean War business had waned and they had to close down. Supplying him with enough money to get started, they insisted that Kim leave Seoul and begin a life of happiness and success which they believed was waiting on the other side of the world. Not knowing the difference really between Vancouver or San Francisco or Boston or Toronto—all just city names on a map of a continent where the reason for borders was not nearly as clear or as known to him as the reasons in his own land—Kim decided upon Toronto. Friends of his parents had been there for two years, and had nothing but good things to say. Once there, he heard of the opportunities in the small towns to the north, and in a month, Kim had moved his family to Beaverton where they bought a home and the Fish N' Chips Restaurant which Kim has owned and operated now for more than thirty years.

Kim's wife had died very suddenly during their first winter in Canada, and he was left to raise his son and daughter alone. In Korea, this was unheard of, and Kim's parents

told him to move back to Seoul so that they could help, or at least move back to Toronto where he had friends. Kim said he would just see how life unfolded over the next little while, and if he could manage it, he would stay. The restaurant was doing well, and although he missed home, he missed his wife more and he knew in his heart that nothing he did would ever fill that void. All that mattered to him then was his children, and he wanted to afford them every opportunity he could. He believed staying would do that.

His son was married now with three children of his own and worked for IBM in the city, and his daughter was in line to be a partner at the Bay Street firm she practiced for. She told him she did not have time right now for a husband and a family. Although Kim was very proud of her, he couldn't help thinking of how lonely she must be, even though he himself had lived alone now for fifteen years. And then he couldn't help thinking of his own parents who had sacrificed so much for him, and what they would think, were they alive, of his daughter's busy and single life. He knew that somehow they would blame him, that they would consider her not being married a failure. They would say he encouraged her too much as a child, but then he would tell them that he had encouraged her the way he did because he did not want her to have to depend on anyone. He would say, this is not a place where women have to walk behind men. But even as he thought all of this, he knew that his parents would not understand. They were from a different place, and a different time.

'Others sprayed the so-called weeds with chemicals for a healthier lawn,' Charles continued. 'And yet others might even have plucked and harvested their dandelions for salad greens and wine.' He paused again and looked into each of the faces before him.

‘So what is the law here?’ he said. ‘What is the right thing to do with these weeds? And who is the judge? And where is there art if it’s not in the spreading of seeds or in the cultivation of what we’ve been given? Is it in our ability to simultaneously kill the yellow dandelion and enhance the greenness of the grass? Who is the critic that sees more art in green than in yellow?’

There was a long pause then, and closing the notebook on the lectern, Charles moved to a less serious tone. ‘At the very least, remember this,’ he said. ‘As my fellow Scotsman Robert Louis Stevenson once said, there is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly behooves any of us, to judge the rest of us.’

Outside, was the first real autumn day of the year. There was sun but it wasn’t overly warm and the air still smelled of yesterday’s rain. Before long, the weekends would be rife with the scent of burning leaves and the children, still sun-kissed, would run around in the hours after school clinging to their summer freedom. By the end of the month, the calls for supper would sound with the arrival of dusk and the cool air would blow in from the lake. There would be leaves to play in and pieces of them would stick to the wool of the hand-knitted sweaters the children wore for their evening games of hide-and-seek. Soon there would be the promise of Halloween and then winter would loom and with the first snow, the anticipation of Christmas. But long before then, somewhere just beyond the onset of fall and the donning of sweaters, the children would somehow forget the summer they loved and had so recently been trying to save. And they would be unaware of the memories being formed, the moments they would not even think of until age and the adult desire to understand had them looking back with wonder.

Charles pushed open the tall double doors at the back and it was like the Church breathed the freshness in. He stood outside at the top of the steps and shook hands and spoke with each of the members as they made their way outside, most of them remarking on how pleasant the weather was, some mentioning how nice the young Oriental boy seemed, and others commenting on the service.

Margaret Mitchell was always the last to leave. Today, like the last few Sundays, she was with her husband. They were both in their early seventies and like Charles and Ethel, they had lived in Beaverton their whole lives.

‘What a lovely day,’ Margaret said.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Charles.

‘I see the young Chinese boy arrived safely,’ Margaret said. ‘He seems like such a nice young man.’

‘Oriental’ and ‘Chinese’ were often synonymous in Beaverton, used interchangeably to describe those from Asia who shared similar-sounding languages and similar facial features. The way Macedonians might be mistaken for being Greek or people from Kazakhstan for being Russian or New Zealanders for being Australian, the way Canadians outside their own country are often mistaken for being American. Here, Oriental and Chinese included anyone who came from China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam or Korea.

‘He must find it awfully different here,’ she said.

‘Yes, it’s all very new to him but I think he’ll do just fine,’ Charles said. ‘He’s quite a scholar you know.’

‘Oh, yes, I hear they’re very good in math and what not. Walter and I watched a special just the other night on the CBC. They talked about how they’re so much further ahead than our children in the maths and sciences. They study very hard, you know.’

‘Mm-hmn,’ Charles said, seeing no need or purpose in correcting Margaret’s use of ‘they’ or ‘Chinese’. To say that ‘they’ was inappropriate, or that Young-shin was from Korea and not China, would mean very little to a woman Margaret’s age who had spent her whole life in this rural Ontario town. It’s just who she was.

‘Well, it was a lovely service, Reverend,’ she said. ‘Like always.’

‘Thank you, Margaret,’ said Charles. ‘And how’s your daughter, Anne, doing?’ Charles and Ethel had gone to high school with Anne, but really only knew her in passing.

‘Oh, she’s doing well. Still teaching in the city. Tough for her to get up this way, you know.’

‘Well, you say hello to her for us,’ he said. ‘Tell her that we miss her.’

Walter was standing behind Margaret, dressed in his only suit. He had lost weight since the stroke, and there seemed to be room enough for two of him within the jacket. Walter had been the manager of McCaskell’s Lumber for forty-one years, but since he had lost the use of much of his left side, he was no longer able to work. Since being home from the hospital, he had started coming to Church with Margaret every Sunday, but he was yet to make it through a sermon without closing his eyes. Charles never said a word about either—the sleeping or the stroke. He took Walter’s left hand and shook it. ‘And how are you Walter? Keeping busy?’

‘Oh not too bad, not too bad.’ The left side of his mouth drooped slightly when he talked. ‘Tinkerin round the house and the yard and what not. Bout ready to turn the garden fer another year.’

‘Well, if you need any help at all, Walter, you just holler,’ Charles said. ‘Many hands make light work.’

‘Thanks, Reverend. That’s awful kind.’ Walter held his left hand up with his right and demonstrated the uselessness of it by trying to bend the thumb back and forth. Then he said, ‘But all I’d really like was the work’n use of me own two.’ He tried to smile but only the right corner of his mouth responded.

Charles said nothing. He shook Walter’s hand again and then watched the couple descend the steps. Margaret held Walter’s left arm, as she always did, and he took the rail as they stepped down onto the street. And it was in moments like this that Charles was filled with an overwhelming love for his town.

That evening, the Prophets were over to the Fosters for what had become a tradition, the summer’s last barbecue. Although Candice and Travis were staunchly atheist, the four of them had remained friends throughout these thirty years, spanning all the way back to the first meeting of The Global Awareness Club. After high school, Travis and Candice both earned double degrees in Physics and Mathematics. They were married the summer after Teacher’s College and by September, they both had a spot on the faculty of their former high school. In five years, Candice was the Head of Science and Travis, the Head of Math. And in another five years their son, Isaac, was born. All according to plan. Like his namesake three hundred and fifty years earlier, Isaac came into the world prematurely on Christmas Day and although neither of his parents believed

in ‘the irrationality of Providence’ they couldn’t help thinking for a brief moment that their son, not yet a day old, was already destined for greatness.

Isaac was fourteen now, the same age as Young-shin, and was beginning high school on Tuesday. Although he possessed the ability and his elementary school teachers suggested he enrol in the University bound courses, he had not yet shown the academic interest of his parents. He didn’t really like school but he loved sports and, like all of his friends, he couldn’t wait to start playing rugby.

‘He hasn’t been challenged yet,’ Travis said, taking a mouthful of beer on the Fosters’ back deck. ‘They coddle them too much in public school nowadays. If it wasn’t for the bit of work we do with him at home, he wouldn’t even know the Pythagorean Theorem.’

In his late forties, his hair was still thick and brown, but the beard Travis had worn most of his adult life now had a single streak of grey down the middle and the hair below his bottom lip was completely white. The beer mug he drank from was a joke gift he had given Charles the day he had graduated from Tyndale University College and Seminary. It was clear and had the brand name Foster’s written on it. The card attached had read, ‘Congratulations! Now let’s get drunk. The good Lord gave us the barley so we could make the beer.’

‘Pythagorean,’ Charles said. He flipped the thick and sputtering steaks on the grill, looked out into his backyard, and furrowed his brow. ‘Isn’t that an island off the southern tip of Korea?’

‘Always the preaching comedian,’ Travis said and drank from the mug, sucking the remnants from his moustache. ‘Speaking of Korea, how is the new boarder—what’s

his name—Young-chin? Candice and I were out to the school last week and Map asked us how you and Ethel were getting along with him. Did you know he's finally retiring, that old hippie?'

'It's Young-*shin*,' Charles said, and closed the barbecue's lid. 'And yes, we knew he was retiring. He and Ethel have stayed pretty close over the years. He's the one who asked us if we'd be interested in having an exchange student. He said he had a great experience last year with it, and when it came time to apply again, he thought of us.' Charles crossed his arms and leaned against the deck rail. 'He seems to like it here well enough—Young-*shin*, I mean—but it's only been a day. I couldn't imagine what it must be like.'

'Must be pretty bright,' Travis said. 'Candice and I saw his name on both of our grade nine gifted lists. Young-*shin*,' Travis said. 'Not exactly an easy handle to miss.'

'Mm-hmn,' said Charles. 'Well, you know how our beloved alma mater can be with newcomers, so could you do me a favour and make sure no one twists the handle the wrong way?'

'Why,' said Travis, 'do things turn backwards over there?' He finished his beer. 'I thought that was Australia.'

Charles clapped his friend on the back and for a moment, left his hand there. 'What's the square root of a math teacher?' he said, taking the empty mug from Travis who smiled foolishly and shrugged.

Charles took off his apron which read, 'Hell: Even God Grills,' and said, 'A sense of humour minus one.' He handed Travis the tongs and went into the kitchen where he took the salads he had prepared earlier, set them on the dining room table, and poured the

homemade wine. As Charles walked away, Travis snapped the tongs at his friend. Then he took another beer from the case he had brought with him and cracked open the can. Alone, he checked his watch and wondered where Isaac was—he should have been there by now.

Ethel and Candice were upstairs in the studio.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Candice said. ‘He’ll love it.’ Setting her cup down on a nearby table, she took a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her eyes with it.

Ethel had finished the drawing she had been working on for Charles and would give it to him this evening when they were alone. It was a black and white pencil sketch of Charles and their son, Thomas, standing between the two maples in their front yard on a winter afternoon. Both Charles and Thomas had on snow pants with suspenders and plaid shirts rolled to the elbows.

‘I was always telling them both to do up their jackets,’ Ethel said. ‘They came in from the lake that day without them on at all, just to torment me.’

Candice sniffed and dabbed her eyes again and smiled.

In the picture, Thomas was only seventeen, but he stood shoulder to shoulder with his father. Each had an arm around the other’s neck and neither were smiling, yet their eyes were wide and beaming, serious and elated and full of pride all at once. Outstretched and hanging from the index finger of their free hands were the two lake trout they had caught that morning. The snow on the ground around them appeared untouched. There were no footprints and no tracks made by the snowmobiles that took them to and from the lake every Saturday morning. Only father and son, their morning catch and the snow-heavy trees beside. And the caption at the bottom which read, *Teach A Man To Fish.*

Ethel sipped her tea and cradled the cup to her stomach. She went to the window and looked down into the empty yard and the quiet street where the shadows of evening were beginning to crawl out from beneath parked cars, and to appear at the base of large and swaying trees. The leaves had started to turn and some were scattered on the ground, coming to life with the low and passing gusts.

Candice went to the window and stood beside her friend, put a hand on her back.

Different in their youth, Candice and Ethel had become similar in middle age. The way women who have been friends for many years often do, unintentionally and without notice. Both had short hair with veins of grey in it and they often borrowed clothes from one another's equally earthy wardrobe. Well-worn jeans and khaki cotton pants, fitted shirts of soft yellows and browns and greens. They shared an interest in healthy living, often jogging or cycling together and clipping recipes for their husbands to try. In summer, they wore similar hats while working in their yards. They kept their nails short and the lines in their hands were often dark with the earth of their gardens. And their eyes seemed always to hum with the subtle sharpness of the quietly and keenly aware, always in tune with the pulse of life around them.

'It was five years ago this Friday,' Ethel said. 'The day before he was supposed to come home.'

Candice looked at her friend and then back out the window. A young girl on a bicycle passed by on the sidewalk below. She wore a buttoned sweater, and she was pumping the pedals with all the vitality of youth.

'I couldn't imagine,' Candice said. 'I couldn't imagine losing a child.'

In the five years since it happened, Ethel had rarely spoken about Thomas' death. She and Charles knew that the death of a young person, the way it was in every small community the world over, was the kind of thing that people in town would talk about with relentless curiosity and condolence, but that it was also something no one would ever question, and over time, would eventually come not to talk about much at all. And so they had decided to say it had been a car accident, thinking it would be easier for others to accept, easier than trying to explain what had really happened and why they seemed not to be doing anything about it.

Charles was already up with his coffee that morning five years ago, too excited about seeing Thomas to sleep.

He'll be in the air by now, Charles thought. He'll soon be home.

The sun was beginning to rise over Beaverton just as it was beginning to fall over Seoul, the simultaneous half-light of dusk and dawn on either sides of the world. Charles was in his chair by the living room window, looking out, when the phone rang. He answered it quickly, not wanting Ethel's sleep to be disturbed. The connection was delayed, and at first there was no voice on the other end of the line. Then there was static and the words started coming through in broken phrases. He thought he heard his son's name and that maybe Thomas was trying to call collect.

Maybe the flight was delayed, Charles thought, and he's just calling to let me know.

'Yes, I'll accept,' said Charles. 'Thomas? Is that you Thomas?'

There was a delay again and the frustrating sound of foreign language in the background, and finally Charles heard something he could understand.

‘Mr. Foster?’ came a female voice, and she was crying. ‘Mr. Foster?’

‘Yes,’ Charles said. ‘Yes. Who is this?’

Again, there was a delay. Charles shook the phone and put it back to his ear.

‘Mr. Foster,’ said the voice. ‘It’s Amber.’

Thomas and Amber had been best friends since elementary school and had grown to be much more throughout their years of adolescence, sharing at eighteen the kind of closeness and love for one another that many people never experience in a lifetime.

As senior members of the Global Awareness Club, they had come up with an idea called Living Language—room and board in exchange for ESL classes for children of parents who couldn’t afford the private schools. Map loved the idea and was instrumental in helping them bring it to fruition. With his help, Thomas and Amber decided on Seoul for their destination. Over the course of the year and numerous letters describing their idea, Thomas and Amber were finally able to develop a correspondence with a high school teacher in Seoul who was interested in such an arrangement. So interested in fact, that he insisted Thomas and Amber stay with him and his family, arranging an eight week stay over the coming summer months. It would be the first time either Thomas or Amber had ever been outside of the country. Charles and Ethel were worried at first and had particular reservations about the idea, but after discussing it, they decided they wanted Thomas to experience everything he could. Although very happy with her life as it was, Ethel still had hopes of travelling herself, and so she did not want to stand in the way of her son actually doing what, until then, she had only ever thought of. Amber’s parents were like Map—self-declared ‘old hippies’—and they were behind the idea from the

start. And so the week after school ended, Charles and Ethel and Amber's parents stood at the departures gate of Pearson International, and waved good-bye to their children.

'I'm so sorry,' said Amber. Her voice was faint, cutting in and out. 'I'm so sorry, Mr. Foster.'

'I can hardly hear you,' Charles said. His heart quickened. 'Sorry about what?'

Amber's voice came through again in delay. 'I tried to stop them, Mr. Foster.'

'Stop who, Amber? What's happened?'

Amber was still crying and so it was even more difficult for Charles to hear what she was saying. 'Thomas,' she said.

'What,' said Charles. 'Tell me. What about Thomas?'

The phone filled with static and Charles squinted.

'What? Say that again,' he said. 'I can't hear you.'

'Thomas—' she said.

'Yes, yes, I heard that. Thomas. What about him?'

And suddenly the line cleared and Amber sounded as though she were in the next room. Charles could even hear the footsteps of nurses and the wheels of rolling beds in the background.

'We were out buying gifts for everyone back home,' she said. 'We were with a Korean couple our own age who we met our first week here. A group of American soldiers walked by and started taunting Changsuk. Two of them started pushing him back and forth, like it was a game. They were laughing. They're supposed to be there as peacekeepers. Then one of them grabbed Suni by the waist and swung her around. She screamed and that's when Thomas—I tried to stop him,' she said. 'The whole group of

them just—all I could hear Thomas say was for Suni and me to run. I didn't know what to do, Mr. Foster.'

'Amber,' said Charles, his heart racing. 'Tell me Thomas is alright.'

After he hung up the phone, Charles went mindlessly to the kitchen to fill his cup and then quietly ascended the stairs. Ethel was still asleep. She sighed and rolled over as Charles lowered himself into the chair in the corner, the wicker creaking beneath him, but she did not wake. The morning sun filtered through the thin and billowing curtains, and a muted light filled the room. He would sit there and listen to her breathe, and wait for her eyes to open.

There were no witnesses other than Amber, at least none who would come forward, and she was in no condition to testify. Even if she were, what would that mean? How could they go through something like that after losing their son? The media would make a spectacle of it. It would be in all the papers—*Small Town Minister's Son, Killed in Overseas Brawl*—and the T.V. stations would set up camp on their front lawn, shoving microphones in their faces every time they stepped outside. Charles and Ethel did not know what to do. Desperate and thinking that maybe he might know someone in Seoul who could help them, they decided to tell Kim what had really happened and to ask for his help. Speechless at first, he said he wished that he could, but American soldiers were given special treatment in Korea. He told them that they were protected by some kind of overseas immunity, and that too many other accidents had gone unexplained and unannounced and unresolved over the years. And so thinking of the memory of their son and what they believed he would have wanted them to do, they decided to keep the whole incident quiet. They believed he would have wanted them to try to find some peace.

Now, Young-shin sat on the side of Thomas' bed and looked out the window into the large backyard of his new home. Charles was at the barbecue and there was another man with him whom Young-shin didn't know. A few minutes before, he had heard Ethel and another woman come up the stairs and go into the room across the hall. Earlier, Young-shin had said he was tired and Charles told him he should try to take a nap before supper. That was two hours ago, and he was yet to close his eyes.

Downstairs, Charles had returned to the deck. He took the tongs back from Travis and clicked them twice. 'Are they done?' he said.

'Are who done?' Travis said.

'The steaks.'

'Lord only knows,' Travis said. 'Heaven forbid I touch another man's meat.'

'You know you're going straight to hell,' Charles said, opening the lid. 'I put six of these on you know. I thought Isaac was coming.'

'He's supposed to be.'

'Well, if he's anything like his father, he won't miss a free meal.'

The sun was low and the sky was the colour of rust. And in the distance, out of the still and peaceful evening, came the shrill and grating sound of steel on steel. No one local ever noticed the passing of trains—it was so natural to the rhythm of the place—but when the whistle came unexpected like this and was held, or the train screeched in a sudden effort to stop, everyone within earshot would turn and look in the direction of the tracks.

'Jesus,' said Travis. 'Someone needs an oil job.'

‘Probably those cattle again,’ Charles said. ‘Ethel was out for a run the other day and saw the CN men trying to herd a bunch of them away from the tracks. The train was held up for nearly an hour.’

Upstairs, Ethel told the same story to Candice.

‘I’d heard about that,’ Candice said. She and Ethel stared out the window for a moment longer, and before they left the room, Candice looked at her watch.

The sound of the braking train had a different effect on Young-shin, accustomed to such noise and almost soothed by it in his hometown of four million. He reached for the phone on the bedside table, overcome suddenly with the urge to call home. But just as he dialled the number, he realized that his Sunday evening was no longer the same as his family’s, and so if he did call now, there would be no one there to answer. It was Monday morning in Pusan and his father would be at work. His little sister would be at school and his mother, out on her daily routine of errands.

Beside the phone, there was a picture of Thomas fishing from a dock. Young-shin picked the picture up, and as he did so, Ethel knocked on the bedroom door behind him. Candice was beside her in the doorway.

‘He was your age then,’ Ethel said.

Young-shin returned the picture to the table and stood. Out of habit, he bowed.

‘It’s good evening,’ he said.

‘Yes, it is,’ Ethel said. She gestured toward the picture. ‘I hear you like to fish, too.’

‘Pish,’ Young-shin said. ‘Yes, Missus Pasta. I like pish.’

Ethel smiled and so did Candice.

‘Please call me Ethel, Young-shin.’

‘Esso,’ Young-shin said. ‘It’s berry dippicult name.’

‘I’m Mrs. Prophet,’ Candice said. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

‘It’s rear preasure to meet you too,’ Young-shin said, and, remembering the custom, stepped forward to extend his hand.

Candice shook the boy’s hand and said, ‘I think you’re in my gifted science class this semester. You must be a very smart young man.’

‘Oh, no,’ Young-shin said. ‘Not smart. Just study berry hard.’

‘Your parents must be so proud. Maybe you can inspire my son Isaac to study a little harder,’ Candice said. ‘He doesn’t like school very much.’

Misunderstanding the comment about not liking school, Young-shin said, ‘Oh, no, I’m berry exciting about school but berry nerbous.’

Candice smiled and said. ‘You’ll be fine.’

‘You’ll be great,’ Ethel said, and gesturing for Young-shin to follow, she turned from her son’s room without ever really entering it, and descended the stairs.

Sitting down to dinner, Charles introduced Young-shin to Travis as Mr.. Prophet, the mystic math teacher. Young-shin missed the joke because he did not know what a mystic was, nor did he know how inaccurate it was to call Travis one, a man who was set firmly within the world of logic and rigidly against any notion of spiritual truth.

‘You are teacha too,’ Young-shin said. ‘In Korea, it’s berry honour job.’ And then trying to mimic what Candice had said only minutes earlier, he bowed to Travis and said, ‘You must be berry smart young man.’

‘I like this boy,’ Travis said, and the others laughed.

Into the meal, Young-shin remembered what his mother had told him about being polite and complimenting the food. 'This is berry delicious,' he said. 'Sank you so much. It remind me of bul-gogi, traditional Korean food.'

Travis cut into his steak and said, 'Bul-gogi. Hmn. Over here we only eat the cow.'

'Travis!' Candice said.

'Don't pay any attention to him,' said Charles. 'Mr. Prophet thinks he's a comedian.'

'It's okay,' Young-shin said. 'We make similar joke in Korea.'

'See,' said Travis, chewing his steak and taking a mouthful of wine. 'He knows I'm only kidding.'

Young-shin smiled, sincere and innocent and unintentionally wry all at once. 'We say North American like to eat cow because they eat like cow.'

Charles nearly choked on his food. Taking a sip of wine, he grinned the way he did, and looked at Young-shin, then at Travis. Ethel handed Candice a napkin which she used to wipe her eyes, and then gaining eye contact with Travis, Ethel smiled and checked the air with an index finger, the way Map used to do. Travis swallowed, looked across the table at Young-shin, and raised his glass.

'Cheers,' said Travis. 'I can see you're going to fit in here just fine.'

Young-shin had no idea what the phrase 'fit in' meant, and no one had ever raised a glass to him before, especially no one older, but wanting to be polite he raised his in return, and said, 'Kung-pie.'

'Kun-pie,' said Charles, and raised his glass.

‘Kun-pie,’ said Travis.

And then everyone at once, ‘Kun-pie!’

After dinner, Young-shin helped Candice and Ethel clear the table while Charles went with Travis to look for Isaac. Isaac spent a lot of time on his bike down in the skateboard park by the river, and he would often lose track of the time, but it was dark now and long past the hour he should have been at the Fosters. It wasn’t like him not to at least call.

As they turned onto Simcoe, Travis and Charles could see the quiet flashing lights of police cars down past the Old Mill Gateway. They parked in front of the tavern on the corner by the bridge, and when they crossed over they could see the roadblock down beyond The Meeting Place, a small building where the Historical Society came together for their work on the museum and the writing of the town’s history. The roadblock was stopping people from going down Main Street toward the fairgrounds, and farther down Simcoe toward the harbour. There were many people standing around whom Travis and Charles knew, but there also many whom they didn’t know. It was the way the town seemed to be going.

Kim had been in Beaverton for more than thirty years, and although many still considered him a foreigner, there were some who treated him as though he were from this place. Gordon Fisher, the town’s most infamous ice fisherman, used to take Kim out onto the lake with him, and over the years they became very good friends. On one of the walls in Kim’s restaurant, there were pictures of them standing out on the ice holding up fish they had caught. One time, while they sat there silently jigging their lines, Kim looked out the tiny window of the hut and without notice or explanation, he said, ‘She was too

homesick. One day she wake up and her heart broken in two.’ Gordon said nothing and the two of them continued to fish in silence. It was the first and only time Kim ever spoke of his wife’s death to anyone in town.

Most Saturday nights, Kim held a card game at the restaurant after closing. Other local store owners used to play and Gordon would always be there. Walter Mitchell was a regular for a long time, and some of the men from the train station used to come before it closed down. Travis would often be there, and on occasion Smalley would show up and tell his stories of the town and its people. ‘You wouldn’t believe what you come to know by collecting people’s garbage,’ he would always begin. It was like listening to Dickens or Twain, they would say. And so these men of Beaverton would be, sitting around Kim’s tables with their whiskey and beer and their stories and cards, unaware of the time and of the life outside until the sun lifted over the town the next morning.

And here they were tonight, Smalley and Kim, and now Charles and Travis, and all the other people from town who were standing before the roadblock, muttering to one another, wondering what this particular story would be.

Charles put a hand on Kim’s shoulder. He turned and said, ‘Terrible accident, Lebland Pasta. Did you hear train?’

‘That was two hours ago,’ said Travis.

‘We thought it was the cattle again,’ Charles said.

‘No, not cattle,’ said Kim. ‘Kids.’

‘What?’ said Charles.

‘What do you mean, kids?’ said Travis.

‘No one knows who it was,’ Smalley said. ‘There was a group of them playing chicken on their bikes.’

At home, Candice and Ethel were in the living room on their third glass of wine, pretending to listen to Ideas on CBC Radio. Neither of them were very good at waiting.

Candice stood and went to the window. The street was dark. The only thing she could see was a reflection of herself and the lights and the stillness of the living room behind. She turned and drained her glass. ‘I have to go,’ she said.

Ethel finished her glass, and said, ‘I’ll go with you.’

Before leaving, Ethel went upstairs and knocked on Young-shin’s door.

‘Mrs. Prophet and I are just going for a walk, Young-shin. You have everything you need?’

‘Yes, Missus—I mean, Esso,’ Young-shin said. ‘I hab everysing. And sank you for my picture. I like so much.’

Ethel had given Young-shin a charcoal drawing of Pusan’s North Harbour. With some research, she had been able to find a few pictures of his hometown. Shots of the Changbok and Kyongbok palaces and the Beomeo Temple, of the Nakdong river and the North and South Harbours. She chose a picture of the North Harbour because it was where Young-shin liked to go fishing with his father. She knew this from the introduction letter he had written to her and Charles prior to his coming.

‘It’s so beautipul,’ Young-shin said when she gave it to him after supper. ‘You are berry great artist, and so kind.’

As always there was a caption at the bottom of the picture which Ethel had tried to write in Korean. When Thomas and Amber were planning their trip to Seoul, they had

wanted to learn some of the language before leaving. Kim offered to tutor them and they met with him every Sunday at the restaurant from January to the end of June. Ethel would often help Thomas and Amber study in the evenings, always keen herself to learn something new. And deep down, she still carried that hope born from her youth that she might still see the world, and so she did things like study languages and paint images of far off places and take on foreign exchange students, until she and Charles finally decided to go. They had been in one place for so long, it was difficult to leave, even for a short while, and the longer they stayed the more difficult it was. Although Young-shin was too young to know this, Ethel knew that it would still be difficult for him to leave home and so she wanted to give him something that would remind him of where he was from. The caption at the bottom of the charcoal drawing read, Mool Udi D'nji. Water Everywhere.

‘Goodnight, Young-shin,’ she said.

‘Goodnight, Esso.’

She and Candice walked down North Street and out onto Simcoe. When they saw in the distance the same quiet and flashing lights that Travis and Charles had seen, they began to move more quickly, and by the time they passed the post office their walk had become a jog, and as they reached the tavern on the corner, they were running.

Kim was still standing in front of the Meeting Place, alone now, and when he saw the two women approaching, he walked towards them.

‘What’s going on, Kim? What’s happened?’ said Ethel.

‘Where’s Travis?’ Candice said.

The swarm of people in front of the roadblock was growing. Travis had shoved his way through to the front and Charles had managed to stay with him. News of who might have been on the bikes had filtered down through the crowd.

‘There was terrible accident,’ said Kim.

‘What,’ said Candice, ‘what happened? Is Travis hurt?’

‘No, he’s not hurt,’ said Kim, and then he looked at Ethel. ‘But I think you should go home.’

‘What do you mean we should go home?’ said Candice. ‘Where’s my husband? Where’s my son?’

At the front now, Travis jumped over the police tape and ran passed the flares that marked the line of no crossing. In his path, were two parked police cars, spanning the width of the road, their front bumpers touching and blocking the way of passage.

‘Isaac!’ he screamed.

Candice stood on her toes.

‘That was Travis,’ she said. ‘Travis!’

She tried to step around Kim who moved to stop her.

‘Get out of the way,’ Candice said, and tried again to move around him.

Kim looked at Ethel. ‘I really think you should go home,’ he said.

‘Shut up!’ Candice said. ‘Why don’t you go home, why don’t you go back to where you fucken belong?’

‘Come on,’ Ethel said. ‘Let’s go. Let’s go look for Isaac.’

Ethel tried to put an arm around her friend, but she shook it away.

‘Get off, get off me,’ Candice said, and then ran towards the crowd and started shoving her way through. Ethel tried to follow, but Kim stopped her.

On the other side of the roadblock, a policeman stepped out from one of the cars and put a hand on Travis’ chest.

‘We can’t let you down there, Mr. Prophet,’ he said.

Twenty years old at most, the policeman had been a recent student of Travis’, but in the moment, Travis did not recognize him. Without thinking, Travis seized the hand and threw it off him, forcing his former student off balance and to the ground. Instantly, another young policeman grabbed Travis by the arms and shoved him forward into the side of the car. Holding Travis by the wrists with one hand, he held a flashlight above his head with the other, leaned in and sniffed. ‘Have you been drinking tonight, sir?’

Travis furrowed his brow. ‘Fuck yourself,’ he said, and as he managed to free one of his hands, he swung his elbow into the policeman’s nose. ‘Isaac!’ screamed Travis, but then his forehead was in the pavement, and there was a knee in the back of his head, and a zip-tie cutting into the skin of his wrists.

‘Anyone else?’ the young policeman said stepping up to the tape and scanning the crowd. A line of blood ran from his nose. His fists were clenched and his eyes were wide. ‘Anyone else want to cross this line?’

The former student helped pick Travis up and then ushered him into the back of one of the cruisers. ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Prophet,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Candice had not seen or heard any of this. She was just coming through to the front of the crowd now, and like Travis, she went over the tape and ran past the line of

flares. Then she skirted the two horizontally parked police cars, and ran down towards the tracks.

‘Isaac!’ she screamed.

The horde of people had grown and so had the collective volume of the many conversations within it. Names and beliefs of what had happened spread in continuous and repeating circles throughout the tightly packed group. It was as though the whole town were there, and they all needed to know.

Sprinting after Candice, the policeman caught up to her easily, but as he grabbed her arm, the momentum caused them both to fall. He was able to tumble and roll cleanly back to his feet, but when he picked Candice up from the road, the fabric at her elbows and her knees was torn, and there was blood there, and on her hands and her forehead. She was crying, but not from the fall, and calling out her son’s name.

The whole time, Charles had not moved. The crowd had continued to press in behind him. He could feel the police tape pressing against his waist. Had he just arrived and not been witness to everything that had just happened, it would have seemed to him like Candice had fallen on her own, and the policeman was now only trying to help her up. But he had been witness to it all, and although everything had happened so quickly, there had still been that moment when he could have leapt over the tape and done something to help. The moment was tangible. He had felt it pass. He had been filled with the urge to seize and rip the policeman off the back of his pinned and helpless friend. He had felt his fists clench and the blood rise in his face, and he had heard his heart thumping in his chest. And when he saw Candice running down the street toward the tracks and screaming out her son’s name, he pictured himself running in behind the

policeman who was chasing her, and tackling him to the ground. But he had done none of these things. He had not moved. The police tape had become a border that no matter how much he wanted to, he could not cross. And now he was bent over it and retching, physically sick with feelings of guilt and hatred and helplessness all at once.

Down the road, the train began to move and soon the roadblock was disassembled, and the crowd dispersed as the procession of emergency vehicles drove slowly by. Ethel found Charles, and they waited quietly for their friends, some distance away. A senior officer, who had been trackside while the men of the railway were doing their work, publicly reprimanded and forced the junior officer to apologize to Travis and Candice for his unnecessary and unprofessional department. Unaware of the irony because he did not remember, the senior officer had once been part of the crowd who mocked Travis and his homemade kites, and Candice and her oversized sweaters.

But as it always seemed to happen in the dispersion of cruelty, only the receivers remembered, and the passers down took nothing away. The officer saw the Prophets now only as the people they were—upstanding citizens of the community and teachers of his own children, people he had grown up with and who were of the same place as he. And now he found himself bearing the news that no one deserves to bear, and as he told them, he could see the life drain from their faces.

And then the way time seems to pass between those events of most significance, without consequence or consideration, four years went by as though they were minutes. Which is not to say that nothing happened in those four years, only that what did happen was remembered differently by those it happened to.

There was the time Young-shin's family came to Beaverton for Christmas and stayed with the Fosters for a week. Young-shin's sister remembered the sketchbook and drawing pencils Ethel gave her, and his mother remembered the Christmas Eve service Charles gave, and how everyone held a lighted candle and sang Silent Night in the dark. Kim remembered the meal Charles had asked him to prepare for their arrival, and how nervous he was about speaking his native tongue again and trying to cook his native food after so many years. He rarely went to the city, but before Young-shin's family came to Beaverton, he closed down the restaurant and spent three days in little Korea, relearning his home. Young-shin's father remembered the size of Lake Simcoe and how eerie it felt sitting in a little hut atop the lake's frozen surface, the sixty feet of dark water below, and he remembered how it felt to pull a lake trout up from the bottom, and then how heavy it was while he stood on the ice, posing for the pictures that would authenticate the story he would tell and retell to disbelieving family members and friends back home. Young-shin remembered the happiness he saw on his father's face while watching him with the fish, and Charles remembered watching Young-shin watch his father. Ethel remembered how grey the sky was on their last day, and she remembered taking the picture of them in front of Clint Eastwood and how wonderful they thought it was, and her sudden desire to tell them that she had painted it.

And then there was Young-shin's English education. The academic success he had had every year, and the friends he had made, and the mutual feelings of love and family he had come to share with the Fosters. There were the fish he had caught with Kim and the time, most recently, he had snuck out to play cards at the restaurant with the

other men. There was the language he had learned to speak as though he were from here, and the language that had suffered in return.

And then there was Travis and Candice to whom those four years were a blur. They could not overcome what had happened, and in every moment they felt as though they did not belong. Even on their day of leaving, when they stood at the back of the gymnasium they had received their many academic awards in, now teachers at the end of their careers, waiting for their names to be called one more time.

And then in the autumn of her sixtieth year, Ethel was finally on her way to see the world. One morning, she left a gift on Charles' desk with a note. The gift was a picture of their house with an overseas path leading to Seoul. The idea of the map had been a joke between them for more than forty years. On the day they met, she had given him directions to her house, but like so many other people who grow up in small towns, he did not know the names of the streets, and so it took him more than hour to find her. She was in the front doorway as he approached, wearing the scarf he had given her, and when she saw him, she quickly turned away. Now, as she closed the door of their home behind her, Ethel pulled the same scarf around her neck and lifted an end to her face, smiling at what she remembered.

As they drove away from the quiet empty house on North Street, Charles took the tweed cap from his head and held it for a moment out the window. When they passed the Church, Ethel noticed the sign on the lawn and smiled. It read, 'Seoul today.' And as they flew over the Atlantic and the lands of Europe and Asia, they looked out the tiny window and tried to imagine what it would be like, in the places they weren't from.

The lumberer—

Through the passenger window, Stowman could see a field of hay that spread far into the distance, seeming to grow more barren with each passing year—a neglected harvest of burnt brown and yellow that touched the cold blue sky in a portrait of late October horizon. He turned his steel grey sedan onto Stark's Road, and through the driver's side window, there was the ever-present wall of dark and densely wooded bush that climbed high into the air, scraping the clouds. Far in the distance behind, an afternoon train passed through the town.

Stowman could feel the gentle bend in the road. It pulled him towards the woods in a long slow curve. The shape of the road, very similar to a wooden floorboard that bows over time in the absence of moisture.

He clicked the radio on and checked his watch.

'The old man should be making his way to the roof about now,' he thought.

Stowman could picture him trying to pull himself up the rickety old ladder.

‘Goddam wobbly piece of no good,’ the old man would say, short of breath and struggling to grab the next rung. And then he would yell down at his foot, ‘Let go, let go you sunnuva,’ jerking his leg awkwardly and trying to free a half emptied bottle of whiskey that hung from his boot by a length of binder twine, the neck of the bottle having been snagged by a lower rung.

Then Stowman could see him finally clambering his way to the top and throwing himself to the roof, huffing like an aging dog in dry summer heat. The old man would reel the bottle in, lean forward to untie the frayed and knotted twine, and take two or three heavy gulps, sighing relief in the sharp burning warmth of the ‘water of life,’ as he called it.

He would sit there and wait on the edge of the roof with his badly scuffed boots hanging lifelessly over the side. He would be wearing faded brown pants, threadbare in spots and rolled unevenly at the cuffs, and a plaid work shirt, his chest hair smoking from the top of it up to a charcoal-bristled face of old age and defeat. He would just sit there and wait for Stowman to come, as he did every month.

The steel grey of Stowman’s car melted into the dun of the trees, the metal glint in the morning sun lost to the cavernous dark of the woods. The sudden nightness of Stark’s Road made it difficult to distinguish individual trees—only walls of wood that seemed to rise endlessly on either side of the road, the tops of the trees finally touching in an arc overhead. If he looked up, Stowman could see the sun trying to push through the thick roof of leaves, pinholes of light that resembled those punched into the surface of tin lids, giving air to trapped insects to breathe.

With the loss of sight, the sounds and smells of the place heightened. Stowman could hear the frost and loose stone beneath him. On the radio, the words of an old song were being drowned out by the rainstorm sound of static. And there was the faint smell of burning wood wafting out to greet him as though they were old friends—the cold morning air, redolent of uncomfortable familiarity.

‘Come on, son. Let’s go for a ride out to Walden’s. We’re getting low on wood.’

The boy followed his father, one of Beaverton’s two bank managers, out to their family sedan which was silver and polished to a splendid shine. The boy was twelve and his father had promised to teach him to drive on his next birthday. He could hardly wait.

‘Grab my briefcase there, will you, son?’ The man looked regal in a rural kind of way, as he puffed on his pipe and grinned. ‘One day you’ll have your own one of these,’ he said. ‘How’ll that be?’ The boy handed the briefcase to his father and smiled, dreaming of holding the butt of a pipe in his hand while dealing with important matters like his father.

The drive was ten minutes out of town. They turned onto the side-road that guided them through the bush to a long driveway that led up to Walden’s. The boy and his father were greeted before they even reached the door.

‘G’dafternoon, Bill.’

‘Yes, sir, it is, Wally. How’s business been?’

‘Can’t complain, Bill. Can’t complain.’

‘Tough winter though, I’d say. Makes it tough for a man to get by.’

‘Ah, we did alright. No grievance here, Bill.’

‘That’s good, Wally. Good to hear.’ Bill looked at his son and patted the top of his head. ‘Come for some wood, the boy and me. Getting a little low you know, and she still gets a little chilly there at night. Thought we’d go for a ride and pick up half a cord or so. Got the trailer hitched up to the back of the car there.’ Bill points. ‘See?’

‘Fair enough, Bill. A man’s gotta keep warm.’

‘That’s true, Wally. A man does.’

Bill looked at his son again. ‘Why don’t you ask Wally if he’d let you have a look at his old cars. Got a couple of real nice beauties in there. What are they worth these days, Wally? Sure are something to look at, son.’

Wally scratched the top of his head.

‘Sure.’ He looked at the boy, and said, ‘Just over there, lad. In the garage by the drive. It’s unlocked.’

‘Thanks, Wally. That’s nice of you. Now don’t go putting your hands all over them, son. You should never go touching another man’s things. You remember that.’

Bill went to the car and took some papers from his briefcase as his son raced over to the garage. Bill showed Wally where to sign his name and then he put the papers on the hood of the car so that the pen would write more easily. After, they exchanged a look and a hand shake that confirmed the adage ‘business is business’. And then they loaded the trailer with wood.

Stowman turned the radio off, any hint of song now completely washed out by the sound of static. He lit a hand-rolled cigarette and bits of tobacco found their way onto his tongue. He managed to spit most of them to the floor and swallowed the smallest bits unknowingly. The lighted end glowed and crinkled when he drew on the cigarette,

tearing through the white of the paper and leaving a long grey ash in its place. After only a few drags, he butted the remains. The cigarette sizzled as he folded the saliva-wet end over the glowing ember and pressed it against the scarred edge of the tray. Its heat pushed against his thumb, and he slid the tray in flush with the console, like it wasn't even there.

'Did ya get the smokes, Stowie?'

'I told ya Deller, my dad don't smoke smokes. He smokes a pipe.'

'Wull, why didn't ya scoop that then?'

'Nah, he'd know in a minute it was gone.'

'Don't matter none. Nix'll have some. Said he'd meet us at the top of the hill. Be about half hour from there I guess.'

'Bout that I suppose.'

'Yer sure we can get in there? I don't want to ride all that way for nothin.'

'Sure, I'm sure. Like I told ya, my dad says they're gonna be ours anyway. It's like Wally's just keeping them for us. Like farmers do horses for rich people, ya know?'

'Yeah, well, you better be sure, Stowie—that's all I'm sayin.'

Coming to an end, the road opened to a clearing in the woods and Stowman could see the old man in the distance, climbing to the roof.

Tall wooden gateposts greeted Stowman as he drove through the once exalted entrance that led to Walden's Woodworking. The hand carved detail had been worn over the years, replaced by long gaping cracks that rendered the posts barely noticeable in a field of other charred and rotting deadwood. Like fallen stacks of firewood in the stump-spotted field, and twigs, and insect-ridden limbs of wooden sculptures, and the old man's home in the distance. One of the posts leaned away from the other, pulled by a black iron

gate whose lower outside corner had been driven permanently into the earth. Weeds and wildflower had coiled around the wattled iron, intimating the length of time the gate had rested there. It had the appearance of an unkempt headstone.

Stowman continued past the gate and up the long driveway. He looked out his window to the skeletal remains of a cow he had been watching decompose since last spring. He nearly nodded.

The animal had been the last of a herd that used to graze freely in the once spry landscape. Stowman could remember as a boy watching the slow and unbothered stroll of the animals in Wally's field, interrupted only by the chewing of sweet clover-hay and the gulping of water from a now bone-dry pond. He could remember driving up the lane with his father, listening to the echo of a deep and bellowed lowing. Driving up now though, there was only the quiet that seeps from skeleton.

'This is the road. This is it,' said Stowie. 'I know 'cause there's no name on it. This is it. This is the road.'

'I know it is,' Deller said. 'What do you think, yer the only one's been here before? Everyone's been here. Showoff.'

'It don't have no name on account of it ain't part of town,' Nix explained. 'They don't give names to things unless they're part of town.'

'That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. Who told you that?' said Deller.

'My dad told me, that's who.'

'Yeah, well he's dumber'n you are.'

'You better take that back or you ain't get'n any of these smokes I brought.' Nix held his fist in the air, six cigarettes jutting from the top of it.

‘Alright, alright. Just settle down,’ Deller said. ‘Say, ole Wally’s got the ears of a dog you know. How are we gonna get in there without him hearing?’

‘Lucky for us he works like a dog, too,’ said Stowie. ‘I heard him tell my dad he was gonna be out in the bush all day, cut’n wood. Even if he did hear, we’d be long gone fore he could get to us. And sides, he wouldn’t care, I told ya.’

‘I know ya told me, but sometimes that don’t mean nothin.’

‘Come on boys. Don’t be so serious,’ said Nix. ‘Last one there’s gotta tip one of them cows the ole man’s got. No back’n out.’ Nix slapped the backs of his two friends and sped off in front of them.

The three boys pedalled down the gravel road to the driveway of Walden’s Woodworking. Dust billowed behind them. It was early afternoon and the sky was clear.

As Stowman continued up the lane, the log home grew in the windshield as though it were in the frame of a camera lens, zooming in. He could see how the logs had been pitted and scarred black from the fire, and thin fingers of smoke spiraled up from the top of the collapsing stone chimney, evidence that inside what used to be the old man’s living room, a woodstove was smouldering. The fire must have been low because the smoke was so faint that it would be lost in a photograph.

There were sheets of translucent plastic for windows, torn and yellowed with age and smoke. The plastic which covered the large open window at the front had come unattached at all but the upper left-hand corner where it draped like a flag, flapping when wind pushed through the folds of it.

Just off to the left of the home was a square area of loose stone where the garage used to be. It burned to the ground in the fire and the cars that it held were now gone, sold

for scrap. Only an abandoned body of a once well kept antique remained, resting on blocks. There were no tires on it, and most of the windows were broken. The hood was propped open as though someone had been working on the engine, although the engine had been removed and sold years before. In its place was a dark, oily hollow at the back of which and shoved into a corner was a deserted bird's nest. In the centre, there was a small burrow of twigs and leaves matted together with earth, which must have served as shelter for some small animal. There were a few small bones that lay scattered near the front where the battery would have been, the natural moving of earth and wind having rendered the skeleton unnameable. The car itself had long been forgotten. A gutted metal carcass, left quietly to rust.

Beneath the large window where the driveway ended, a narrow stone path led to the porch. Whenever he heard the stairs to the porch creak, Wally would immediately stop his sketching or planing or notching, and hurry to the door to greet his customers.

'My door is always open,' he would say.

In front of the porch there were two signposts, miniature replicas of those that stood at the lane's entrance. An iron bar ran across the tops of the posts, nestling into grooves and joining them together. The sign, a two-inch-thick section of a tree stump, hung from the bar, suspended by two small chains. The letters had been etched into the wood face and stained a dark brown, bordered by the countless rings that reveal the growth patterns and age of a tree. The sign read—

Walden's Woodworking

Sculpture Furniture Firewood

'Here it is,' Deller called back to his friends, a hand to his mouth.

‘Christ,’ Nix managed, breathing heavily from the race. ‘Don’t scream so loud. He’ll hear us.’

‘He’s in the bush. He can’t hear us.’

Stowie skidded to a stop, throwing dust and gravel in the direction of his friends. ‘Just the two of you shut yer mouths—I can hear ya for a mile.’

‘Yeah, s’about how far behind you were,’ said Deller.

Nix laughed and punched his friend’s shoulder in approval, their argument quelled by the taunting of another.

‘Shut up and follow me, the both o’ yours.’

‘I don’t know an’ if we should. We’d like to get there fore the fires o’hell scorch the earth we stand on,’ said Nix.

Deller laughed.

‘Real original, Nix. You know, you might sound like yer father but you look like his ass.’

‘You better take that back or you ain’t get’n any of these smokes I brought.’ Nix held his cigarette-fist in the air again.

The boys settled and made their way up the drive, riding slow and sure like the cowboys of old Westerns coming into a seemingly deserted town.

Stowman remembered what had happened on his last visit, and so he stopped a few car lengths from the end of the lane. He looked at the old abandoned car and noticed the wooden sign moving in the breeze, hanging from a single chain like a hand whose fingers were slipping, losing grip.

The old man was sitting on the edge of the roof beside the chimney, the bottle of whiskey squeezed safely between his thighs, and both hands were free. He grabbed two pieces of broken chimney and hurled the fragments of stone and cement, still with enough strength to reach Stowman's car. The fragments rang off the hood and the roof, scraping the paint and dinging the metal body. Then he threw chunks of wood, broken off from rotten rafter-beams that had been left exposed by the fire, and weakened by winters and rains.

Satisfied that he had sufficiently marred the paint job and body work Stowman had had done in the wake of last month's visit, the old man smiled and muttered to himself, and he began to make his way back down the ladder.

Stowman lit another cigarette and waited for the old man to come down from the roof.

'If yer a customer, I've got nothin left to sell,' hollered the old man over his shoulder. 'And if yer a salesman, I've got no money and there's not a goddam thing I need.' He pulled a forearm across his forehead, wiping the sweat. 'You've gotta be one or the other, and you're just wasting your time.'

The old man said this more out of routine than anything. He knew, as it had been every month for the past year, that the man in the car was Stowman.

'Look at that Deller,' said Nix. 'There's smoke comin out of the chimney. He must be home. We can't go in there. Let's go, let's get out of here.' Nix turned his bike around and started pedaling back up the drive. When he finally realized his two friends were not behind him he stopped, muttered something to himself and returned to the front porch of the house.

The other two boys had leaned their bikes up against the sign that read Walden's Woodworking and were already inside the garage.

'Wow, them are real beauties,' said Deller. ' They must be worth suh'mn else.'

The boys' noses filled with the musty smell of dampness that places made of wood often take on. The straw spread out on the ground of the garage was soft underfoot and sweet smelling. And in front of them, there were three antique cars, none of which the boys could name.

'Yer telling me these are gonna be yers,' Deller said, running his hand over the hood of one.

'Keep yer filthy hands off. My dad says yer never to go touching another man's things. Look what you done, dirt streaked all over it.'

'Yer full of shit, that's what you are,' Deller said, shoving Stowie backwards. 'My dad says, my dad says. I bet these ain't even yers, that's what I bet. And you know what I heard?' Deller stepped closer to Stowie and their noses nearly touched. The stance of two boxers just prior to the bell.

'What?' said Stowie.

Both boys' eyes were squint.

'What did you hear?'

Deller slowed and lowered his voice. 'I heard yer dad's always touching other men's things.'

Before the sentence was even finished, the boys were grunting and grappling under the strain of battle, their faces furrowed in as much ten-year-old rage they could muster, each sure of his own might. Within a minute, the boys were tired and hurt. Their

punches weakened, their holds loosened and their heads began to hang. Dirty and bruised and breathing heavily, Deller managed one final attack, an effort that threw them both into the wall that held a number of tools hanging from nails. The force of their bodies against the wood caused some of the tools to dislodge and fall, clanging to the ground around them. Nix entered then, concentrating on the task of lighting one of his cigarettes, something which hadn't yet become routine and looked very foreign on him.

'Say, where are you guys,' he mumbled over the cigarette in his mouth. 'I heard an awful racket in here. Y'alright?'

Deller and Stowie were trying to help one another up now, forgetting already what had caused their fight in the first place.

'Christ, it's dark in here,' said Nix. He struck a match and held it out in front him. 'There, that's better.' His nose wrinkled and he sniffed a couple of times. 'What's that smell? You guys smell that?' The flame had crawled down the matchstick and was now at the skin of his index finger. 'Shit!' he yelled. He shook his hand and shoved his finger into his mouth.

Before the other two had had a chance to respond to the question about the smell, the still-burning cigarette fell from his mouth to the ground. Instantly, flames rose and roared around them and the dry wooden walls of the garage and the straw floor were aflame. When the fire-trucks arrived, the fire had already spread to the house, and when they were finally able to put out the flames, much of Walden's Woodworking had been destroyed.

Wally had been forty years old when he built the home, and he lived there for more than thirty years, making and selling things. For a year after the fire, as he had

always done, he welcomed his customers in, selling them what few things had survived. The firewood that had been stacked in the yard, a set of chairs, a sculpture of two hands clasped together in a fist, and a few *Home Sweet Home* and *Welcome* signs. Things he had kept out front to show what he did. The rumour was that he had set the fire himself, for the insurance money. Bill did not want to believe it, but having access to Wally's accounts, he knew how bad business had been. Just before the fire, he had even been the one to get Wally to sign over ownership of the antique cars to the bank, as payment. When the insurance company's assessment came back 'suspicious,' they rejected the claim.

'They think it was you, Wally,' said Bill.

When Bill arrived, Wally had stopped splitting the lengths of wood he had sawed that morning, and went over to greet him at his car. When he heard what Bill had to say, he said nothing and returned to the splitting.

'The bank's going to let you stay, though,' said Bill, following him to the pile of wood. 'You just have to make your taxes every year. I'm sure you'll be able to do that with all the wood that's out here to cut.'

Again, Wally said nothing, and soon, not knowing what else to do or to say, Bill returned to his car and drove back into town.

The old man was down from the roof now and back inside. Stowman exited his car and took the leather briefcase and a copy of *The Beaverton Express* from the backseat. He put a hand on the abandoned antique car as he passed by. The metal was cold and damp with dew and he ran a finger through it, leaving a careless and wavy line in the film.

‘You’ve had better days, ole girl,’ Stowman said.

He batted the wooden sign, which was still in tact, and climbed the porch stairs.

‘It’s open,’ the old man said from within when he heard Stowman ascending the stairs, ‘but don’t consider that an invitation.’

Stowman walked in, put his briefcase down and set the newspaper on top. He stopped by the woodstove and he could feel the low heat through the fabric of his pants.

There was the slick rhythmic sound of an axe blade entering wood and then a thud. The old man emerged from within the back room with his axe in one hand and what looked to be a dismembered wooden limb in the other. Without speaking, he lumbered over to the stove, turned the handle and pulled the heavy unoiled door. There was a low creak and the clatter of the limb against the sides of the stove’s mouth, the crunch of hot embers being poked at, and the crumpling of newspaper. A flame rose from the paper and soon bit into the wooden flesh of the arm the old man had hacked from his one remaining sculpture.

‘I don’t think much of the way that paper reads,’ the old man said, ‘but it starts a good fire.’

Stowman cleared his throat.

The old man clanged the stove door shut and turned to his visitor.

‘Who let you in?’ he said, straightening himself and moving past Stowman to a rocking chair in the corner. He bent his knees and dropped heavily into the chair which would have collapsed beneath the weight of any other man. He sighed. ‘I don’t know why you keep coming back here. I just want to be left alone.’

Stowman looked down at the heaving hardwood floor, stained and gouged. He looked at his briefcase which contained the papers he'd been sent with, all footed with Xs and awaiting the old man's signature. Stowman squeezed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

'Pull up that old stump,' the old man said. 'If you have to be here, you might as well make yourself uncomfortable.' Then he grinned. 'Watch you don't get a sliver. They're an awful pain in the ass.'

The stump looked as though it had always been there, growing from beneath the floor. It was very low to the ground and Stowman looked awkward sitting on it. When he bent his legs, his knees jutted up around his ears. He looked like a giant using a house for a chair.

'There,' the old man said, 'now you don't look like such a salesman.'

Stowman leaned forward which caused his jacket to stretch taut across his back and bunch up at the elbows, making it difficult to maneuver. He grunted under the awkwardness of it all and reached forward for the briefcase so that he could retrieve the papers that needed to be signed.

'I told you, I'm not interested in any offers,' the old man said. 'Besides, there isn't even a table here to put them on.'

Stowman pushed himself to his feet and placed the papers on top of the stove. There were offers of purchase, applications for Lakeview Manor, all of the formal documentation that accompanies the transfer of home ownership, and the standard forms for a Will and Testament.

The old man rocked himself forward out of the chair and made his way across the room. Placing one hand on the stove for balance he took the top page from the pile, held it at arm's length and then brought it up to his nose, squinting the whole time.

'Type's too small,' he said and closed his hand around the paper. 'Tell them I need old people print.'

He threw the whole stack into the stove, a few pages at a time, giving each the chance to burn away into inappreciable smudges of ash.

Stowman took the pack from his inside jacket pocket and placed a cigarette between his lips. He struck a match, then looked around the room for an ashtray.

There was a square tin of varnish on the floor which was nearly empty. It looked as though it had been there for quite some time, faded and dented. The old man put his boot against the gut of the tin and drew his right leg back beneath him, his knee and ankle joints cracking like the clicking back of a hammer on a gun. Kicking it, he sent the tin across the room. It flipped and clanged off the wooden floor like the sound a handsaw makes after being struck with a mallet, and stopped beside the chair in the corner. Stowman flicked his ash to the top of the stove and the old man went back and sat in the chair. Stowman watched him, rocking back and forth.

'It wasn't me, you know.'

Like his father, Stowman did not know what else to do or to say. After butting his cigarette on the stove, he picked up his briefcase and walked towards the open door. Before leaving, he noticed a manila envelope on the floor with his name penciled on the front. Across the seal was the message, 'Open Later,' which made Stowman smile because it would always be later, and he knew that the old man had meant it that way.

‘Have you got an extra one of those smokes?’

Stowman walked across the room and gave the old man a cigarette. It was as close as they had ever come to shaking hands. As Stowman was leaving, he heard the striking of a match and when he turned, the old man looked very still. He had the appearance of being carved from wood.

Years later, when he was an old man himself, Stowman would make the trip out to Stark’s Road once again, remembering the ride he had made so many years before with his two friends and the monthly ‘business’ visits he had had with the old man as an adult. He would stop where the long slow curve entered the woods, and as part of some small but far too late tribute, he would tap into the ground a road sign that he himself would have made. It would read, simply, Stark’s Road. For the name of the man no one knew.

Then he would drive deep into the woods, stopping where the once exalted entrance to Walden’s Woodworking had been, marked by tall, hand-carved gateposts and a black iron gate. The gate would still be there, driven into the earth, barely visible in the tall thick grass. He would turn the engine off, exit the car and light a cigarette. Evidence of either fire would be scarce, if existent at all. He would look to the place in the clearing where Walden’s Woodworking once stood. Saplings and slightly more mature trees would be stretching tall, desperately trying to reach the high canopy of leaves that draped from the limbs of their still standing ancestors. If he squinted, he might be able to see the outline of the old lane. Maybe the rusted metal of the antique which still rested on the blocks deep amidst the new trees. If he could find the spot where it used to swing pendulously in the wind, he might even be able to rescue the old sign that used to name the place, though it was probably best left as it was, sinking into the earth. And upon

leaving, Stowman would swear to himself that in the air there was the faint smell of
lumber burning, and that he could see the wind in the lift of leaves, and that he could hear
the peaceful sound of the woods, yawning.

The station master—

I was only supposed to stay with my grandparents for two weeks that September when I was nine. I left ten years later. When I told my grandma that I was going to study journalism at the university in the city, she said she couldn't understand why I would want to spend my whole life worrying about things that happened to other people. I smiled and told her it must be in my blood.

The summer before I went to stay with my grandparents, the soccer team I was on made the finals of the local league and I could hardly sleep the night before. I asked my mother if she could call my grandparents and tell them about the game.

'There's no point,' she said. 'They wouldn't come.'

She didn't say anything more. There was no explanation. And I could sense by the way she squeezed her eyebrows together that I shouldn't ask again.

The next afternoon on the way to my soccer game, we pulled into what I thought at the time was called the Bee & Win. I didn't have my seatbelt on and so my head jerked forward with my mother's sudden braking and my face hit the dash. I was waiting for the

typical, 'Wait here and don't touch anything,' when instead I heard, 'Get out and lock the door.' The bridge of my nose ached and my eyes were watering. My mother grabbed her purse and yelled, 'Hurry up!', which made me nervous and unable to undo my seatbelt and my fumbling only made her more impatient.

I had always wondered what was inside the Bee & Win, but I knew by my mother's voice and by the way her fingers gripped my wrist when she pulled me out through the driver's side door that my going in with her wasn't meant to satisfy my curiosity.

If I think back to that evening, I can still feel the emergency brake in my stomach and my kneecap in the mouth of the cup-holder as she yanked me out through her door. I don't think she was even aware of me bouncing behind her, the effortless way she dragged me from the car to the front of the store. As she swung me through the door, pushing me in ahead of her, I caught a glimpse of a familiar pickup back beside our badly rusted hatchback. The truck was my grandparents' and she must have been afraid they would see me left alone in the car. I recognized the truck but only in the vague way that young children recognize the handwriting and faint voices of distant relatives on birthday cards and long-distance phone calls on Christmas morning.

There was a sour smell inside the store, and it was damp. The linoleum floor was slick and my feet slid out from under me more than once as my mother rushed me to the back of the place. I was wearing the soccer cleats my coach had given me at the beginning of the summer. He had assured me that it wouldn't be long before I grew into them.

The store itself wasn't very deep and from the back I could see through the all-glass front. A dull red sign blinked in the window. There was a small but steady stream of customers returning to their cars, clutching brown paper bags and fidgeting with keys. Inside, the two side walls were covered with different types of bottles. An aisle of pyramid-like structures ran down the middle, miniature islands with the names of countries hanging above them. There were smaller bottles and cans on the refrigerated shelves of the back wall which hummed like the far-off rumbling of an engine. Goosebumps surfaced on my skin, and my mother's hand felt cold around my wrist. I was like a lifeless marionette, dangling by an arm.

My nose ached terribly and felt like it was running. I sniffed and wiped my nose with my forearm. A brush-stroke of red fanned out across my cheek and my eyes watered. I was inspecting the blood on my arm when I looked up I saw my grandparents walking towards us. My mother was facing the opposite direction, pulling a string of cans from the back wall. The sound of my grandma's voice made her jump and turn. My mother squeezed my wrist but differently than before. More out of fear and panic now, as though my arm were a branch at the side of a cliff, the only thing keeping her from falling.

I remember what she said, my grandma. I can remember her voice, older but strangely similar to my mother's.

'Look at yourself,' she said, eyeing my mother up and down. Then seeming to forget my mother altogether she looked at me and her voice changed. 'For godsake child, what happened to your face?' My grandma took a step toward me, pulling a handkerchief from her purse. 'What has she done to you?'

When my grandma reached down to wipe my cheek, my mother pulled me in against her leg. She said nothing and walked us past my grandparents, unhurried, to the front of the store. She placed the string of cans on the counter and handed the cashier two crumpled bills. As we left the store, I noticed that two of the letters in the window never blinked. They remained unlit, dark and unnoticeable from everywhere but up close. I felt her hand steering me out the door and I was surprised by its gentleness.

As always, school started on a Tuesday, the day after Labour day. When I came home that afternoon I noticed a for-sale sign driven into the parched leaf-covered ground of our front yard. The driveway was empty. Inside, there was a note on the kitchen table. *I have to go away*, it said. *Your grandparents are expecting you*. And at the bottom, below a series of scratched-out words, *Mom*.

The day I left for university, my grandpa drove me up to the station. I asked my grandma to come but she told me it would be better if she stayed behind.

‘He’ll want his dinner when he gets back,’ she said.

I nodded and told her I would see her next weekend. I hugged her and kissed her cheek.

‘No need for goodbyes,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said.

I turned and walked out the back door, shoving the palm of my hand into one eye then the next. My grandma went to the living room window with a damp tea-towel in her hand. She continued to wave as we drove down the lane and up the road towards the station.

When we pulled in and stepped from the truck, I was greeted with nods and handshakes and calls of ‘Good luck’ and ‘Give’m hell.’ No doubt my grandpa had told the men of the station that I was leaving to go to school in the city. I knew most of them, having come there so many times when I was young to watch my grandpa work upon the rails. I would sit and watch them all lug ties down the track and haul slag from the back of a truck and fix the signals by the road. Sometimes I would sneak into the office and pretend to be the conductor—the station master, like I thought my grandpa was—and I would set the electric train they had there into motion, stopping it at the miniature station and calling out ‘All aboarrd!’

My grandpa and I waited on the platform for my train to come. He was quiet, which was normal, and I didn’t know what to say.

‘It’s here,’ my grandpa said just before the passenger train rolled around the corner half a mile down the track.

That he could sense the coming of trains did not surprise me. They had been part of him for so long. He handed me my bags and asked if I had enough money. Then he nodded, shook my hand and said more to me at once than he ever had before.

‘Work hard,’ he said. ‘And don’t worry. We’ll be here.’

I used to come home every weekend, anxious to get away from the city and back to my own bed and to the comfort of my own desk in the living room. I would leave class early to catch the 4.15 so that I’d roll into Beaverton Station around the same time my grandpa was done work. When we got home, he would grab my knapsack from the back of the truck before I could and slip two or three bills into the front pocket when he thought I wasn’t looking. My grandma did something similar, sliding money into a shirt

pocket when, even after I had asked her not to, she finished doing my laundry. By my fourth year of university, I could only get home on holidays. When I graduated, I moved to the city permanently. I write for one of the big papers there. I am thirty now and make it home when I can.

Late last Thursday, my grandma called me at my apartment, which she never does. At first, she asked if I was eating properly and if I was getting enough sleep and if I was letting that boss of mine walk all over me. I wanted to tell her to stop and just tell me what was wrong but I was scared of what she might say. Finally, I asked why she had called and then she told me about the station closing down and about how my grandpa had retired. When I asked her if that was all, if there was something else she wasn't telling me, she paused and said, 'Isn't that enough?'

It had been more than six months since I'd last seen them. I took a leave of absence from work and came home two days later. The last train was scheduled to pass through Beaverton a week after I arrived. There was a picture of the station house on the front page of *The Beaverton Express* with a caption above it that read, 'Last Stop'.

On that day, the house was even quieter than normal. I was working at my desk in the living room and I could hear steam just starting to rise from the kettle. There was the sound of a knife scraping an empty butter dish and the rattle of an iron pan against one of the stove elements. I could hear the fat of bacon sputtering in it. Then the kettle started to whistle, quiet and distant, but clear. Dinner plates clanked against one another and I could picture a pot of beans bubbling and spitting specks of brown sauce onto the white stovetop. A drawer opened and I heard the cutlery jump inside. There was the hum of an open fridge and the slick sound of a knife slicing through foil, halving a pound of butter.

And throughout, there was the hurried smack of bare feet against the tile floor, rushing back and forth from counter to table, sewing together the sounds of my grandma readying lunch like the patching of old jeans or the stitching of torn overalls, very little attention being paid to appearance, very much to the practical and the necessary.

The salt and pepper shakers, the creamer, the sugar and the butter dish all settled in the middle of the table. The plates and the cups and saucers and the knives and forks and spoons all gathered in clumps, set roughly in front of three chairs. One of the plates warbled around and around coming to rest the way a coin comes out of a spin. On the stove, the kettle now shook with a loud, steady whistle. Steam rolled from its mouth and the element vibrated beneath. It was five minutes to eleven. I knew this by the life in the kitchen.

My grandpa was in the backyard working on an old red mower he had salvaged from the garbage dump. He was at the washstand he had built many years before and the mower was on top so that its wheels were in the air and its silver handle hung down over the side. There was an old maple that stood very tall but unassumingly off to the one side in the backyard, near the recently planted vegetable garden. And there were short wooden stakes driven into the ground at the ends of each row and seed packets pulled down over the stakes' heads like winter caps, marking the rows with signs of what was to come.

Over the years the washstand had nestled itself into the body of the old maple. So much so that the small square structure seemed more to be a natural part of the tree than a manmade addition, its wood as dark and as lined and as weathered as the bark itself.

Working at the washstand, my grandpa looked very much like a surgeon bent over an

operating table, his patient hands fixed in the belly of the mower, fastening down a freshly sharpened blade.

His red plaid shirt was untucked and he had undone most of the buttons in the front, letting the first of the summer air get at his chest. His face and neck were dark brown, weatherbeaten and lined from years on the track. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows exposing thin sinewy forearms, the levers of muscled hands. Under his clothes the skin was pale. Dry and hairless from a life of layered clothing. He almost never took off his long underwear and it seemed as though the sleeveless white undershirt he wore left his back only to be washed. And I don't ever remember him complaining of the heat.

I was watching him through the living room window from the makeshift desk he had fashioned for me out of an old vanity when I was in the tenth grade, more than fifteen years ago now. I smiled as he wiped his hands on the seat of his pants, thinking of how in a few minutes he would be standing in the kitchen doorway trying to straighten his windblown grey hair with the careless swipe of dirty fingers, my grandma yelling at him to take his stinking shoes outside and to go wash his filthy hands, his response being to kick the shoes to the back porch and make his way, sock-footed, to the washroom, having already trailed some of the late spring mud onto the kitchen tiles where before the sun had completely risen my grandma had been on her knees with a rag and a bucket of soapy water. My grandma would be shaking her head at the black jagged shoe-prints on her kitchen floor and the oil splotches smeared across the seat of my grandpa's pants. She would display her hands as he came out of the washroom, asking if *he'd* like to be the one rubbing his knuckles raw scrubbing floors and washing the ass of some old man's pants. My grandpa would simply nod, an endearingly vague gesture, and go about filling

the cups on the table. He would be doing this about the same time my grandma would be at the stove piling the bacon and the toast and the baked beans onto our plates, her back turned to him, saying, 'The least you could do is pour the god damned tea,' always followed by a deep sigh, and then, 'It'd take a small miracle to get you to do anything around here.' Again, my grandpa would just nod, and he would know that it wasn't him or the oil stains or a muddy kitchen floor that was bothering my grandma. He would know, as he had always known, that this was her way of expressing concern, a kind of deeply embedded anxiety that sometimes surfaced in a voice of anger and irritation. Worry which my grandma had always tried to hide with her brusque manner and backwoods toughness. Worry for him and for my mother even and for the test results the doctor had given them just a few weeks before.

My grandpa would know that she would really be thinking about the coming afternoon, as he was, about the passing of the last train and the closing down of the station, neither of which were events as insignificant as they might seem to newcomers or city people on an afternoon drive through the country. He would know that she would be thinking about the stark realities that would be riding as passengers in the last car, waving to them both as the train huffed and sighed and rolled into the distance.

It was my grandma who picked me up from the station last week. She was waiting for me in the old Ford pickup I had ridden in most of my life, badly rusted now and sounding very old—the once distinctive rattle of the engine now more like the faint wheezing of chronic congestion in the weakened chests of the elderly, the now rusted exhaust hacking and spitting dark grey smoke from its mouth.

I stepped down from the train and walked past a group of five or six men with hard-hats on, many of whom I still knew, veterans of the track who had worked with my grandpa for many years. Some of them nodded and a couple of them raised their mugs and said hello, steam rising around their dirty faces. As I threw my knapsack and suitcase into the back of the truck, one of the men put two fingers to his mouth and whistled. I turned and he lifted his chin at me, asked if I'd heard about the station. I nodded and told him, yes, I had heard. He looked down and spit to the gravel in front of him, done not in anger or disgust but more out of habit, a brief interlude between comments, and then he lifted his chin at me again and asked how the city was treating me, if I was able to handle all those wild city women. I smiled and held my hand in the air and as I climbed into the truck, I could still hear the group of men laughing. They would continue for the next little while to talk the way small-town men of labour often talk on breaks and in bars—of women and sports scores and of asshole city bosses in suits. They would continue grunting and making gestures with their hands and laughing, hitting one another on the shoulder. And when there was nothing left to say they would remain for a few minutes more, sipping black coffee and smoking their cigarettes. Then, as naturally as they had congregated, they would return to their work, one man after the next. Some would manoeuvre ties into place and drive spikes into the creosote-soaked wood of rail ties. Others would lay the rails or shovel the slag from the back of a truck. Men of labour, going about filling a day in the only manner they knew.

My grandma looked at me when I got into the truck and the first thing she said was that I looked too thin.

'That place is sucking the life right out of you,' she said.

I put my arm around her and asked if she'd been waiting long.

'Twenty minutes,' she said, in a way that made it sound like twenty days.

I told her we were held up at the last station. 'Something about faulty signals,' I said.

'Yer grandfather's only been retired for a month and they're already falling apart,' she said.

She smooshed her lips together up under her nose and rolled her eyes. I'm not sure she knew that my grandpa and the other men of Beaverton Station were only ever responsible for thirty kilometres of track—there were at least fifty between stations.

Things like that were easily missed. I remember in the fifth grade bragging to the other kids that my grandpa was the station master, that I could just walk in anytime and all the other men would give me special treatment because I was the station master's grandson. I told them how I got to wear the engineer's hat and take rides on the rail car and play with the electric train, which was all true except that I only knew my grandpa *worked* at the station, not what he did. It wasn't until I was much older that I found out he had been a labourer in a section gang for more than thirty years, never station master. It's not that he was a particularly secretive man, my grandpa, it just never occurred to him to ever talk about himself.

Before we left the station I put my hand on the dash and asked my grandma what was for breakfast, guessing she had been up at dawn, busy rolling pie crusts and baking tea biscuits and loaves of fresh bread.

'Nothing that's not burnt from wait'n for that damn train,' she said.

I smiled and told her that grandpa was probably watching the oven.

‘It’d take a small miracle for that man to do anything around the house,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t even know enough to make a pot of tea, let alone look after a meal.’

I smiled again and asked if he was finding things to keep himself busy.

‘He wanders up to this goddam track every afternoon,’ she said. ‘Says he’s just going for a walk. But I know better.’ She nodded once. ‘He’s gone for two or three hours at a crack. Filthy when he comes home. Sweaty and tired and his eyes wide with whiskey.’

Then sounding more like she did on the phone two nights ago, she said, ‘You know, he still gets up at six every morning. By quarter after he’s grabbing his empty lunch-pail and head’n out the door. In the truck fore he realizes he doesn’t have nowhere to go.’

She shook her head and looked out her window. There was a man lifting the temporary steel steps back onto the train and I could hear over the loudspeaker the rise-and-fall intonation of the station master calling out, ‘All aboard.’

As my grandma pulled out onto the road, I noticed how difficult it was for her to turn the steering wheel. Her hands were rough and lined with age. The skin was loose and it moved over her knuckles as she gripped the wheel. I looked at her face and her eyes were heavy with worry, cradled by dark circles beneath. She had become old, my grandma, and tired. I noticed the plain gold band on her ring finger and thought of the two of them standing at the altar in suit and gown more than fifty years ago, hand-in-hand with family and friends behind and a minister prompting their vows. The image seemed almost ridiculous to me. I had never thought of them as a married couple, not in the ‘love,

honour and cherish' sense. I remember asking my grandma once when I was still very young whether she and grandpa ever kissed.

'Give yer head a shake,' she said.

And I remember she was at the stove lifting a wooden spoon to her lips and blowing softly on hot soup, her face tense with anticipation.

I felt at home as my grandma and I drove away from the station. We took the long way, which in Beaverton only ever meant an extra few minutes, so that she could point out anything that had changed since the last time I'd been there. We drove past Beaverton Public School and the park on King Street where my grandpa used to take me sometimes to play soccer. They had just erected a plaque there in appreciation of the money donated by McCaskell's Lumber. Then we drove down Mara Road past the Fish n' Chips Restaurant which had recently been renovated. Then over the bridge to Simcoe Street where we turned at the tavern on the corner which always seemed to be changing names. We drove across town—'quaint' as the summer people called it—past Gillespie's Hardware and past the white-pillared hotel which was now a realtor's office at street level and a fitness centre up top. And as we turned around by the Presbyterian Church, I saw the editor walking into the office of the Beaverton Express. Across the road there was a large thermometer-shaped sign in front of the library that displayed how much money they had raised so far for the addition they were hoping to put on. In less than a minute, we were back through town and down across the tracks by the station where we had started. I anticipated every pothole as we drove into Ethel park, pushing myself up slightly from the worn seat just before we bounced over one. And I counted down to the song of startled birds lifting from the trees as we passed by. And when I breathed in, the

air was cool in my nostrils and fresh, the redolence of home. Soon we were pulling into our typically rustic laneway marked only by the kind of brown and rutted tire tracks that become deeper and darker and more permanent over the passing of many years.

I knew the engine would whine when my grandma shoved the truck into park and that it would cough three times when she removed the key. I knew she would rummage through her purse, retrieve nothing and zip it shut. I watched as she opened the door and let herself down from the truck, holding on in the same careful way she had always done, grunting with the effort of it, though a little slower now and even more carefully. I knew she would shake her head when she saw the pile of burning leaves back by the shed, having heard her tell my grandpa many times not to be burning things, that the neighbours would complain. And I mouthed the words with her when she spoke.

‘That man will be the death of me yet,’ she said.

I have been home now for a week. It was almost eleven, just three hours before the last train, and the late morning sky was flawlessly blue. My grandma was busy in the kitchen and my grandpa was out with the mower at the washstand. I was at my desk trying to work but my attention kept lapsing into daydreams of the past. I thought of the time I mentioned in passing that I’d been selected to write for the school newspaper and how a week later I came home to find the desk I was sitting at now waiting for me in the living room. I could remember there were two new pencils and a pad of paper laid out on top. I’m sure my grandpa must have known I wanted to say something. He was sitting in his faded green armchair, reading the classifieds and smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, peaking occasionally over the top of his paper.

‘Enough there to get you started?’ he said.

‘I thinks so,’ I said and I stood the pad of paper upright and tapped it twice on the desk. ‘I think so.’

And then I remembered that he showed me how to sharpen pencils with a jackknife that same evening, his cautious whittling of the ends, slicing small wood chips into the kitchen sink and holding the tips up to his face to be sure the points were sharp and even, taking care in even the smallest of things.

The loud and steady whistle of the kettle jolted me from my daydreaming and I could hear the slow rising-sound in the cups of my grandma pouring the tea. I had already pushed my chair back from the desk when she called out.

‘Dinner’s on the table,’ she said, followed by a more terse, ‘Call that grandfather of yours.’

I walked out to the kitchen, yawning and rubbing the strain from my eyes.

‘In there sleeping while I’m out here slaving away,’ she would have said, had I been my grandpa at that moment. Instead, she muttered as I passed, ‘You’d think by now he’d know what time dinner was.’

My grandpa was at the foot of the steps when I opened the back door, swinging his boot into the concrete side, one hand on the step for balance and the other reaching down every so often to pull the sole of his boot skyward so that he might see the amount of mud remaining in the grooves.

Dinner lasted no more than ten minutes. It never did.

My grandma cleared the table and started the dishes while my grandpa and I ate our raisin pie and finished our tea.

‘I have a bit of work to do this afternoon,’ I said. ‘But I was thinking about going out to the Fifth later to pick some fiddleheads. What do you say, grandpa?’

He had become very good at feigning deafness.

‘They won’t be ready yet,’ my grandma said.

‘They might be,’ I said and then I got up from the table and took my pie plate and cup to the sink. I looked at her and lifted my brow. ‘It wouldn’t hurt to check,’ I said.

‘No, I guess it wouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I could fry’em up for supper. They’re good with a bit of steak.’

My grandpa didn’t say anything. He was still busy with the pie and the tea in front of him.

‘What do you think grandpa?’ I said. ‘You and I head out there this afternoon?’

‘Gotta cut the lawn yet,’ he said with his mouth full and then he swallowed.

‘Maybe after.’

I worked at my desk in the living room for an hour after lunch. My grandpa had fixed the mower and now the roar of it grew and faded in a constant rhythm as he pushed it toward the house and then back toward the garden and the old washstand. Behind me, there was the muffled clanging of plates and cutlery under water, and the trickle as though from a fountain when my grandma lifted and dried the dishes with a damp tea-towel, movements as automatic for her as breathing. She watched my grandpa through the small kitchen window while she worked. She had made a habit of checking on him recently when she knew he wasn’t looking. In the evening sometimes when he was stretched out on the sofa taking a nap, she would fix on his face first and then just below his chin, making sure his chest was still rising and falling. In the early mornings, she

would part the living room curtains and peak out, waiting for him to realize he had nowhere to go and watching as he hopped out of the truck and made his way back to the house carrying the lunch pail she had not packed. And now, as he pushed a thirty-some-year-old mower over their lawn for the thirtieth-some first cut of the season, she watched him in case he happened to slip on the spring-wet grass, or in case his back gave out the way it had been doing lately, or in case he happened to fall to his knees suddenly, clutching his chest.

After he was finished with the grass, my grandpa went to the shed to get the six-quart baskets for picking. When I no longer heard the mower, I grabbed my jacket and met him at the truck. He had already wedged the baskets between the spare tire and one of the wheel hubs so that they wouldn't blow away. The baskets were old and badly stained from the many summers of strawberry picking and I noticed the withered remains of a single fiddlehead in one of them, pinched by the weave.

The truck started to move as I opened the door and I had to hop on one foot a couple of times before I could pull myself in. I curled my fingers under the top of the open window and pulled the door shut, the way I had seen my grandpa do so many times before. Neither of us spoke as we drove out of town. I thought of my grandma back home already peeling potatoes for supper, the spiraled skins thunking into the sink. She would be staring out the kitchen window already waiting for us to return and expecting the harsh whistle of the last train to fill the small-town streets of Beaverton at any moment.

And now it has been a year since that day, and like when I was only supposed to stay with my grandparents for two weeks that September when I was nine, I have found myself here again, much longer than I had planned or expected.

Although I gave up my apartment in the city I still wrote for the paper there. I'm what my editor called his 'rural correspondent.' During the winter, he asked me to write a piece on the station closing down.

'Something idyllic,' he said. 'Something that lets us *feel* the country.'

I wanted to ask him what *feel* the country meant, but I've come to know that those kinds of questions are never heard the way they are intended, nor are they ever met with the kind of answers they deserve.

It was cool this morning and the sky was heavy with clouds. Yet as I left the house to walk up to the station, I noticed that the gardens were starting to come to life. The crocuses were already in colour and the tulips' green stalks were poking just above the hand-tilled soil, not knowing themselves what colour their blooms might be. The hyacinths were stretching up, waking from a winter's slumber and the narcissus was bursting with the anticipation of its own burning eye and its thin white petals.

I've been up to the station a number of times over the past year snapping pictures and rummaging around. Once this past winter, I managed my way in through the back door of the shed attached to the station house. The door was like one you might find on an old barn, meant more to keep the elements out than people. The padlock and latch-handle were badly rusted from the autumn rains and from the February thaws and the lack of maintenance. I used an old rail spike I found by the track to pry the latch-handle from the wood siding. The wood snapped in the cold and I stumbled back, much less resistance than I had anticipated. The echo bounced behind me.

I thought I might find a bulletin board inside plastered with old pictures, shots of my grandpa thirty years ago caught swinging a spike-hammer or replacing old ties, on

break maybe with his forearm resting loosely on a coworker's shoulder, thermos mugs in hand and cigarettes hanging from their lips, and their tanned dirty faces squinting into the sun. I thought I might find a daybook or a filing cabinet full of archives documenting the life of the station. Something that would help me in writing the article. Something that might tell me a little more about the man my grandpa was and the years he had spent working on the railroad.

When I walked home from the station, it was still cool enough that I needed to keep my hands in my pockets and my jacket done up. I could smell the bacon as I approached the house and when I reached the back porch I jogged up the steps only to find that the door was locked, which was strange because the truck was still in the driveway. I went to the shed where my grandparents kept the spare key, hanging on a nail inside the door beside the garden tools. At first I didn't notice that the trowel and the small spade were missing.

I unlocked the door and tromped into the kitchen. Thirsty, I put the camera down, turned on the tap and gulped the white rush of water. In the sink, I noticed the remains of a meal eaten alone. There was a single plate dressed with crumbs and a piece of unwanted bacon and a circle of remnant ketchup on the side. A cup with a mouthful of black tea sat in the bottom with three damp tea bags plopped beside. Scrapings of black toast were on the counter and on the mat that footed the sink, evidence of a careless and unsteady hand. And when I turned and saw the empty flower tray on the table—the clumps of styrofoam-spotted soil spilled on his placemat and on his chair and the kitchen floor below—I knew where my grandpa must have gone.

I lifted the keys from the nail by the door and drove the truck out to meet him, to help him if he hadn't already finished or at least save him the twenty minute walk home, although I knew he loved to walk. I parked on the side of the road by the spiraled iron gate and walked across the wet grass to where my grandpa was. There were puddles in the low parts of the ground and the water seeped in through the seams of my boots, wetting my socks and feet. It seemed even colder now than when I had walked up to the station, the way an early spring day can be, a reminder that winter is not too far gone.

The sky was still heavy—a kind of slag grey—and there was an uneasy wind in the trees, coming alive in transient gusts. Eddies of wintered leaves swirled across the ground and up the backs of headstones.

I knelt down next to my grandpa. The ground was soft to the touch and I could feel the dampness soak through the knees of my pants. I had put a sweater on beneath my jacket before I left, but I was still blowing on my hands and rubbing them together. My grandpa's sleeves were rolled to the elbows, his shirt was unbuttoned to the top of his chest with the white undershirt beneath and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. He had already cut a semi-circle into the grass and tossed the shaken clumps of sod into a pile next to him. Some of the clumps were overturned and baring their white wispy roots. The trowel and spade were behind him, matted with dirt and his hands were wrist-deep in the soil, rolling and turning the earth between his fingers.

'Went up to the station this morning,' I said, handing him a bulb. 'Got some good shots I think.'

He dug a hole with two fingers and placed the bulb down in, covered it and patted the soil.

‘You’d swear by the look of it that it’s been closed down for years,’ I said. He reached for another bulb and I handed him one. ‘You should come with me next time I go.’

My grandpa continued working at the small garden, whispering to himself occasionally, quietly cursing a stubborn flower that would not stand up straight. I sat next to him and helped when I could.

I had been thinking about my childhood a lot lately and I’m not sure if it was because I was home again or because of the article I was writing or because my grandma was now gone. It was all of these things, I suppose, and my grandpa indulged me whenever I subjected him to the clips of memory that popped into my head.

Sitting there beside him, I asked if he remembered the time he and grandma had run into my mother and me at the liquor store just before I came to stay with them that September when I was nine. I asked him whether he remembered all those backyard soccer games I made him play after he came home from work, his keys and lunch pail and work-gloves dropped and sitting by the edge of the garden, our official out-of-bounds. I shook my head and said how that was more than fifteen years ago now. He nodded a couple of times while I talked, not to say yes but just to let me know he was listening.

When it looked as though he was nearly finished, I asked him about the bulbs he had planted, what they would grow into. He cleared his throat and coughed a couple of times, raspy from having gone all morning without speaking.

‘Paper whites,’ he managed. ‘Your grandma liked them.’

When I thought of it, I could remember the way my grandma used to describe the flower. It had a deep orange centre with white petals.

‘They come up looking like a fire in a field of snow,’ she would say.

My grandpa pointed to the bucket he had brought the garden tools in and told me there was a thermos inside. Steam rose from the cups as I poured, the familiar smell of heavily steeped tea rising with it.

I looked at the garden my grandpa had just planted and smiled, thinking of how my grandma would have snapped at him for putting the flowers too close together and for having planted the bulbs in the spring rather than the fall.

I let my eyes lift to the name on the headstone behind, one that a year ago I would not have recognized. The years beneath the name told me she would have turned eighty this year. I whispered the number under my breath, unable at thirty to imagine such an age.

The epitaph was marked in plain printed letters and I thought how easily missed it would be by strangers walking by, glancing over the rows of headstones for names of people they knew. I thought of my grandpa sitting in the living room at the desk he had made for me and how out of place he would seem there in his own home, awkwardly scratching words into his pocket-book, the rough handwriting almost illegible.

I turned then and saw him lift the cup to his mouth, his eyes squint with the anticipation of hot tea, and I wondered if he knew how perfect the words were that he had chosen. And then as instantly, I realized how vain a thought that was. He was the only one who knew.

The epitaph read, Mother, Grandmother, Wife.

The piano player—

Whenever you are putting things together, whether it is people or facts or even the segments of stained glass, nothing can be assumed. First, there has to be a design. Here, it begins with a stencil we sketch out and darken with a thick black line. Then we snip the stencil and stick it to the glass we want to cut. And remember, the pieces must be selected carefully. The colours depend on your mood and on the contrasts you wish to achieve. If it is a country landscape you want, decide if you will settle for the conventional blue glass for sky or a stormy grey, green for land or a barren brown. Ask yourself if there is a tree in the scene, and if there is, if it's an evergreen or a maple. Determine if there is water and then figure out how you will separate the water from the sky. Shades of dark and pale blue, perhaps, or a northern sunset of red. And maybe there is a bird in the sky. Or maybe it's a city scene you imagine. A street of people and lights. Van Gogh's café. Or is it your intention to go practical? A lampshade, maybe, of soldered multi-colour that softens the light of the lamp on the table beside the oversized armchair you sit in while marking grade three art and sipping red wine.

This is Katherine Jensen, daydreaming. She is standing in the middle of what will soon no longer be her living room, and she is thinking of the first time she ever heard her ex-husband speak.

‘I don’t know what I came back in here for,’ she thinks and then sighs.

The hardwood floor is cold against her bare feet and she thinks that the gas company must have already turned off the heat, not even waiting for her to be gone. But it is the end of August and still very hot, and sweat can sit in film on your skin as it does on the arms and the necks of the two movers who are emptying the room of the furniture and labelled boxes and sheet-covered paintings. The heat would not be on. It only makes sense that the floor is cold because of the air conditioning and because of the absence of her favourite rug, rolled and taped and slung over the back of the antique writing desk she uses for stained glass. Both are already packed into the moving van, and around her, the house continues to grow empty.

‘Mrs. Jensen.’

The room is opposite in space to what she remembers her new house in the country to be. ‘Quiet’ and ‘Secluded’ and ‘A place to call home’ were the descriptions in the listing that attracted her. And the fireplace. A real stone fireplace with a black iron stoker set, a wooden mantle and a brass cradle in which to stack the wood. And then there is the old piano which the previous owners are leaving behind.

‘It was here when we bought it,’ the owners told her the first time she looked at the house. ‘Neither of us knows how to play. We don’t want to move it, so if you buy the house, it’s yours.’

‘Maybe I’ll take lessons,’ Katherine remembers saying. ‘Now what did I come back in here for?’

The porch at the front of her new house looks out to a large and naturally undulating lawn. Flower gardens run along the front of the house and down along the side. Here in the city she could never have a garden. There were a few bushes by the front steps but the small yard in the back was always too much in the shade from the high privacy fence and the row of homes behind for anything to grow. She had tried for the past three years, buying plants and flowers that required the least amount of sun, but each summer the plants and flowers had wilted and died, apparently more in need of sun than advertised.

‘Mrs. Jensen.’

Different from the underground rumble of the subway she was accustomed to, there are railway tracks that run less than a hundred metres away from her new home in Beaverton. Yet the tracks are so lined with trees that they appear themselves to be a natural part of the landscape. The previous owners told her that by the end of the year she wouldn’t even notice the shaking ground or the whistle that blows when a train rumbles by.

Katherine hasn’t moved. Still standing in the middle of the room, she looks down at the sandals dangling from the fingers of her right hand. They are the sandals her grade three class bought for her at the end of school last spring when they heard she would not be returning in the fall. Katherine was thirty-two and it was the first and only school she had ever taught in and although she was sad about leaving, she was more nervous about teaching in a new town.

The last unit she had taught her class was on rainbows. They had studied the science of rainbows and the weather of rainbows and the superstitions of rainbows. She had read them a story called, 'The Lightness of Rainbows,' and she had taught them how to paint rainbows on their own canvases.

On the last day of school, one of the girls in her class presented Katherine with a gift.

'See Missus Jensen,' said the little girl, pointing to the multi-coloured package. 'It's rainbow coloured.'

The rest of the class was sitting in a semi-circle on the floor and Katherine held the awkwardly wrapped gift in her lap.

'How come your sniffing, Missus Jensen?' asked another little girl who stood and leaned her head on Katherine's shoulder.

One of the boys jumped up from the floor with a fist in the air and marched over to Katherine's chair.

'I'll help you Missus Jensen,' he said and tore open the gift. The multi-coloured paper flew about the boy's head with his overenthusiastic ripping.

Inside the box was the pair of sandals Katherine was holding now and taped to the sole of one of the sandals was a pair of rainbow earrings.

'It cost twenty whole dollars Missus Jensen,' shouted a little boy at the back and the whole class laughed.

'They're very nice,' Katherine said. She smiled and wiped her nose and eyes with a tissue she took from her pocket. 'I'll keep them forever.'

The boys cheered and two of the girls in the front row started crying. The oversized card that accompanied the sandals and earrings read in large awkward letters, ‘To our super best teacher Missus Jensen’ and inside were the names of all the students and messages of ‘good luck’ and ‘we love you,’ backwards-drawn letters and all.

One of the sandals falls from her fingers and it is enough to jar her from her daydreaming.

‘Yes,’ Katherine says.

‘What would you like us to do with those, Mrs. Jensen?’ The mover is pointing to the three boxes marked Fragile by the front door. ‘I think that’s all there is.’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘That’s all there is.’

‘I’ll put them in your car for you then?’

‘Thank you,’ she says.

The two movers are typically dressed in jeans and white t-shirts—were they in a crowd, noticeable in no particular way. One is heavier. His girth stretches the shirt he wears and the hint of grey in his short dark hair speaks of his age. The other is much slimmer and has a week’s growth on his face which makes him appear older than he actually is. Father and son. Brothers maybe. Friends who heard about the job from other friends who failed to mention the long hours and heavy labour. Or maybe they don’t know each other at all and talk only because they have been tossed together into a job they neither like nor dislike. An occupation that gives them something to do from day to day and pays them for doing it.

One of the movers closes the sliding door on the back of the moving van and latches it shut. The three boxes marked fragile are in the back seat of Katherine’s Echo

with the card from her students. She slides her foot into the sandal that has fallen, drops the other to the floor and does the same.

‘I came back in here for something,’ she thinks. Then turning on her heel, she stops when the kitchen comes into view. ‘The butterfly,’ she says and hurries to the kitchen where a silver and blue stained glass butterfly hangs in the window. She unhooks the chainlink and wraps it around her wrist and cradles the object in her hand. If it were to slip, the noise of the breaking and the scattering of pieces would be far too close an image to her own fragility for her to manage.

‘Quiet,’ she thinks, ‘and secluded.’

‘A place to call home,’ she says as she walks from the kitchen back through the empty room one last time. ‘I’ve heard that before.’

Katherine has been in Beaverton now for two months. She moved here not so that she could forget the life she had in the city, but more to gain some distance from it. She did not know why her marriage had dissolved the way it had and she did not know when things had changed. She only knew that it had come to this, the sudden and numbing division of one shared life into two separate and no longer recognizable parts. And she hoped she could find some solace here, if not a new beginning.

It is the middle Sunday in October and most of the leaves have fallen. Katherine is on one of her walks through town and she has on a sweater her ex-husband’s grandmother had knitted for her and a pair of faded jeans. Nothing that would give away the fact that she wasn’t from here. Her normal route takes her past the fairgrounds and into town where she walks the length of Simcoe Street up to the library where she often stops to pick out a novel to read in the evenings. Then she walks down North Street, by

the river, where the century homes let her feel as though she's walking through another time.

Today, there is a family quietly working in their front yard and Katherine can smell the leaves burning in the back. The man has on a minister's collar and the woman has on jeans and a fitted yellow shirt. They look to be in their early forties and their son, Katherine thinks, might be twelve or thirteen. The woman is raking and the man and his son are stuffing a small pile of leaves into what looks like a large, brown paper bag. The man holds the bag open while his son shoves handfuls of the leaves down in. They see Katherine and wave, and she waves in return. And when she comes to Madill Street, the end of her loop, she circles around and walks back through town to her home.

Katherine's neighbour, Walter Mitchell, is outside when she returns and she asks him where she can buy some of those large paper bags to put her leaves in.

'Waste of time,' Walter said. 'The bottoms rot out of 'em. No good fer nothin. You haven't got many leaves anyway. I'll get rid of 'em for ya.'

Walter mulches his. He rides the lawn-mower back and forth along the same paths of cutting until the leaf fragments are so small they could be vacuumed. The ones in his garden he works into the ground with a rotor-tiller until they disappear. He used to rake the leaves into his ditch and burn them there, but he's not allowed to do that anymore. There is a new by-law inspired by the complaints of newcomers—people who point to environmental issues and the rising number of asthma cases in children—that restricts those who wish to burn their leaves to one burn-can per yard and although it takes them much longer than before, there are still some who burn a yardful of leaves in their barrels one pile at a time. Katherine has seen enough of these barrels, and 'illegal' garden and

ditch fires, that when the October wind is moving on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon, she can smell the smoke of burning leaves from almost anywhere in town. And she imagines that if you are from this place, it must be the unmistakable smell of fall. A strange comfort that can only be understood by being here. One of those things that you can never truly know or understand until you become so part of the experience that you no longer realize that it's an experience at all.

For Katherine, the first two months in Beaverton have been saturated with experience. There was the clogged eaves trough and the subsequent flood in the basement. And then the plumbing problems with the bathroom sink that wouldn't drain and the toilet that wouldn't flush. And in the kitchen, the cold water flowed from the hot water tap, and the hot water from the cold. But water problems could be fixed. What was most frustrating, and not nearly as straightforward to deal with, was her new teaching position at Thorah Central Public School.

Just before school started, the principal changed Katherine's schedule and gave her a split class of grade twos and threes.

'You're former principal tells me you're such a good teacher,' he said. 'I know you can handle it.' He spoke with the rehearsed-sounding confidence of a politician.

Now, Katherine had a doubly demanding curriculum and a classroom of thirty-five children all under the age of ten, a number which exceeded the cap, but Katherine knew that citing policy here would do more to underline her cityness than to prove her Union loyalty or professional awareness. She could already sense an uncomfortable distance between herself and the other members of the staff, who were mainly women, and she wanted to keep the gap from widening.

‘One more bit of business before we go,’ the principal said at the end of the year’s first staff meeting. ‘We always like to offer a night class to the community in crafts or other special interests, but with the retirement of Mrs. Burns we’re in need of someone to take over that responsibility.’

With the mention of Mrs. Burns, the room seemed to hum with a tension similar to that which might follow a known and talked about other woman. Katherine pretended not to hear the whispering. She was sitting at a table in the back with three other teachers—the new librarian and the only two male teachers on staff.

The two men attempted awkward smiles when they made eye contact with Katherine, a gesture of the uncomfortably quiet that looked more like a mouth exercise than human expression. Finding nothing to say, they returned their eyes to the papers in front of them with apparent purpose, checking off agenda points and feigning attention to what was being said.

The librarian shrugged and said, ‘I know no crafts, nor do I have any special interests.’

Katherine smiled but she wasn’t sure if the librarian meant to be funny. And throughout the meeting, she continued to smile when other teachers looked over their shoulders toward her table and then away.

During the first week of school, every time Katherine entered the staff room for a cup of coffee, or the office to check her mailbox, or when she walked down the hall with her arms full art supplies, other teachers pretended to be in a private conversation but spoke loud enough for her to hear. *What a wonderful teacher Mrs. Burns was, they would say. We’re going to miss her terribly. She’s a teacher you just can’t replace.*

After the mention the night class that needed a new teacher, the principal looked at Katherine and then pretended to scan the room.

‘I have an idea,’ he said. ‘Does anyone know how to do stained glass? We’ve never offered a course in that before.’

Because it was such a small staff and such a small town, everyone in the room knew that Katherine did stained glass, but she did not raise her hand or gesture in any way. Again, there were whispers and after the meeting the principal asked to speak with her in private.

‘It might be a good way to get to know some people,’ he said, again like the politician. ‘Maybe some of the other teachers might join. Why not give it a try?’

Fully aware of the attention that is paid to the new teacher, especially in a small town, Katherine said, although it was not the first thing to come to mind, ‘I’d love to.’

It is evening now, and thinking of the woman she saw raking the leaves this afternoon and the man and their son who waved to her, Katherine draws her naked ring finger down the keys of the old piano as she passes by. The descending run of treble to bass notes resonates in the room. She nestles into the armchair by the window, tucks her legs under, and sips her wine. A copy of *Gatsby* sits on the table beside.

‘Quiet,’ she thinks. And it is. ‘Secluded?’ More than she’s ever been.

Through the window, she watches Walter and Margaret Mitchell returning home from one of their nightly walks. They are holding hands and they smile and wave. Katherine does the same.

The evening train barrels by and its whistle blows.

‘Home,’ she thinks. ‘I hope so.’

Katherine's house is at the end of Main Street, near the lake. If you continue to go straight, there is a short dirt road nestled in behind a group of houses where Katherine likes to walk at night. Across from the houses, there is a line of tall maple trees and just beyond them, a small stretch of Lake Simcoe shore. One evening earlier in the fall, Katherine made her way down to the water's edge by this road, wearing the sweater and holding the silver and blue butterfly in her hand. She stood on a half submerged rock and looked toward the end of the pier that juts out into the lake. The pier was a considerable distance away which made the flashing light at its end seem more like a hovering firefly or a dying star than the harbour marker it was meant to be. The light reminded Katherine of the one at the end of Daisy's dock and she pretended while she stood there that *she* was Daisy, that there was someone standing opposite her on the east shore of Thorah Island three miles away, dreaming of seeing her once again. But she knew there was no one there. No one standing three miles or even three thousand miles away.

On the second Sunday of September, Walter and Margaret came over to Katherine's house to introduce themselves. Within the first few minutes, Katherine knew that Walter was the manager of McCaskell's Lumber and had been for more than thirty years. In his early sixties, he wore dull green workpants and a plaid shirt, the fashion of so many of the middle-aged and older men here. The sleeves were rolled so the cuffs would be out of the way for working, and the top two buttons were always undone. His thinning hair was usually messy from when he rubbed the top of his head—a habit that accompanied the pauses of figuring or contemplation, the unpretentious equivalent of the professor tilting back his head and stroking his beard. Walter shook Katherine's hand firmly and asked how bad the flood had been.

‘How did you know?’ Katherine said.

‘The bastard owned this house before you was lazier’n a pet coon.’

‘Walter!’ said Margaret.

‘What?’

‘Stop that.’

‘Well, he was,’ Walter said.

Katherine smiled.

‘He never cleaned them eaves troughs a’tall,’ Walter said. ‘The basement was always flooding. I got a ’lectric pump,’ he said and lifted it to show Katherine. ‘I’ll clear her out fer ya, then I’ll clean out them eaves.’

‘You don’t—’

Walter was in the house before Katherine could finish.

‘Don’t worry,’ Margaret said. ‘He loves tinkering around.’

Margaret looked to be a few years younger than Walter. She used to work in the kitchen at Lakeview Manor, the nursing home just up the road, but she retired two years ago. She wore sweaters with country scenes on them and her voice was as gentle as her hazel eyes.

‘Tea?’ Margaret said. ‘Only take a minute for the kettle to boil.’

Margaret and Katherine walked across the lawn to the Mitchells’ house and sat at the kitchen table. Margaret steeped the tea and filled the cups and opened a tin of shortbread she took from the pantry. Katherine put a hand to her stomach.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t,’ she said.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Margaret said and took one for herself. ‘You know our daughter Anne is a school teacher in the city. She’s terribly busy and never has any time to cook.’

‘Oh I know,’ said Katherine. ‘I don’t know where the time goes.’

An hour passed, unnoticed by either woman. Margaret made another pot of tea and their conversation moved seamlessly from topic to topic. From teaching in the city and wanting children to raising children and gardening, to the old piano left in Katherine’s house and recommended methods for furniture stripping, to making stained glass and to the course Katherine was going to teach starting at the end of October.

Walter walked in just as Margaret was about to ask Katherine what had made her move from the city, to such a small town like Beaverton.

‘Good as new,’ Walter said. ‘Dry as a bone.’

He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a beer.

‘Walter!’ Margaret said.

He ducked, throwing his arms up over his head. Realizing he was safe from any falling or hurled object, Walter straightened.

‘Whoops,’ he said. Some of the beer had spilled and was foaming on the floor in front of him. ‘I’ll get that.’

He tore a length of paper towel and, wincing, lowered himself to his knees. Margaret was already circling the dry mop behind him, clearing the trail of bootprints he had marked in mud from the doorway to where he was now grunting, pulling himself back to his feet. Margaret held out her hand. Leaning against the counter, Walter removed the first boot and handed it to her.

‘You love me,’ he said.

‘Hmmm,’ she said, fighting a smile.

He stood on one leg and she cleaned beneath him. The routine was repeated. Margaret dropped the boots onto the steps outside and Walter returned the mop to the closet. They met back at the sink and they both started laughing. He put her face in his hands and kissed her. She did the same. It was the kind of moment onlookers might outwardly mock, but secretly long to be a part of. A moment of love whose language can only be understood by those who share it.

Katherine is thinking of all of this now and smiling as she drives into the dirt parking lot of McCaskell’s Lumber, where Walter is the manager. She has come here to buy the solder and the adhesive and the other unspecialized tools for the stained glass course she begins teaching in a week. She parks beside a truck that has ‘Jensen’s Renovations’ stencilled on both of its sides and a phone number beneath. It was not enough really to constitute an advertisement, more a mobile version of the yellow pages, a name that names the business and a number for those who are interested. Katherine has seen the truck before and has wondered to herself if there might be some distant connection.

Inside, she walks past the front counter and nods ‘hello’ to Walter who is in conversation with another customer. He raises a hand in return. Passing the aisle marked Plumbing, she remembers the flood in the basement and the other problems and the water damage the piano had sustained.

‘The piano,’ she thinks. ‘That would be a nice piece. I could make it a country design.’

She collects a coil of solder from the shelf and walking two aisles over she finds the glass scorers she needs.

‘I wonder if it’s antique. It looks old, but it doesn’t sound very good,’ she thinks, remembering the sound it makes when she runs a finger down the keys.

With her hands and arms full, Katherine walks back towards the front counter and sees that Walter is still talking with the same man. She stands in line behind him and waits.

‘But I don’t know how to play,’ she thinks. ‘Maybe if I knew someone who could play.’

‘Hi Miss Jensen.’

This is Rebecca, one of her grade twos, and she is tugging on the bottom of Katherine’s sweater.

‘Well, hello, Rebecca. What have you got there?’

Rebecca furrowed her brow and inspected the small box. ‘Crew nails,’ she says.

‘Screw nails, are you building something?’

‘Yup,’ says Rebecca. ‘A banana.’

‘Really,’ Katherine says and smiles. ‘That’s very creative, Rebecca.’

‘I know,’ Rebecca says. She shrugs her tiny shoulders and continues to investigate the box, holding it close to her face and then flipping it, and then flipping it again.

‘What’s creative?’

‘It means to be able to make something,’ says Katherine.

‘Oh,’ Rebecca says and kicks the floor. ‘I can play the piano,’ she says, and points her chin at Katherine.

‘Really. I wish I could say that.’

Rebecca hugs the leg of the man in front of her. ‘This is my daddy,’ she says.

Rebecca’s father turns and throws her over his shoulder.

‘Daaa-deee,’ says Rebecca, squealing and laughing.

As though for a sketch, Katherine records the man’s details. He has on worn jeans and a plaid shirt. The sleeves are rolled to the elbows and the top two buttons are undone like Walter’s, but he appears to be much younger, in his early thirties like Katherine. His shoulders are broad and his torso narrows at the waist and his forearms are tanned and muscular, the hair on them soft looking and blond. And his fingers are thick and calloused, which Katherine feels when she shakes his hand.

‘Yer Rebecca’s teacher,’ he says.

‘Yes,’ says Katherine and nods.

Continuing her list of details, Katherine notices Bill’s prominent brow and she likens the eyes under it to the blue of water or sky in a country landscape. His well-worn farmer’s cap is spotted with sawdust and a pencil juts from behind his ear. And in the manner captured in old photographs of men working in the bush or on the railroad, his face is modest and strong.

Bill returns Rebecca to her feet and again, she hugs his leg.

Normally, Katherine would be shy talking to someone she had just met, especially someone like Bill. But because he was a parent of one of her students, and because so many people in this town, excluding some of the teachers at her school, had made her feel so at home here, she felt comfortable talking to him. So comfortable, in fact, that it was

almost like they had known each other for years, and shared secrets that no one else would ever know.

‘I noticed your truck outside,’ Katherine says. ‘We have the same last name. We could be family.’

‘I wouldn’t say that too loud,’ says Walter from behind the counter. ‘You wouldn’t want people think’n you were related to this guy. He’s trouble.’

‘You’re trouble, daddy,’ says Rebecca.

Bill looks down at Rebecca and then over at Walter, who is laughing to himself, and then at Katherine who lifts her brow and says nothing. Bill raises his own brow and shrugs. ‘Well, I guess it’s unanimous,’ he says.

Katherine smiles and the conversation seems finished.

Walter looks at Katherine, then at Bill and says, ‘Gotta a lot on the go these days, Bill?’

‘Why? You have’n trouble screwin in those light bulbs again, Walter?’

‘No, no. Katherine here has some work needs being done. Too much for this old guy.’

Katherine puts her purchases on the counter and says, ‘I was thinking of redoing the sunroom at the back of my house.’

‘Not enough sun?’ Bill says.

‘No,’ she says and smiles again. ‘No, there is plenty of sun. Just not enough room.’

After, when Katherine asks Bill for his card, he makes a joke about her being from the city.

‘Things don’t run that formal around here,’ he says. ‘Closest thing I have to a card is that truck you saw out there. I’ll be over Thursday afternoon to give you an estimate.’

‘Thursday,’ Katherine says. ‘Okay. Thanks. Thanks very much.’

Bill nods and touches the brim of his hat. Rebecca mimics him and waves. And the door rings behind them as they leave.

It is six o’clock in the evening on the last Thursday in October and Katherine stands at the front of the same classroom she teaches in all day. She has arranged five tables in the middle of the room and removed the others to the sides. They are all women who have signed up for the class, ranging in age from thirty to sixty, and they sit in groups of three or four. Katherine’s desk is at the front upon which she has three labelled boxes. Inside one box, there is an assortment of coloured glass. In another, the adhesive and the glass scorers and the soldering equipment she bought at McCaskell’s, and in the last, stencil paper and pencils of different thicknesses.

The classroom itself is decorated with the Thanksgiving art of seven- and eight-year-olds. There are crayon portraits of pioneers with macaroni hats, a family of cardboard turkey cut-outs, ninety hand-sized paper maple leaves hanging with different lengths of fishing line from the fluorescent lights, individually coloured and labelled with students’ names. And there is an autumn mural which has been constructed completely from raw materials—clumps of hay for the field and bark for the trees, corn husks and squash and pumpkin stems for the crops in the field, yellow and red leaves that fall from the branches, brown and black cloth for the clothing of the scarecrow standing in the field, and more hay for the stuffing and feathers for the bird swooping down, all of which

is fastened with binder twine to the long canvas spanning the back wall of the room, orange and brown paint globbed on to fill the blank spaces.

‘First, there has to be a design,’ Katherine says, looking out into the faces of the women. ‘You begin by sketching a stencil, then you snip it and stick it to the piece of glass you want to cut. Like this,’ she says and holds up a simple sketch of a Christmas tree and a piece of green glass.

At the back table, Gladys Graham whispers something to Margaret Mitchell, who wishes she had sat somewhere else.

‘The colours depend on your mood,’ Katherine continues. ‘On the contrasts you wish to achieve and the kinds of connections you want to make.’ Holding a red piece up to the light, Katherine twists her hand back and forth to demonstrate the potential effects of coloured glass.

‘I tell you one thing,’ whispers Gladys. ‘I know what *her* design is *and* the mood she’s in.’

Manager of the I.G.A. bakery since graduating from high school, an active member of the Presbyterian Church and secretary for the foodbank, Gladys likes to think she has had her finger on all of the goings-on in Beaverton for more than thirty years.

‘The only connection she wants to make is with Bill Jensen between the sheets.’

‘Stop it,’ Margaret whispers. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘I know that Evelyn McCrae saw him leave her house on four afternoons last week and two evenings.’ Gladys holds up two fingers and strains to keep her volume to a whisper.

‘He’s renovating her sunroom,’ Margaret whispers. ‘That’s all.’

‘I’m sure he is,’ says Gladys.

The other ladies at the table snicker.

‘I’m her neighbour. Do you know that? We have tea together. We’re friends.

Walter even fixed her plumbing.’

‘I’m sure he did.’

More snickers, with an attempt to contain them.

Margaret closes her lips tightly, her brow is bent and her right leg is jiggling beneath the table.

Katherine notices all of this, as most teachers would, and although she feels her throat tighten, she continues.

‘If it is a country landscape, do you. Mn-hmn. Do you go with the conventional. Mn-hmn. Blue glass for sky and green for land? You have to decide on. Mn-hmn. I’m sorry. You have to decide if there is a bird in the scene or trees.’

‘Oh there’s a bird alright,’ says Gladys. ‘Flitt’n about in someone else’s nest.’

Margaret stands. ‘Would you please shut your mouth!’

‘Oh, that’s nice, Margaret,’ says Gladys and rolls her eyes.

The other women turn and look as though each had heard her own name called out by a stranger in a crowd.

‘I’m so sorry, Katherine,’ Margaret says. ‘Gladys has a—well, she has a way.’

The room is silent. Katherine takes a tissue from her desk, wipes her eyes and then nods, once. She walks to the back of the class and stands in front of the mural.

‘When I asked my class some of the same questions I’ve just asked you,’ she says, ‘about the landscape and the sky and about the land and the bird, their response was

to add a scarecrow, take out the sky and make the land brown. Sometimes it's that simple. Just do what comes to you.'

Having taken it from her desk, Katherine dangles the silver and blue butterfly from her fingers. 'This is my first piece,' she says.

'Oh, that's beautiful, dear,' says a woman near the front.

'Thank you,' Katherine says. 'I wish I could offer you the teacher I had.' She looked at Gladys and then at the rest of the women. 'The first thing he said to us was that whenever you are putting things together, nothing can be assumed. I always remembered that.' Leaning against her desk, Katherine remembers the butterfly hugged to her chest. 'He had us make one of these,' she says and holds it up again. 'Everything beautiful is at one time captive, he told us, struggling to escape.'

'My god,' says the woman near the front. 'He spoke like that?'

Katherine smiles. 'Always. When I asked him what he thought of this,' she says, referring again to the butterfly, 'he looked at me and said, This is *your* escape.'

'Oh my,' says Margaret. 'What a lovely man.'

'Jesus,' says the woman near the front. 'I couldn't take it, a woman my age. I'd faint.'

'Well,' says Gladys. 'What did you do?'

Katherine looks at the butterfly and then out the window.

'I escaped.'

It is a week later, and suddenly, it seems, November has arrived. The sky whispers of rain and the wind from the lake noses through the trees. The train whistle is faint, but Katherine can hear the chugging in the distance as she steps from her Echo. Still

accustomed to the steady city sounds of horns and human traffic, she hears every interruption to the quiet stillness of this town's dusk.

The wind catches her hair and enters her open coat and she shivers. Bill's truck is parked beside hers in the driveway and so she knows he must still be at work in the sunroom. Inside, there is the whir of a power drill and the whine of a skill saw and the smack of wood against wood, sounds that repeat themselves in a measurable rhythm. The house smells of sawdust.

Not wanting to interrupt his work, Katherine makes a cup of tea, wraps herself in a woollen blanket and tucks herself into the armchair by the front window. Everything is dark. She turns on a lamp, takes the novel from the table by the chair and tries to find her place. She reads for a minute or so and then looks up and stares out the window. Margaret and Walter, on their evening walk, wave as they pass by. Katherine smiles unnoticeably and lifts her hand in return. The night is all stars, tiny and almost insignificant on their own, yet brilliant and beacon-like in their collected constellations of lighted pinpoints across the sky—faraway signposts of faraway homes.

The moon seems closer than usual and Katherine hums the opening notes of 'Moonlight Sonata' she had heard on the CBC on her way home this evening. She pictures herself at the piano, pressing the keys with the same attention and subtlety she pays to the delicate solder work of stained glass.

A few days ago, Walter and Bill moved the piano from the living room to the garage. Bill had mentioned in passing that he could refinish it for Katherine, if she liked. Katherine said that she didn't know how to play, but that if he wanted to, he could take it for Sarah, his wife.

Katherine had met Sarah at Parents' Night the week before. It was her last interview of the evening, and so at the end, they were able to chat about themselves—where they were from and their families and what they liked to do. Again, it was like Katherine was having a conversation with an old friend. She learned that Sarah was a piano teacher in town and that like herself, she was originally from the city. Sarah told her that she had moved to Beaverton ten years ago when she was in her early twenties, finished school and at the end of the only relationship she had ever had.

'I was desperate for a change,' she said. 'And then all of a sudden my parents gave me three thousand dollars. They said it was for graduation and that I could do whatever I liked with it. I was in shock. I'd never had that kind of money before and then that same week, I came across a listing in the paper for a century home in a quiet town by the lake. It said the home needed a lot of love and care, which sounded perfect for me at the time.'

When she came to look at the house, Bill was working on the roof, putting down new shingles. He had been hired by the owners to do some renovations to help sell the house.

'I knew as soon as I saw him,' she said. 'I can't explain it. It just all seemed to fit.'

Before leaving that day, Sarah put an offer on the house. By the closing date, three months later, she and Bill had bought the place together and they've been married and living there ever since.

Katherine looks up from her book. The sounds of construction have ended for the evening and now the heavy footfalls of workboots tread from the back of the house to the living room where she sits at the window.

‘Imagine I should call it a day then,’ says Bill.

‘Mm-hmm,’ Katherine says and sips her tea, holding the cup in both her hands.

Bill removes his hat and scratches his head with the same hand. ‘Fore I forget,’ he says, ‘Sarah wanted to know if she can still sign up for that course you teach.’

‘We just had the second class tonight,’ Katherine says. ‘I’d love it if she came.’

‘That’s good,’ he says. ‘I’ll tell her.’ He removes his hat again and replaces it.

‘You mind if I work on the piano then?’

‘You mean now?’

‘No, no. I mean on the night of the class. I could take Rebecca to her grandma’s and tell Sarah I’m help’n Walter with something. I figure once a week’ll let me finish by Christmas. I’d like it to be a surprise.’

‘Oh,’ she says and thinks of the antique writing desk her ex-husband bought for her their first Christmas together. ‘Of course. That will be very nice. I’ll leave the garage unlocked.’

‘Right,’ he says and touches the brim of his hat. ‘Well, goodnight.’

Katherine walks to the front door and sips her tea. ‘Goodnight,’ she says and the door clicks shut behind him.

Sarah Jensen’s hands are submerged in the kitchen sink, talking over her shoulder and over the rush of running water and the submarine sounds of clanging dishes, so that

Bill, who is cleaning the mud from his boots against the steps of the unfinished veranda he was building, can hear what she is saying.

‘I’m taking some of my students to the city this Saturday,’ she calls out.

‘Oh?’ he says and smacks his boots against the concrete steps.

‘What did you say?’

Rebecca is holding onto Sarah’s leg. ‘Mu-uh-uhm.’

‘Not now,’ Sarah says, bending down to remove the child-lichen. ‘What did you say, Bill?’

‘Ma-ahhmm. You got me all wet.’

Rebecca folds her arms and frowns.

‘Stop it Rebecca,’ Sarah says and returns to the dishes.

Sockfooted, Bill moves slowly and quietly in behind his wife. He puts a finger to his lips and Rebecca giggles. Without warning he wraps his arms around Sarah from behind, lifts her and growls. Startled, she jumps and then laughs and pulls Bill’s arms apart, playfully slugging his ursine shoulder.

‘Scare *me*, daddy. Scare *me*.’

‘Come on now,’ he says and lifts Rebecca over his head. ‘Daddy’s not scary is he?’

‘Nuh-huh-ho,’ Rebecca squeals as her father spins her.

‘So what’s in the city?’ he says and brings Rebecca in for a landing

‘The symphony,’ Sarah says.

‘Again daddy, again.’

Bill repeats the ride and sets Rebecca down, dizzy and laughing.

‘The symphony is in the city,’ she says, pulling the plug from the sink and reaching for an absent tea-towel. ‘Four of my students are leaving at the end of the year and I thought it would be nice to take them.’

‘Sure,’ he says. ‘Okay.’ He opens the refrigerator. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Plus, I’d like to go,’ Sarah says.

‘What’s that?’ Bill says and tugs his hat, now scanning the contents of the cupboards.

‘I said *I’d* like to go. I haven’t been since before Rebecca was born.’

‘When was I born?’ says Rebecca. She is cross-legged on the floor now twirling the missing tea-towel over her head.

‘Been where?’ says Bill.

‘Look at me Daddy, I’m a helicopter. Wup, wup, wup, wup.’

‘Give me the tea-towel, sweetie,’ Sarah says, but Rebecca leaps up and flies into the living room.

‘Wup, wup, wup, wup.’

‘She’s your daughter,’ says Sarah.

‘Where haven’t you been?’ says Bill.

In search for something to dry her hands on, Sarah doesn’t notice the playful expression on Bill’s face.

‘The *symphony*, Bill. Sometimes I—’

Bill steps in front of her, tips his hat and kisses her hand. ‘Name’s Billy the Kid, ma’am,’ he says. ‘Awful sorry but I ain’t got much time for chit-chat. There’s a bounty

out on my head and I'm kinda on the run.' Holding her as if to waltz, his voice lowers and softens. 'What's say you and I go lie low for a while?'

Sarah slaps his chest twice, leaves her hand there the second time and smiles. He lifts and sits her on the counter and pulls himself in. Hands around his neck, she whispers, in character, 'I could kill you right now,' she says, 'and take the money for myself.'

Bill traces two simultaneous lines—a fingertip beneath her shirt along the top of her jeans, and his lips, barely touching, up her neck and across her cheek to the edge of her mouth. 'Yours for the takin darlin,' he says.

Sarah removes his hat by the brim and replaces it backwards on his head, presses her naked heels into his jeans and arches her back so that she's just above him. Their mouths are close, lips slightly open.

'Wup, wup, wup, wup.'

Rebecca flies back into the kitchen and hovers behind her entangled parents, thwapping them with her propeller blades.

'Watch out daddy. You're in the way.'

'I'm in the way,' he whispers.

Sarah kisses Bill's forehead and releases him. Kissing her quickly, he winks, staggers away from the counter and performs a slow-motion silent-movie death as Rebecca continues her helicopter attack, giggling amidst the chopper sounds. In two motions, Bill drops to his knees, closes his eyes and topples tree like to the floor. Convinced for a moment of his death, Rebecca stands stunned, hands at her side, the tea-towel dangling and silent. She looks up at her mother and Sarah feigns shock in return.

Rebecca kneels beside her father.

‘Daddy?’ she whispers.

As she turns to look back to her mother, Bill thrusts himself from the floor, throws back his head, bangs his chest and roars. Giddy with fright, Rebecca dances around her father, giggling and in flight again, dipping and swerving to avoid his apish swipes of defence. And then, as though rehearsed, Rebecca and her father turn in unison on Sarah, collapsing her in a fit of merciless tickling.

Outside their home on North Street, the leaves scurry across the road reporting the movement of wind, and the dusk light obscures the distinctness of things. The light in the kitchen window would draw the cursory attention of someone walking by, as lights in windows often do, but it would be Sarah’s hysterical shrieks of laughter, punctuated by her desperate-sounding pleas of, ‘Stop! Don’t! Stop it, please!’, that would halt the passer-by on her usual walk through town, triggering a memory of a door-slamming argument she may have been witness to between Bill and Sarah the week before, remembering that the argument had come the day after a stranger’s van, marked with a city phone number and the name Cadence Company on the side, had been parked in the Jensens’ driveway all afternoon. Others would have seen and heard the same thing and in the morning, rumours would surface at the early morning coffee counters. The rumours would be passed along as lunch-hour hearsay, and then would continue to fester in the salons and the shops in town. By the end of the day, what was only assumed in the morning, would be known as true.

Approaching midnight, the sheets are fumbled and cover only parts of Bill and Sarah. She rests her head on his chest which rises with his breathing. Nestled closely,

there is almost no space between their bodies. The unconscious and infrequent bending and straightening of their legs, the touching of their feet and the mingling of their hands in an acts of rediscovery, their talking and their slipping in and out of sleep, are all ripples in the wake of their sex.

‘You should have been an actor,’ Sarah says, remembering his earlier Godzilla routine with Rebecca.

‘I am an actor,’ he says.

She kisses him and mumbles, ‘You are not.’

‘Am too,’ he says, rising to an elbow. ‘I’m a con-tractor.’ With each syllable he taps her head. She blinks with the tapping and smiles. ‘I just never hung out with all them, what do you call’ems, in high school?’ he says.

‘Uh, actors?’ she says.

‘No,’ he says and buzzes his lips at her. ‘They started some kind of club with a fancy name. Wrong school to do that in, lemme tell you. A little too down home for that kind of thing. Oh Christ, what’d we call’em?’ He snaps his fingers. ‘I know,’ he says and laughs. ‘I remember. The They’s Peein Club.’

‘Thespian, you mean,’ she says.

‘Nope. The They’s Peein Club.’

‘That’s awful,’ she said.

‘Well, it was true. They were always stand’n around in the halls, all cocksure with their goddam fancy clothes on, arms straight down in front of them with their hands crossed like they were get’n their picture taken every goddam second. That’s why we called’em that. They always looked like they were taken a piss.’

‘You’re terrible,’ she says and slaps his chest, softly.

Turning on her side, Sarah yawns deeply and hugs herself against Bill, drapes a leg over his torso. She yawns again and closes her eyes. ‘Want to hear what they say about you?’

‘About me,’ he says. ‘What?’

‘I’ve heard things,’ she says and smiles, her eyes still closed.

‘What did you hear?’ he says.

‘I heard that Katherine Jensen is your first wife, come to track you down.’

‘Hmn,’ he says and puts a hand behind her knee and tugs. ‘I told you there’s a bounty on my head.’ He slides a hand up to her waist, to the small of her back where he knows she’s most sensitive. She wiggles at first and then settles. His fingers have a different purpose than tickling now and the pleas she makes are not like before, and no one will ever hear but them.

His hands continue up her back to her shoulders and then down to her breasts, the centres of which are soft and warm on his palms, and then hard. One hand moves back to the ridge of collarbone, to her neck, and then her lips. She wets his finger and bites. Pulling herself across his body, she’s above him again and the rhythm slowly begins. Like the laboured chug of a waking and departing train.

‘Well, Mr. Kid,’ she whispers, gnawing his neck. ‘Rumour has it you’ve already been caught.’

‘Yes ma’am,’ he manages.

‘People will talk,’ she says. ‘People will talk about you and me.’

‘People...will always...talk,’ he says. ‘That’s what...people...do.’

‘Yes,’ she says and looks at him, then tilts her head back and closes her eyes. ‘But you’re...mine...Mr. Kid.’

‘I surrender...Miss...Jensen.’

It is the end of November now and winter looms. After eight o’clock on this Thursday evening, the cold rain falls almost like ice against the classroom windows, percussion to the song that lulls softly in the background, which Katherine sings to herself as she collects the stained glass materials from the tables around the room. She is alone with her back to the door.

‘The night is my companion and solitude my guide,’ she sings. ‘Would I spend forever here and not be satisfied.’

Sarah steps into the doorway but Katherine does not see her.

‘I forgot my umbrella,’ Sarah says.

Katherine turns with a hand to her chest. ‘Sarah,’ she says. ‘You scared me half to death.’

There is an uncomfortable silence, and then Sarah goes to the table she was sitting at for tonight’s class and takes her umbrella. She looks down and taps it on the floor. Katherine hugs her chest.

‘I know what people have been saying,’ Sarah says.

Katherine puts her hands in her pockets and straightens her arms, which makes her shoulders tense.

‘People do a lot of talking around here,’ Sarah says. ‘It entertains them.’

Katherine seems almost to smile, but really it is a gesture closer to wincing.

‘Last year I was sleeping with the piano tuner,’ Sarah says. ‘His van was in our driveway one afternoon and then I was gone for a week. A torrid affair.’

Katherine’s eyes widen at first, and then tentatively, she smiles.

‘It’s not like I’m the piano teacher,’ she says. ‘Or that my mother got really sick and so I went to take care of her in the city.’

Katherine puts a hand to her chest again, but with different purpose than before. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she says.

‘No,’ says Sarah. ‘No, she’s fine now. But that’s all it takes for something to get started around here.’ She looks down and taps the umbrella again. ‘Anyway—’ she says and turns to leave.

‘Sarah,’ Katherine says and steps forward. ‘I was wondering—I was wondering if you had any spots open.’

‘Spots?’ says Sarah.

‘For lessons, I mean.’

Sarah wonders if Katherine has a niece or a nephew who lives nearby. Or maybe a son or a daughter who lives with her ex-husband and is now coming to live with her.

‘Sure,’ Sarah says. ‘I’ve always got room.’

‘I think I’d like to learn how to play,’ Katherine says.

‘Oh,’ Sarah says. ‘You mean for you.’

Katherine picks up the balled piece of paper at her feet and tosses it into the bin by the door. ‘It’s silly,’ she says. ‘I know. I’m too old. It’s just an idea I had.’

‘Sure,’ Sarah says. ‘Sure, why not? I think it would be good. We could—,’ she says and smiles. ‘We could make a trade of our art.’

Katherine hugs herself again, but more for warmth this time. ‘I like that,’ she says and then less seriously, she mimics Sarah. ‘A trade of our art,’ she says and they both laugh with the rain still in its muted rhythm against the windows and the soft thunder in the distance.

Past nine o’clock on Sunday evening, Katherine is in her armchair again by the window. She has refilled her wine glass twice, and she has the phone in her hand. She dials, hangs up and then redials five times, and when she finally lets the number register, the rings are muffled and distant in her ear. He answers on the fifth ring and after a few awkward moments, they are in conversation again as though no time or distance had passed between them.

‘I love it here,’ she says. ‘It’s so quiet and the air is so clean. I think my neighbours are the kindest people I’ve ever met. I remind them of their daughter, I think. She teaches in the west end of the city, close to where you used to have your studio on Sorauren. Mm-hmm. No, closer to High Park I think. Mm-hmm.’

Katherine sips her wine.

‘It would be nice to see you,’ she says. ‘I know what we decided, but it really would be—I really would love to see you.’

At first, he does not respond and Katherine’s head begins to reel with the wine and a sudden and overwhelming loneliness, a physical longing for the man who is himself no longer physically real to her, starkly and irreversibly absent but for memory. And then there is an audible beep on the line and Katherine thinks she hears him say, ‘I’ve been waiting for you to call.’ Waiting these last three months, every night by the

window the way she does, for the phone to ring. But just as she is about to confess her lingering feelings of love, he repeats himself and she hears more clearly what he has said.

‘I have call waiting,’ he says. ‘I think I should take it.’

‘Oh,’ she says and gathers herself as best she can. ‘Okay. Well, maybe I’ll call you next week.’

The next afternoon when Katherine comes home from school, shivering from the cold, her phone is in mid ring. Removing her gloves and unzipping her coat, she hurries to answer it. Bill walks out from the back of the house just then and nods. He is finished for the day. Sarah is not at home and he needs to be there when Rebecca gets home from her piano lesson. He tugs the brim of his hat as though to says goodbye, but Katherine holds a finger in the air to stop him. He stands at the door and waits.

‘I wasn’t expecting you to call,’ Katherine says. ‘Hello? No, it must be a bad connection. I was just saying I wasn’t. Hello? Yes, I can hear you now. I know, it’s freezing all of a sudden. Really? When? Yes, I’ll be home. Oh, for a seminar, of course. Well, where will you stay? What’s that? I’d love to, yes. Oh no, the Christmas concert is that night. Yes, Christmas concert, for the school. We could have a late dinner afterwards. What’s that? Of course you can. It starts at six. Okay. Good. I’m at 57 Main Street. Just stop in town and ask someone. They’ll point you here. What’s that? I’m losing you again. I can’t hear you. What? Yes. Me too.’

With her back to the door, Katherine returns the phone to its cradle so that it does not make a sound, and starts towards the kitchen.

‘Cold out,’ Bill says.

Katherine stops and turns. She puts one hand on her hip and presses the other to her forehead. Her face is still flushed from the cold and she tries to smile.

‘God, I’m sorry, Bill,’ she says. ‘I forgot you were there. I, um—’

She drops the hand from her forehead to her mouth and turns her head.

The hardwood floor creaks as Bill steps towards her. Standing there, he does not know what to say. Katherine wipes her eyes and then as though she were suddenly reminded of something, she brushes past him and pulls a book from the shelf where the piano used to be.

‘I almost forgot,’ she says. ‘Could you give this to Sarah for me. The author used to live not far from here. We talked about it the other day. I thought she might like it.’

Bill takes the book from her, and as he does, she hugs him. He puts an arm hesitantly around her and then a hand on the back of her head. Embarrassed, he can feel the heat of her legs against his, and the presence of her breasts against his shirt. But what stays with him from that moment of closeness between them, is the feeling of her lips on his cheek and her tears on his neck.

December has arrived and winter seems to have come overnight. The leaves that were able to escape the incineration of autumn now sleep beneath the snow, a different kind of rest than being sewn to canvas or traced onto stencil paper to be cut from coloured glass. There is ice in the mornings now, and when walking outside, you can see people breathe. Dusk continues to arrive earlier each day, and so too does the quiet stillness that falls with it across the town. The streetlights are decorated with Christmas designs and coloured lights hang strewn in the windows of the storefronts after dark, like

nocturnal rainbows. An hour north of here, the earth still harbours the look of a worn and faded fall, brown and barren and concrete grey.

Unable to sleep once again, Katherine sits at the antique writing desk in the renovated sunroom, now her studio, edging and smoothing a piece of glass. Her slippers feet are warm against her favourite rug. The oversized card from her class in the city is framed and hanging proudly on the wall with some of the other pieces of art she has collected over the years. A print of Van Gogh's café. An anonymous and faded country landscape of field and water with a small brick home on a hill. A portrait of a woman holding a child. A chalk sketch of a boy by a river, walking away. And her silver and blue butterfly in the window.

At the Christmas concert, Rebecca plays 'Silent Night' while the rest of her class sings. Sitting in the front row of the school gymnasium, Bill snaps pictures while Sarah keeps time, tapping the toe of her shoe against the floor. After, the place is frenzied with the fleeing and spirited little performers, scurrying and crying younger siblings, and grandparents struggling with their own winter coats and hats. The parents rally everyone together for a quick picture before they go.

Rebecca races towards Bill and he swoops her up onto his shoulders.

'My little piano player,' he says.

Rebecca's grandfather looks up at her and holds her shoe, shakes it gently, and laughs heartily and open-mouthed. Her grandmother pleads with Bill to put her down, and Sarah takes her as he does. They are the portrait of family.

As the season approached, Walter overheard Katherine tell Margaret that she had never had a real tree at Christmas, and so on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, he drove

out to a concession road with an axe in the back of his truck, and returned with a seven-foot spruce.

‘Don’t tell anyone,’ he says, while securing the tree in its stand. ‘People around here tend to make more of things than they actually are.’

‘Thank you,’ Katherine says and wipes her eyes.

‘Ah, now none of that,’ Walter says, and like a father, he looks at her and hands her the handkerchief he always carries. Then he puts an arm around her and squeezes her shoulders.

After coming back from Christmas Eve service, Margaret and Walter help Katherine decorate the tree and the three of them spend the rest of the evening together. Margaret has brought a tray of homemade squares and shortbread. She unwraps and sets them on the table. Katherine pours three glasses of eggnog, two with rum.

The tree is decorated with multi-coloured lights and ribbon and little figurines. The three of them sit around it, and talk and laugh and exchange presents.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Katherine says, unwrapping the angel that Margaret crocheted herself.

Walter uses a chair to place it on top of the tree and then Katherine hands a present to him and one to Margaret.

‘I love it,’ says Bill, fastening the tool belt around his waist.

‘Oh, Katherine,’ Margaret says, holding the porcelain teapot in her hands.

Without any of them noticing, midnight comes and goes. When Walter looks at his watch, it is nearly twelve thirty.

‘Merry Christmas,’ he says.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Katherine says. ‘Thank you for being so—’ She puts a hand to her lips. ‘I’m doing it again.’

Margaret hugs her and as they separate, they both laugh and wipe their eyes. Walter stands at the door.

‘Come here,’ Katherine says.

Walter rubs his head. Katherine smiles and hugs him. He hugs her in return and says, ‘Remember, don’t tell anyone.’

As the Mitchells walk home, Katherine stands at the window and waves, watching the slowly descending snow.

Across town, Sarah reads Rebecca ’Twas the Night Before Christmas while Bill piles presents around the tree. Later, after their own tumblers of eggnog and rum, Bill wears his Santa hat to bed.

‘Name’s Santee Claus, ma’am,’ he says. ‘And I don’t need to be home till mornen.’

Alone, Katherine takes a piece of wood from the brass cradle and puts it on the fire, then settles into her chair.

‘Home,’ she says. ‘I think so.’

The garbage collector—

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It was early on this first Sunday in July, and the unseasonal coolness of last night's mercurial drop still lurked in the darkness of the morning. By morning's end, the severe midday heat would confine many people to their homes, contented with the manufactured spring coolness of air conditioners and soundless ceiling fans. Those without such refinement would point large square fans directly at the living room armchairs in which they would sit all afternoon, reclined as though tanning on a lakeside beach. They were the types of fans whose blades looked to have been stolen from an old-fashioned airplane and they hummed with the whirl of propeller driven wind. Others would venture lakeward and attempt to splash and wade away the sweaty discomfort of their overwarm skin. Some would hunt out the plots of shade that shift throughout the day beneath the seasonal umbrellas of their backyard trees. Children would run giddily through the slow-moving pendulous arc of sprinklers whose primary purpose was to quench the parched yellow lawns and the dry grey earth of vegetable and flower gardens. Some, like me and the other two young men of Smalley's Haulage & Landscaping, would find temporary

refreshment in the blood-warming numbness of Sunday afternoon beer. And with the stealing-in of dusk, much of this sluggishness would end, giving way to the lawnchair- and blanket-burdened walk to the community centre fairgrounds for the annual display of fireworks—immeasurable and unowned jewels of light.

It was still cool this morning and because the sun was yet to rise, the nocturnal animals were still busy, cooing high in the trees, skulking in the ditches and filching the choicest garbage from the cans and green plastic bags that sat vulnerably at the ends of driveways, already awaiting Monday's collection. As I walked along Ethel Park Drive at this early hour I wondered, out of habit, who Ethel was, and whether this subdivision of ten streets, bound on the west by the shores of Lake Simcoe and on the east by the railway tracks I was now crossing, had ever been a park to be strolled in or a field of autumn hay to be harvested. And as I passed by where the old station house used to sit, I wondered why something with such heritage and such seeming permanence had to be torn down. Whether the repeated vandalism had become too costly to fix, or the powers-that-be deemed it unworthy of fixing. Or whether it was more to do with the unnessariness of having a station house in a town where the passing trains no longer stopped on their cross-country journeys to pick up departing travellers or to drop off those returning home.

At night when I was seven and supposed to be sleeping, I used to prop myself up on a chair, crank open my window and watch for the lights of the station house to come on. I could hear the voices and the labour of the men working on the rails, and I would mime in unison the church-bell ding of hammers on spikes and the sound of shovels scooping slag. Sometimes, there was a barrel the men lit for warmth on cooler nights and

I would lift my nose to the mixture of faint smoke, hot metal and creosote in the air. Now twenty-five, I was married with a seven year old son of my own who looked for me from his window when I came plodding home from a twelve hour day of work, reeking with the stench of my labour.

Smalley's Haulage & Landscaping was owned and run by a man who knew everyone in town. According to the stories people told, he was fifty-five or sixty, but to me he looked no more than forty. Most were forced to look up when speaking to him, and they would have walked around him on the street if he didn't always stop first, say 'hello' and step to the side himself. His hair was still slate black and both his voice and his eyes were intimidating.

'If you work for me,' he said to the overconfident teenagers who came looking for easy cigarette and beer money, skipping school or on suspension, 'you will learn *how* to work. Six till six, six days a week. Honest work for honest men.'

The boys rarely finished a day, but Smalley always paid them fairly for the work they did. They were really no different than I was eight years ago, in attitude at least, aching 'to be done with school' and 'to get on with it,' whatever 'it' was. I could remember that all I wanted then was to leave this town and make a fresh start somewhere, a new beginning. And now as I walked down Lakeland Crescent, I was reminded of when I was forced to leave, sentenced to two years of juvenile detention. Whenever anyone asked me what I was there for, I always joked and said, I used to sleepwalk and a few times I woke up in the wrong house.

Just as I was forced to leave, I was forced to return, burdened by the realities of a jobless eighteen-year-old father-to-be. My wife, Jade, whom I had met just before being

sent away, used to come and see me almost every weekend. Her home life wasn't very good either. Gritting my teeth, I would often think back to many of my would-be classmates who, instead of juvenile detention, were setting up residence arrangements in University cities across Ontario, and some as far away as the east and west coasts of the country.

'So where are you going?' they would say, walking through town or playing basketball in their driveways while I passed by, hauling and throwing bags of garbage into the back of Smalley's packer.

'Wherever I get in,' they would say. 'As long as I'm not stuck here.'

And that phrase repeated itself in my head even now. 'Stuck here,' as though cemented in. People who say there is always a choice are people with the luxury of adage, having themselves never been pinned down by circumstance, or forced to choose between the lesser of two bads. Yet, I no longer really considered being here *stuck*. More *fixed*. A kind of tolerable permanence which I almost felt grateful for.

Ten years ago when my then teenage wife, Jade, was pregnant, we signed a temporary lease to a small bachelor's apartment above the plaza on Osborne Street. Smalley had just given me a job and until then, we had been staying week-to-week in the dingy hotel above Luy's Place across the road. The apartment was badly scarred by previous tenants and the landlord made no mention of imminent repair. The front window was cracked and the wall was discoloured from water leaking in, the screen-door was ripped, and the carpet was stained in so many places that the stains themselves could almost pass as pattern. There was a fist-sized hole in the wall above our cushionless complementary chesterfield, and the whole place reeked of cat urine.

‘We have no choice,’ I whispered to Jade. Her eyes were watering and both hands were on her taut round stomach. ‘It’s this or Luy’s,’ I said, still softly.

Seeming to overhear our conversation, the landlord leaned in and said, ‘The rent is low, I gar’ntee you won’t beat it nowhere in town.’

Then, skirting the line of sarcasm and sincerity, I walked into the middle of the room, spread my arms and said, ‘Home sweet home,’ and the landlord pointed to a decorative wooden sign above the door whose carved-out lettering read the same. Beneath her watery eyes Jade smiled, but only just.

I found sometimes that I became lost in thought this way, especially when I was alone, and the thoughts were often of the same things. Like moments from my youth when I was innocent and still far removed from the adolescent trouble that lay ahead. Or Smalley and the work that I did now and the strange pride I felt for doing it. Or the place I was in and the history of it, and why some things seemed always to remain while others were destroyed and lost forever, eventually even to memory. And then I would often think of my new home and my family and what life would have been like were it not for those mistakes I had made and for the time I spent away.

Smalley always told me I was pensive, and the way he said it made it sound like neither a good nor a bad thing to be. He told me I reminded him of someone called George Milton but that I was better off than him, that I would eventually find my piece of land and make a home for myself because I didn’t have the burden of a Lenny to look after. I didn’t know who George or Lenny were and so I didn’t really understand, but I liked that he had so much confidence in me. I had never had that before. One Saturday morning, I went with him out to the police station to bail out Weed and Burney—his

other two steady workers—from another one of their minor run-ins with the law. They were both nineteen and Smalley had taken them on about a year ago, as he had with me when I was eighteen. It was as we drove into the police station that he told me how I reminded him of George, and then he added something which made me think of a story I had often heard about him from other people in town. About how his wife had left him twenty years before, taking with her their only child. He had been at work, as he was almost every day, and came home to an empty house and a note scribbled on a scrap piece of paper stuck to the fridge.

‘But there are worse things,’ he said as we drove into the police station, shoving the truck into park and speaking to the windshield, ‘than having someone to look after.’

Whenever Smalley discovered something he considered ‘worth knowing’ in one of the books he kept piled beside him in the packer, he called us over from our working so that he could teach us what he had just learned. Recently, one of the suspension kids laughed when Smalley did this and said that he didn’t skip school just to listen to some stupid garbage man play teacher. Smalley climbed down from the cab then and approached the boy calmly. The boy was held almost physically by Smalley’s presence and he did not move. Smalley explained the meaning of the word *stupid* to the boy and used three examples for clarification. Then he made it very clear that he was not a man to *play* anything. Finished, Smalley took one step back, which seemed to release the boy from his hold.

‘I don’t need this,’ the boy said and started to leave. ‘Fuck yuhs all.’

Smalley stood there and said, still very calmly, ‘Come back here son.’

The boy turned at the foreign-sounding word and stopped. Smalley's right arm was outstretched and he held two bills in his hand. 'Don't forget your pay,' he said.

The boy looked at me as though to ask if this guy was for real, and then he turned back to Smalley and walked towards him. The boy looked at me again, waiting for a nod of assurance or something to help him understand, but I did not move or say anything. He snatched the money from Smalley's hand, turned and ran, looking back over his shoulder now and again, almost tripping over himself. Smalley stood there until the boy turned the nearest corner and was gone from sight.

'Broke another one,' said Weed. 'Little pussy anyway.'

Eyes furrowed, Smalley turned and glared at Weed.

'Sorry Smalley,' Weed said. 'I was only sayin.'

Smalley climbed into the cab of the packer, returned his attention to the book he was reading and called us over again. I don't remember what he told us then, but watching him with that boy reminded me of when I saw him knock a stubborn bull down with one swipe of a two-by-four. When he was serious, which was most of the time, we were serious. And when we were not, we soon were. When he called us over, we came, and none of us rolled his eyes. He was 'a man of ethics' and tried his best to make us so.

'Bull!'

I heard my name shouted and realized the walk to the garbage that awaited me was over.

'Bull!'

This was Weed who was similar in stature to a garden rake with the prongs pointed skyward. He was rail thin with a metallic face, and had small grey eyes like

rivets. His hair was uncombed and scraggly, and his teeth were badly stained from the filterless Export 'A's he smoked by the daily package. He seemed to sustain himself on pork rinds and fruit-flavoured carbonated drinks which supplied him with the overabundance of stomach gas he liked to burp up and blow into Burney's face.

'Bacon and strawberries,' he would say with a grin. 'What a meal. What a meal.'

The early bird combo, as Weed christened it, was rounded out by a stolen and usually old copy of *Hustler*, which he was coming at me with now, the pages splayed.

'Jesus Bull. Look at the guns on this one.' He pretended to unholster himself at the groin and shoot the centrefold twice. Pshew. Pshew.

I lifted my brow, nodded and lit a cigarette.

'Never fucken guess what I just caught the Burn doin,' he said, and I was walking beside him now as he pointed to Burney and the crate of discarded tomatoes by the entrance of the long gutted trailer home which sat tightly against the back of the Valu-Mart, the site where we began so many of our Sundays.

The trailer home was the grocery store's dumpster, able to hold four or five times as much garbage as the typical metal dumpsters that usually sat at the backs of parking lots to such stores. The wheels had been removed so that it sat flush to the ground and the back had been ripped out and replaced with two large doors that swung open as though to the entrance of a cathedral. The two windows along the side were still intact and let in light, allowing us to see what we were handling, though I often preferred not to see at all.

'The doors is unlocked when I get here,' continued Burn, 'which I thought was strange, so I open'em up and there's the Burn.' Weed laughed and coughed and horked

mistakenly onto his own shoe, which he didn't bother to clean off. 'And he's chomp'n clean into one them rotten t'matoes. Nearly fucken puked on muhself.'

I lifted my brow and nodded, looking at Burney and then kneeling to retie my boot.

Burney was shaped like a wheelbarrow being dumped with the handles in the air. He was short and lumpy and slow. His yellow happy-face t-shirt was faded and spotted heavily with the unwashed stains of a week's work, the latest of which was now running down from and accentuating the already turned-down corners of his mouth, the juice and seeds of a rotten tomato breakfast, dripping from his chin. His arms were bent and in the air, like the handles, shrugging.

I thwapped open one of the clean plastic garbage bags the store's owner had left for us, the cleanest smell I got all day. The next two hours were spent tunnelling towards the back of the humid and putrid trailer. We worked without speaking, filling bag after bag with the overturned contents of carelessly tossed and now fermenting crates of produce. The contents of split and overstuffed bags of meat-ends, some of which were not tied, now spilled over each other and onto us when we lifted them, hot and squidgy in our hands. Expired dairy had the worst smell. Beyond sour, it had a way of sticking to the back of your throat. At the end of the two hours, I held open one of the bags while the other two shovelled the stew of mud and missed carrots and soggy wood chips and meat juice that slicked the floor we had now more than half cleared of garbage. I dusted the floor with fresh wood chips and then walked out into the fresh air of the now sun-soaked morning. I stretched and lit a cigarette. Beside me, Burney and Weed did the same.

'Made it to the beginning,' Weed said.

I raised my brow and nodded, drawing long on the cigarette. The beginning of the week's garbage was always cleaner, stacked neatly in boxes and bags that were tied and not too full. Like the proverbial fresh start of so many things that begin with purpose and careful attention, subject to the inevitable and infectious shrug of indifference that causes stockboys and even shift managers to open the trailer, fling the garbage in and then close the doors in one hurried and unconscious motion, the promise of doing it right the next time, stale in the air.

I poured three coffees from the thermos I had brought into styrofoam cups we salvaged from a recycling bin nearby, leaving an inch from the top for the whiskey Burney stole from his father. It was a bottle that held, 'over a hunnert ounces,' he told us, and he was always careful not to take more than six or so. After the coffee and after lighting another cigarette, I stepped into the field behind the trailer, the dry ground and brittle hay crunching beneath my workboots. I stopped beside a tree and relieved myself.

The field stretched westward to a wall of distant trees behind which I knew but could not see the railway run. Beyond the railway tracks was Ethel Park Drive, and I could picture my new home at the north end. It was a small brick bungalow with an average sized yard, but to us, it was everything we had never had. It would be still and quiet at this hour, the day's new light sneaking through the curtained windows to warm the faces of my wife, Jade, and my son, John, who would both be lying peacefully beneath their blankets, in their separate beds within their separate rooms. A comfort none of us was yet accustomed to, having spent the last seven years confined to the smallness of our bachelor's apartment above the plaza on Osborne. After the crib and until he was five, John had slept with us, and then when he started school he moved to the chesterfield

which we did our best to make comfortable for him. Privacy for my wife and me was rare, coming only on the spare weekend afternoons I did not have to work and John was out playing with his friends. I could picture him waking this morning to the model train-set my wife and I stayed up to assemble late last night. Today was his seventh birthday, as he had reminded us, it seemed, every hour for the past two weeks. He told me he couldn't wait for the fireworks tonight and made me promise to be home in time to take him. My wife will have packed us sandwiches and the blankets and lawn chairs would be waiting at the door when I arrived home. I promised him I would be there, and then tried to remember when I was his age if I ever looked forward to fireworks as much as he did. At twenty-five, my youth already seemed so long ago. And then I wondered, almost in vain, when in *his* life the thrill would finally dissipate, like the falling individual sparks of the firecrackers themselves. The thrill of something so simple and so innocent as glittering lights in a darkening sky, or the sounds of men working on the rails.

Standing in the field by the tree, I zipped myself out of daydream. Weed was busy flipping through a scene in his magazine and Burney was back inside the trailer, cautiously approaching a brick-like stack of cardboard boxes. There was a scraping sound behind the boxes and the cardboard tower trembled as though in an earthquake. Burney's arms were bent and in the air again, but this time more with the appearance of a diminutive and defensive bear.

'A rat,' he thought, gritting his teeth.

As he made his lunge for the bottom box, the stack buckled in the middle and collapsed on Burney who tumbled to the floor. In the initial moments afterwards, everything was still and then the tallest box began to move, its open end pointing upward.

Stuck now and desperately clawing the sides of its cardboard prison, the skunk squealed its panic.

‘Gotcha,’ Burney said, still thinking the animal inside was a rat. ‘Hey Weed! Hey Bull! I caught a rat!’

Unmindfully, Burney pulled himself from the floor, clutched the sides of the box and shoved his face down in. The skunk hissed and sprayed. Burney squinted and tripped backwards, pawing his face. Choking on the thick cloud of musk, he righted himself, vomited and kicked the box. Through the cardboard, he felt the body of the skunk against his boot, which frightened him. The box hit the wall and toppled, sending the open end towards the trailer doors. And as if in a too-close-to-call foot race, Burney—screaming ‘A giant mutant rat! A giant mutant rat!’—and the skunk, waddled frantically from the trailer.

‘What the—’ Weed said, jumping out of the way.

The skunk flitted right and down into the field I was returning from. It darted neatly through my legs as though through a hole in a fence. I looked up to see Burney running, eyes still shut, towards the recently arrived packer. Climbing down from the cab, Smalley shut the door and turned. He was jolted by the fleeing Burney who rebounded jarringly off of his tall and solid frame. Burney plopped to the pavement, rubbing his excessively watering eyes, and vomited again.

‘Bull!’ Smalley called.

I made the effort to run.

Weed pretended to check the trailer for more skunks.

‘That’s it!’ he yelled over his shoulder. ‘No more uh the squattin little bastards in here.’ And before leaving, he stashed his magazine inside one of the boxes.

Smalley crossed his arms. ‘You said we caught them all.’

‘I thought we did,’ I said.

‘Set the trap by the edge there before you leave,’ Smalley said and pointed to the field. ‘It won’t be back until the middle of the week. I’ll guarantee that. Weed here turned over its nest so to speak.’ He unfolded his arms and put a hand on Bull’s shoulder. ‘Best laid schemes,’ he said.

Fragments of the poem rose in my head. Smalley recited it often.

‘Who says the farmers don’t know anything?’ Smalley said, helping Burney to his feet.

‘Not me Smalley,’ Burney said, his eyes red from the rubbing. Sniffing, he drew the grimy skin of his forearm beneath his nose repeatedly.

‘Quit sniffin so much,’ Weed said, and swatted Burney across the head. ‘Yer maken me sick to my stummuck.’

Burney swung back, but his arm was too short and he missed.

Weed laughed. But then Smalley reached out and connected with the side of his head. Burney snickered to himself, fingers to his lips.

‘It’s the smell that’s making you sick,’ Smalley said, ‘not Burney’s sniffing.’

‘Jesus, Smalley,’ Weed said. He pressed an open hand to his head and pulled it away, and did so three times as though checking for blood. ‘Why ya gotta hit so hard fer?’

Smalley returned to his work and said, 'Soft doesn't make an impression. And there's no substance in light.'

Smalley backed the packer in close to the old trailer home dumpster, and in seconds we were all busy again with our tasks. Weed condensed the cardboard boxes and bundled them with twine, sure to place the one with the magazine on top in case he had time to steal one more look-through. Burney worked on the bags we filled and piled during the first part of the morning, heaving them into the yawning mouth of the packer. Smalley controlled the levers, operating them in a pattern of pulls and shoves when the mouth became full of garbage. The levers engaged the slow-moving metal lip that came down over the bags and pulled the garbage back into the belly of the packer. The lip always seemed to pinch one of the bags, making it pop and hiss like a blown tire. Busy now by the edge of the field, I loaded and camouflaged the trap's metal with twigs and clumps of trampled hay.

'What smells so bad?' Burney said. His eyes were tomato red and still watering, but the vomiting had stopped.

'Christ, you're stupid,' Weed said.

Smalley looked at Weed and said, 'Don't ever say something you don't really mean.'

'Huh?' Weed said.

Smalley waited.

Weed swiped the air as though swatting a fly. 'Fuck Smalley. You know what I mean.'

Smalley said nothing.

Weed rolled his eyes. ‘Pardon, for fucksake. And I *do* mean he’s stupid.’

‘I’m not stupid.’ Burney tried to hit Weed again but his arm was still too short and he missed again.

‘Why?’ Smalley asked.

‘Because the same thing happened to him before. That’s why.’

‘He forgot,’ said Smalley.

‘Yeah, I forgot.’

‘Who can’t remember a skunk pissin on him?’ said Weed.

‘I know a lot of men who wish they could forget a lot of things,’ Smalley said and looked at me. ‘But they can’t. Does that mean they’re smart?’

‘I dunno. Yer twisten things again Smalley.’ Weed picked his nose and flicked it.

‘I’m sorry I called you stupid, Burney.’

‘That’s alright.’ Burney stepped forward so that his fist would meet Weed’s shoulder. ‘Hey,’ he said, sniffing again. ‘What’s that smell?’

‘Jesus,’ said Weed.

‘It’s just a little skunk musk,’ Smalley said, sending the packer’s mouth into action again. ‘Nothing a bit of tomato juice won’t fix.’

‘Heh, heh,’ said Weed. ‘Add a little pepper and you’ve got a bath and lunch all at once.’

Smalley allowed Weed the last word, and none of us said anything more until the last bag had been tossed in. And even then we only offered our individual opinions on having finished the job.

‘Made it to the end,’ Weed said.

And Burney echoed him. ‘Made it to the end,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Smalley said, ‘you did. But there’s no rest for the wicked. Not even on Sundays.’

I raised my brow and nodded.

It was past eleven by the time we finished. The sun pounded and seemed to blister everything beneath it. I climbed into the passenger’s side of the packer and used the pile of books between Smalley and me for an arMr.est. Weed and Burney took their usual places at the back, a step on either side of the yawning mouth in the rear, casually holding onto the head-high rails that ran along the packer’s sides. My shirt was wet, and the drops of sweat that ran down from my neck felt like insects crawling down my spine. I shoved my back into the seat to squash them, just to be safe.

As we rolled away, I looked in the side mirror and saw a stockboy carrying a box which appeared to be heavy. The box rested on his rigid and outstretched arms, his hands free and jutting out from beneath. His nose was skyward and turned away from the box and so his steps were slow and mechanical. All of this made him look like a human forklift. He squatted and lowered the box to the ground, then frantically wiped the sleeves of his shirt against the side of the trailer and on the grass beside. Holding one of the doors open with his foot, he bent over to reach the box and heaved it into the recently emptied trailer.

‘So much for fresh starts,’ I thought.

The bottom of the box was rotten though and the absence of the expected weight caused him to fall forward through the door. Quickly, he scrambled to his feet, the knees of his pants and the sleeves of his shirt now dotted with wood chips and smeared with the

grime of the trailer's floor. Freed from their container, the heads of rusted lettuce and what appeared to be overripe melons, fell away. The ones on top carried enough momentum to roll to the edge of the field where the trap was.

'Easy pickings for the skunk,' I thought.

Just then, the packer coughed a black cloud of smoke from its exhaust as Smalley shifted the gears, and the stockboy noticed us, it seemed, for the first time. He put a hand to his mouth and with the window rolled down I could hear his strained and screaming voice, but because of the distance between us, I was unable to make out any of the words. He kicked one of the melons and it exploded at the toe of his shoe. Weed was on my side of the truck, and in the side mirror I saw him bent forward slightly, seeming to wag an invisible tail back and forth. Then I noticed his belt flapping at knee level and realized that he too must have heard the stockboy's screaming. I couldn't help but smile, taking some small pleasure in Weed's wordless reply.

'Where's the camera?' Smalley said.

'Ah, it's nothen,' I said, flipping through the pages of a book. 'Just Weed being Weed.'

'Burney is over here,' Smalley said, nodding to his side mirror, 'being Weed too.' Knitting his brow, Smalley raised a prophetic finger, smiled, and said, 'Sometimes words are not needed to bare your soul.'

We both laughed and it became one of those moments I consciously recorded. Later, when the dusk descended and we were lying elbow-propped on our blanket in the fairgrounds, I would try to recapture the moment for Jade. But even as I would begin to

tell it, I would know, as is the sad reality in the retelling of all such moments, that she, the closest person to me, would not really hear what I said, nor would she understand.

The packer's robust body bounced lazily over the potholes and undulations in the road. Neither Weed nor Burney ever sat in the cab. They were content to stand on the meshed metal steps at the back, holding onto the rails. Smalley never drove more than twenty miles an hour, and so they were never really in danger of falling off. For the twenty minute ride that wound through town, up over the hill, and out to the concession road and the long dirt driveway where Smalley's brick farmhouse was, the two figures stood there at the back of the packer and smoked their cigarettes, squinting against the manufactured wind as we drove.

Smalley parked the packer beside the barn and the shushing release of the air-brakes, disengaged, sounded like the heavy and thankful sigh of tired men. Beneath the still and pounding sun, the four of us walked back towards the house. Weed and Burney and I took our regular seats at the picnic table beneath a large maple tree, its sheltering branches spread protectively above us. Seated and leaning our crossed arms heavily on the table, we relished the arrival rest.

Smalley climbed the steps and entered his house. Beside the steps there was a garden-hose, coiled and hot in the sun. On harvest days of collecting the stooked hay from the field and piling it in the mow of the barn, Weed and Burney always raced to the garden hose when the tractor or hay elevator came to a stop, signalling a break. They would pour the initially warm and rubber-smelling liquid over their heads and then gulp the clean cold water as it streamed out from the hose's end. But although they were parched from their working and their smoking and the sweltering heat of this midday July

sun, there was no race today. Instead they stretched their legs beneath the picnic table and waited patiently for the beer Smalley was returning with now. We had two each. Weed and Burney gulped their first like the water from the hose. I drank half of mine and Smalley took only a mouthful. We drank in silence and I dealt the hands for the lunch-hour card game. Burney forgot the rules and Weed began to ask him why he was so stupid, stopping short of the word 'stupid.'

Looking at Smalley, Weed grinned and said, 'The pickens is too easy, Smalley. Too easy.'

In the centre of the picnic table, there was a bag of freshly baked buns and two plates, one with cold cuts and the other, slices of tomato.

'Dig in,' Smalley said, and the we ripped open the buns to the warm smell of yeast and stuffed the centres with the slices of meat and tomatoes. Before the ripping, we wiped our hands down the legs of our pants and across our chests. We ate without plates, and no one asked for the time.

As the lunch ended, each of us waited for the signal from Smalley to start moving again. Glutted on six sandwiches and slowed by the Sunday afternoon beer, Weed, thin as he is, slunk from the picnic table to the grass beneath the tree. Burney did the same, only his transfer from table to grass was disjointed and ungainly. Lacking Weed's natural stealth, he clunked awkwardly and heavily from his seat to the ground beneath the tree, but then stretched himself out and found an equally satisfying rest. Feet crossed and hands behind their heads, the two were twinned within the shade. At the table, I watched my own hands shuffling the cards, and Smalley strummed his fingers on the wooden surface staring out beyond the house to the sun-coloured hayfields of summer, each of

our actions a pensive accompaniment to the rhythm of the other. Separately and together, we were in a moment similar to the moment of waking, contemplating a return to sleep. Similar to the extended stay beneath a warm-water shower having already finished the acts of soaping and rinsing. For there is usually a reluctance to quit the comfort of the bed or the warmth of the shower, like the hesitation that sat upon us now at the picnic table and beneath the tree, too aware of the initial difficulty that always came with the ending of one thing and the beginning of another. But then at the same time, there is often that uneasy desire to leap from the bed and from the shower and to be instantly dressed and already in the middle of what waits beyond the sheets and the curtain, the certain and necessary and too often uncontrollable eventualities of the day.

Resolutely, Smalley snapped his attention back to the present, and there was punctuation in the way he finished his beer. A deliberate and single motion. Hand to mouth to table, then thunk.

‘The sooner we start the sooner we finish,’ he said, and pushed himself up from the table.

I doubled and stretched an elastic band around the cards and thwapped them twice against an open palm, signalling my readiness to begin the afternoon. Weed, not yet willing to relinquish the leisure of his rest, reacted instead with feigned and sudden snoring. Burney tried the same but choked on the effort, and fell into a fit of coughing. Straining, he pulled himself into an upright position, his too-tight and stained happy-face t-shirt twisted and hiked up over his belly. He grunted under the effort to stand, and then he belched.

‘Time to go home Smalley?’ he said.

Smalley put a finger to his lips and pointed to the prone body of Weed beneath the tree. Unsure of the reason but willing to play along, Burney put a finger to his own lips and squinted, a quiet tire-hissing shhh whispering from him as he stalked away. Weed, seeming now to have fallen into the rhythm of actual snoring, held fast to the pretence of sleep.

Smalley looked at me and motioned towards the coiled garden hose by the steps. We exchanged smiles of comprehension and in seconds I returned with the hose, passing the nozzle to Smalley's open and waiting hand.

'I don't know what's worse,' Smalley said, standing atop the picnic table with the hose pointed down at the unsuspecting and vulnerable Weed, 'the bad acting or the stink.'

The snoring stopped and Weed opened his eyes.

'At least we can do something about the stink,' Smalley said and squeezed the nozzle's handle.

The water had already soaked Weed before he could react. Uselessly, he clambered to his feet and ran in desperate circles like a dog leashed to a tree, barking his plea for Smalley to stop. Off to the side, Burney clapped his approval and laughed almost uncontrollably. Overcome, he skipped across the lawn and flung himself into the stream of rushing water, face on, hands over his head and his mouth open wide.

'Me too,' he said. 'Me too.'

I was on the concrete steps by the house leaning on the guardrail when Weed and the mimicking Burney ran in my direction, bringing with them the streaming garden-hose shower. There was nowhere to turn and soon I was in the line of fire, soaked in seconds. Smalley relinquished then, and for a moment I considered an unspoken alliance with the

other two, a backyard mutiny, seizing and turning the hose on our leader. But even before I could decide against it, Smalley had turned the nozzle on himself and squeezed. We all laughed our different decibels of meaning and after, wiping the water from his face, Smalley looked at us and said, 'We've all got a little dirt under our nails.'

The day's most intense heat had passed now and I'd been here at the site of the old station house for more than five hours, separating the debris into heaps of salvageable lumber, valuable metal and garbage for the dump. The sun was well beyond its highest point, almost on its way down, but I was still hot and my throat was caked dry from breathing in the different kinds of dust that settle on and within the many layers of a torn-down building. Wood dust and metal dust and dust from the earth beneath the rubble. Dust from the many years of labour buried below, but once within, the now collapsed and unrecognizable walls of Beaverton's station house. Tired, I climbed into the cab of the truck whose bed now held an actual tonne of the site's material waste. I turned the still-inserted key and the vents blew stale and hot air in my face. Finding a half-filled bottle of warm water, I uncapped and drenched my throat with it. Satisfied, I pulled my head through the shirt that had been baking on the truck's hood all afternoon, and there was a familiar comfort in its warmth.

On my way home, I took the path that wound down from the track and cut through the wall of trees that lined Ethel Park Drive. The path was dark brown and still soft and green at its sides, protected by the shade of the high-reaching trees and safe from the drying faculties of the sun. Through to the road, I looked first to the south end and noticed Smalley's landscaping truck a few streets away, stopped in front of the park's railway crossing. Weed and Burney appeared from behind the truck and waved back to

Smalley as he pulled away. I waved but Smalley didn't see me, and neither did Burney or Weed. From the other direction, west from the lake, I noticed two boys walking up Victoria street. Weed and Burney seemed to be waiting for them by the tracks. I had seen them both before, and from here, one looked like that boy who had told Smalley he hadn't skipped school just to listen to some stupid garbage man play teacher. I raised my hand again to Burney and Weed, but they still did not see me. I turned then, and walked north to the end of the park where I knew my wife, Jade, and my son, John, were waiting for me in our new home.

Weed and Burney had worked with Smalley all afternoon, mowing and raking and watering the three lawns that he had slated for every Sunday. I know this because I had spent many Sunday afternoons doing the same.

Yet on this Sunday, after they had finished their regular routine and were on their way back into town, Smalley added one more task. Driving passed my new home at the north end of the park, he stopped and backed into the driveway. Weed climbed out of the truck first and headed for the assortment of cardboard boxes at the driveway's end, which he noticed as they were pulling up. Burney jumped down from the truck and followed him. Smalley did not seem concerned with their transitional waywardness as he normally would have. Jade and our son, John, were just then walking down the stone path of our home, and Smalley was going to meet them.

Jade's hair was dark, short and practical as I had always known it to be, and although she seemed plain from a distance, up close her blue and unyielding eyes erased any thoughts of that plainness. Her paint-flecked denim shorts fit loosely, the remnants of a pair of my old jeans that she had cut the legs off of. Her t-shirt was also mine, oversized

but comfortable-looking. She fanned herself with it, pinching and then pulling and releasing the front in a rapid motion, the way she always did. There was a towel draped over one of her shoulders, and a small duffel bag hung from the other, with a frisbee and suntan lotion jutting from the top of it. John lunged across the lawn, pumping a water-winged arm like a piston by his head.

‘Chugga chugga, chugga chugga,’ he called out.

‘Some hot though, isn’t it?’ Jade said.

‘Terrible,’ Smalley said. ‘John’s been at the station house all afternoon.’

‘Mm-hmn,’ she said. ‘Terrible how they had to tear that down.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘There was no need for a crew there anymore, and after they closed it down, a bunch of boys started breaking in and wrecking the place. Whoever was in charge must not have wanted the hassle.’

‘Boys,’ she says, averting her attention to John who was now circling the cardboard boxes that Weed was still inspecting. Burney had one of the boxes on his head, crouched and holding on to John’s shirt, a railcar to the boy’s chugging engine.

‘Hey!’ Smalley said. ‘Get your noses out of there and start cutting this lawn.’

Weed froze like an animal halted in the middle of his foraging by the sound of danger. John’s train halted too, and recognizing the seriousness in Smalley’s voice from when I my own voice sounded that way, he made the effort to run towards the house. But Burney, with the box on his head and no engine now to lead him, could not hear Smalley, nor could he see what was in front of him, and so he crashed into the pile of boxes and fell clumsily to the ground. After picking himself up, unaware as to why everyone was laughing, Burney began to laugh as well.

Moments later, Weed and Burney lifted the lawnmowers and the trimmers and the rakes and the edging spades down from the trailer and went about cutting as if it were a regular part of their Sunday afternoon routine, neither questioning nor complaining. Not even aware really that they were involved in extra work.

‘How do you like your new house John?’ Smalley said, patting the boy’s head.

‘I like it good Smalley,’ said John, slapping Smalley’s leg in return. ‘How do you like it?’

‘Just fine,’ Smalley said, and laughed.

‘It’s my birthday today,’ the boy said, thrusting a finger into his chest and looking up.

‘Well, happy birthday, John,’ Smalley said. He took the boy’s small hand in his own and they shook as though there were no age or height difference between them.

‘What are you now, twenty?’ Smalley said.

John laughed like the seven-year-old he was, and asked Smalley if he would like a ride on his train, and if he did, he’d better hurry up because it was leaving right then.

Jade thanked Smalley and waved to him as she and John walked across our lawn to the road and down towards the lake. ‘Is this train lakebound?’ she asked.

‘Chugga chugga. Chugga chugga,’ John said, which meant yes.

And as she took the boy’s outstretched hand in hers, it was as though two railcars had been lined up on the track and linked by a crosswork of chains.

It was the unmarkable start of evening now and although the sun had lost almost all of its intensity, the residual heat of the day still warmed those who inhabited the outside air. The smell in many places was that of the blossoming lilac trees but I knew,

although too close to smell it myself, that an odour came off of me more like the fish being caught by the idle fishermen down by the pier. The lingering effects of Burney's skunk, the morning hours of clearing out the trailer home garbage bin, and the hot July grime of all those afternoon hours spent at the station house, now stick to me in a syrupy sweat of long and heavy labour.

I was at the end of my day and at the end of my walk home, opposite, at least in physical direction, to my early morning start more than twelve hours ago. My son John was running in circles on the small, freshly cut lawn of our new home. His arms were spread wide and his head was down. My wife Jade sat on the steps watching him. Their towels and bathing suits were draped over the clothesline, and seeing them, I wanted to run down to the lake myself, plunge in and clean myself of the day.

Jade raised her hand when she saw me approaching, but John did not notice me. I could hear the whining roar of his human airplane, swooping low and rising again with seeming purpose and navigated patterns of flight. I lowered my own head and spread my arms in emulation, roaring towards him in my own awkward adult way. As we collided, my outstretched wings lifted him from the ground and deposited him beside Jade on the steps. He was giddy with intensely silent laughter, almost forgetting to breathe. He scrunched his nose and waved his hand back and forth in front of it. I feigned offence, threw him over my shoulder and marched through the door of our new home. Inside, I released him to the floor and headed straight for the shower, and when I was finished I went to our bedroom, something my wife and I had never had alone, and collapsed dramatically onto the bed. John had followed me the whole way, flying his human airplane into the bathroom while I showered, and now I felt the weight of his little body

bounce on the bed beside me, mimicking my dramatic collapse. Bored almost instantly, he leaped from the bed and yanked my hand in a plea for me to rise. Eventually, I conceded, and he pulled me into the living room to show me the train set he woke to this morning.

Wearing the old black-and-white striped engineer's cap I kept on our dresser, John pointed the train-set's handheld throttle at the miniature locomotive, and calling out 'All abooooard,' he sent the train into a surprisingly realistic chugging motion around the track. He was mesmerized and I found myself wanting him to offer the throttle to me so that I might take my turn controlling the train.

Later, we ate our dinner of hotdogs and french-fries, John's birthday request, and after the cake and candles I gave John a gift I had taken from the site of the old station house earlier in the afternoon. It was a gold rail spike with the words, Thirty Years, and the letters, CNR, etched into one of its sides. I told him if he put the spike-end to the ground and rests his ear against the blunt end, he would be able to hear the coming of distant trains. Almost as instantly as I said this, he was out the door and leaping from the steps to the lawn. He lowered his ear to the ground then, testing the method.

'I can hear it,' he said. 'I can hear it. One's coming. One's coming.'

In a few brief moments, a train rumbled by, and John's wildly dancing eyes told me that he was still young enough to believe in the magic his father could conjure, still young enough that he did not feel the need to explain the wonder of it, or the pride he took in being able to foretell the coming of a train.

It was dusk now, and the sun began its rust-coloured descent into the lake, dropping behind the homes and the cottages and the mature, high-reaching trees of

Morrison Avenue, the lakeshore road that spanned the west side of Ethel Park and ended at the harbour. And because I was on the other side of the harbour then, up in the fairgrounds with Jade and our son, John, waiting for the fireworks to begin, I came to know what happened in the park only after it happened. And although many of the details might be imagined, as they are in the retelling of any story, what went on was true.

Weed and Burney and two other not yet men of nineteen met at the railway crossing at the south-east end of the park and walked to the site of the torn-down station house, as planned. Weed had more of his father's whiskey, and they all took turns taking cowboy swigs and wiping their mouths with their sleeves.

'There won't be no one there,' Weed said. 'I'll gar'ntee they're at them fireworks.'

'And hower you supposed to know?'

'I just do, is all. And if they're not, we'll see their lights on, and we'll come back another night.'

'We'll come back another night,' Burney said.

Weed picked up a piece of slag rock and hurled it at the pile of debris I had been clearing all afternoon. The rock hit an already broken window at the base of the remaining pile, and a trill of breaking glass echoed behind him. The other two boys threw rocks of their own and each clanged loudly off different pieces of bent and twisted metal. Burney took his own rock and threw it with everything he had, but missed the pile completely, the rock landing soundlessly in the dusty gravel beside. The other boys were already running down the path and through the trees out to the street, their shadows cast long and thin behind them.

A raccoon scuttled out from the bush just then and stopped at a barrel near the pile, one of the barrels that the railway men used to light things in for warmth. Standing on its hind legs and clawing the barrel's rusty side, the raccoon seemed to mistake the barrel for a garbage can of potential food. With his hands over his head and crouching, Burney whispered, 'I got'm, I got'm this time,' but then he tripped on a piece of wood and through the thin fabric of his pants, he broke the skin on both his knees. The sound of Burney falling caused the raccoon to scurry off down the track and east into the field that spanned the half mile or so to the parking lot of the Valu-mart, the site of the day's early morning work. Checking his knees every so often, Burney made his awkward way down the path and through the trees to the street.

The other boys were only a minute or so ahead, but it would be some time before Burney caught up with them, too dark now to see them on the road as a means of navigation, and slowed by the burning skin on his knees. He would stop along the way at the sound of animals in the ditches and trees, and he would forget which street the house was on, walking down each one as he passed. He would know for certain he was at the right place only when he finally reached the small brick bungalow at the north end of the park, and saw beneath the streetlight the pile of cardboard boxes he had tripped over earlier in the day, and recognized the sign at the road's edge that read, Smalley's Haulage & Landscaping.

Above the streets of the park, the sky was suddenly black and all the shadows were gone. Most of the houses along the way were quiet and dark. Occasionally, a dog barked as the boys walked by, and across the town the first of the fireworks cracked and thundered and whistled in the distance.

At dusk, I had gone outside and gathered the lawn chairs and Jade carried the rolled blanket we would lie on. We walked with our free hands together. John ran ahead a short distance and then back, ahead and then back, and he continued this the whole way to the fairgrounds. Jade and I walked behind and smiled at his excitement. When we arrived, John ran ahead once more, jumped and as he landed, pointed to the spot he wanted to claim for the evening.

‘Here!’ he said, as though discovering the spot of a buried treasure.

As we unfolded the blanket and the chairs, I tried to tell Jade about the stockboy from this morning and Weed’s silent response.

‘So when he tried to hurl the box into the trailer,’ I said, ‘it spilled all over the place, and then the packer backfired and he saw us and Weed was back there with his pants down, waggin his bare ass at him, and Burney was doing the same, and Smalley and I started to laugh and—’

‘D’you go back to help him?’ Jade said.

The muscles above my eyes clenched and furrowed downwards.

‘No,’ I said. ‘We didn’t go back.’

‘Oh,’ she said.

‘Served him right,’ I said.

And again, she said, ‘Oh.’

We were both quiet then, and later she told me how nice it was of Smalley to cut our lawn that afternoon.

‘There were those two boys with him, though,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I like them.’

‘Weed and Burney,’ I said, plucking strands of grass and mindlessly making a small pile of them on our blanket. Feeling the anger in my face, I heard my own voice in my head.

‘Why don’t you like them?’ I thought. ‘Because they’re garbage men? That’s what I am you know, or did you forget? That’s all I am, a stupid fucken garbage man. But not so stupid. Not so stupid that I was unable to buy us that house, or did you forget that too?’

Of course, I said none of this out loud, but in the moment I wished I had.

Jade’s attention shifted to John who was dancing wildly around us now, writing his name in fire with the sparkler I had lit for him when we first arrived. She was angry with me for having given it to him, and even after I assured her that it was not a firecracker and that it wouldn’t hurt him, she didn’t concede. I was silent. She took the sparkler from John and slapped his hand for not listening. He plopped down beside me and crossed his arms. And he did not cry.

I sat there and wondered why it was so difficult sometimes to explain what I really meant, especially to Jade, when everything made such articulate sense in my head. How could she not understand how funny that stockboy story was, or the satisfaction we felt in driving away? Why would she ask if I went back to help? Why would I go back to help?

The moment for retelling the moment now gone, I was reminded of the first conversation I had had with Smalley seven years ago, the day he hired me for the second time. The first time he hired me I was a fifteen-year-old on suspension looking for cigarette money. I wondered now why he didn’t speak to me then the way he spoke to me

three years later, when I walked into the Little Brown Jug only days after being back in Beaverton. He was in his regular booth eating breakfast, and there was a book face-down beside his plate. At the counter, I asked for a coffee, secretly unsure whether I had enough money to pay for it.

Smalley knew where I had been those three years and that I had a child coming. He knew that I was living with Jade on her meagre savings in an apartment we wouldn't be able to afford in two months if I didn't have a job. And he knew that it was likely no one else in town would hire an arrogant kid who had been arrested and sent to juvenile detention for those five break-ins on Lakeland Crescent. He knew all of this, but still called me over to his table and ordered me breakfast.

'Sit down, son,' he said. 'You look hungry.'

I told him I was fine but then I inhaled the food when it arrived.

'Yer the garbage man I worked for two years ago,' I said. 'Smalley.'

He reached across the table, removed my hat, and placed it on the seat beside him.

'We're inside,' he said. 'Don't ever wear a hat inside.'

Normally, a hand would never have come close to touching me before I knocked it out of the way, let alone close enough to take my hat. And normally, I would have told the owner of the hand that I would wear my hat anywhere I damn well please. But I didn't say that then, and in fact I did not say anything.

'It wasn't two years ago,' Smalley said. 'It was three. And technically you didn't really *work* for me then. But you will from now on.'

And then after telling me to be there at the Little Brown Jug for five the next morning, he told me something I did not understand at the time. But I listened, and since then, somehow I have changed.

‘There are moments that can only be appreciated by those who live them,’ he said. ‘There is no point in trying to explain what happened to someone who wasn’t there. It doesn’t exist for them. Just remember it, so that maybe you can understand.’

Weed and the other two boys were now in the driveway of the house at the north end of the park. They were silent and crouching when they arrived, and their eyes widened when Weed pointed to the pile of boxes at the side of the road, evidence that the owners had just moved in and, to them, the promise of potential goods. The house was in darkness and the front door was unlocked, almost welcoming them in. Before entering, Weed drew once more on his Export ‘A’ cigarette, and flicked it to the bottom of the steps, leaving it to burn down to the filter. Inside, one of the other boys led the way through the rooms with a dim flashlight. The home was modest home in size and in what it held, and soon the boys found there was very little worth stealing at all.

‘I could’uh swore there’d be good stuff in here to take,’ Weed said. ‘You should’uh seen the guns on the woman who owns it.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ said one of the other boys. ‘They ain’t even got a T.V., for fucksake.’

The other boy had discovered the train-set in another room, and called the other two in. There, Weed found the gold rail spike that lay on a table by the door.

‘Heh heh. We’ve struck it rich,’ Weed said, holding the spike up for the other boys to see. ‘Look’uh this. It’s pure fucken gold.’

‘And hower you supposed to know?’

‘Feel it,’ Weed said. ‘Feel the weight of it.’

Weed demonstrated his method of authenticating gold, lowering and lifting the spike in his hand as though jiggling for fish.

‘See,’ he said and the other two boys took their turns weighing the spike.

Still in darkness, they went through the house once more, taking a necklace from the bedroom and a six-pack of beer from the fridge. Returning to the room he had found the rail spike in, Weed donned the engineer’s hat and flicked the train-set on.

‘Choo, choo,’ he said and the other boys laughed.

Taking turns with the controller, they finished the whiskey Weed had brought and drowned their throats with the stolen beer.

‘Shhht,’ whispered Weed. ‘I hear something.’

There was the sound of someone ascending the steps outside and a hand on the door. ‘Fuck. They’re home,’ whispered one of the other boys.

‘Get down,’ said the other boy.

Two of them clambered behind the chesterfield, and Weed crawled beneath the table. The door opened and the boys held their breath.

‘Weed,’ came the whisper from the door. ‘Weed are you there?’

‘Jesus,’ one of the boys said under his breath. ‘He never said he knew the fucken owner.’

‘Weed. Where are you guys?’ came the voice again.

‘Burney. Is that you?’ said Weed, crawling out from under the table.

The boy with the flashlight stood up and pointed it in the direction of the door, lighting up Burney's face.

'Ya scared us near to death, Burney,' Weed said.

'I hurt my knees,' Burney said, and showed Weed the blood on his hands. 'See.'

'Well don't go touching anything in here,' Weed said.

'Let's go,' said one of the other boys. 'Let's go before they really come home.'

Across town, the fireworks were in their finale. When the boys left the house, they could see and hear the sky light up with the rapidly cracking and streaming showers of light. They stood and watched, and in seconds, there was silence again and darkness.

'It's finished,' Weed said. 'Let's go.'

'It's finished,' Burney said.

Weed and the other two boys, with Burney in tow, ran down towards the lake. And the night train rumbled across the tracks behind them.

It was already warm on this Monday morning, even with the sun still below the earth. The bell above the door rang as I entered The Little Brown Jug, and my coffee was waiting for me on the counter. I felt drained. I hadn't slept much of the night, knowing that someone had broken into my home.

'Bull!'

I turned and saw Weed pulling himself out of our regular booth. Burney was with him.

'Look'uh this,' Weed said, smiling and exposing his badly stained teeth. 'It's pure gold,' he said. 'I found it last night.'

Weed had the gold rail spike in his hand, the one I had taken from the station house yesterday and given to my son. Burney was standing on the other side of me, unclean as usual, his pants torn at the knees and dark with dried blood. He showed me his hands and they were the same.

‘I hurt my knees,’ he said.

I said nothing. Now the butt of the Export ‘A’ I saw this morning at the bottom of my steps made sense, and the blood I found on my door.

‘What do you think it’s worth, Bull?’ Weed said. ‘Hunnerd, two hunnerd bucks?’

The bell above the door rang, and Smalley walked in.

‘What do you think what’s worth,’ he said.

‘This,’ said Weed and showed him the spike.

Smalley looked at him. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘I found it last night, Smalley,’ said Weed. ‘Why? What’s wrong?’

‘It doesn’t belong to you,’ I said and looked at Smalley. I took the spike from Weed. ‘See,’ I said, pointing to the lettering on its sides. ‘And it’s not gold. It’s brass,’ I said. ‘It’s not worth anything, except maybe to the man it was meant for.’

Late last night, the trap I had set in the field by the Valu-mart snapped shut, clenching in its metal jaws the leg of an unsuspecting raccoon. No one could hear it screaming. Its heart raced and raced until it finally stopped. When I found it later this morning, the animal’s free paw was outstretched and touching one of the melons the stockboy had left there. There were claw marks scored deep into the fruit’s side. The pale green flesh of the melon was on the raccoon’s paw and smeared into its chin, and into the fur and the whiskers about the animal’s snarling and frozen lips.

Fisher—

As I open my eyes, I can remember being awake at this hour only three times in the twenty five years of my life. Two years ago at a New Year's Eve party I stayed long into the night which became the morning of the first day of the new year and at four o'clock, as though it were some kind of official ending hour, we all dispersed, riding the elevator down and spilling into the street, resolutions swirling about in the routine of drunken banter. I remember flopping an arm around the shoulders of a woman I'd just met and vowing to her as I took the party hat from her head and thrust it high into the air, that *this* would be the year I would finish the one-act play I hadn't even started and that I would surely land the leading role, 'O brave new year!', in this summer's Shakespeare-in-the-Park production of *The Tempest*.

A taxi passing by interpreted my raised hat and proclamations as gestures of hailing and so kissing my cheek and undoing my arm from her neck, the woman whose name I cannot remember now climbed into the back seat and left me wavering in the

street, unsteady and alone. Even as the taxi drove away I stumbled forward, calling after it, slurring versions of my most recent promises.

‘I will!’ I said. ‘I have such stuff to be made on. That’s what my, that’s what my grandfather said.’ I put a finger in the air. ‘And he is a fisherman, he can predict things.’

There was a couple on the sidewalk coming toward me and had I been more aware in that moment I might have seen the woman nudge the man who was calling up to someone hanging over a balcony and I might have heard her comment about my drunkenness and the number of weirdoes around lately. But I was caught up with the film in my own head and the sound of my grandfather’s voice as I remembered it from my youth. I pointed at the couple as they crossed the street and projected my voice as though from a stage. ‘He said I was a marvel. Marvelous Gordon. Marvelous prosperous Prospero.’

A few days later, outside of the Horseshoe on Queen Street West, I bumped into the woman I had made my resolutions to. She asked how I was and whether I had made it home alright and then, grinning, she asked if I’d been discovered yet. Embarrassed, I smiled and, trying to think of something clever to say in return, I performed a sigh and then with my best voice of melancholy I intoned an impromptu rhyme. ‘In the morning young I boarded the Blue Line bus, then all alone on Yonge I clung to the maybe image of us.’

With one leg back I bowed and extended a rolling hand towards her. She smiled, clapped her mittened hands and feigned the voice of a lauding critic as she walked past me and on down the street, calling casually over her shoulder as she faded into the swiftly

flowing current of the sidewalk crowd. 'Fabulous Gordon Fisher captures the subtle solitude of the suffering lonely man,' she said.

I wanted to run after her then, my critic, this woman who had remembered my name. I wanted to grab her hand and as though in a big screen scene of anticipated love, spin her into to me so that our eyes would lock and then, her face in my hands, pull her mouth to mine. But what I wanted more was to tell her in my plain voice, while she held me and repeated my name consolingly, about how when she left me that night I had walked for over an hour and then passed out on a bench all alone, unable to remember which way was home until the aching sun rose above the buildings of the city. I wanted to tell her how the darkness that night and the ice and the cold had reminded me of a story that had haunted me my whole life. And how in a moment of seeming sobriety I had slapped my own face and promised out loud to make the return finally, to make it back to see my grandfather before it was too late. And when I was finished and wiping my eyes I wanted to laugh with her about how the early-risers of the year's first morning, eager with their own resolutions, had dropped their self-serving coins into the party hat I had taken from her, mistaking me for one of the homeless.

But she was gone and as I lie here I'm drawn in thought to the dreams of her I've just waken from. And then sighing, I think more to the immediate, to the feelings of emptiness I had last night when a group of us were out after rehearsal drinking martinis and imported beer, monologuing our plans for the weekend. Most of us were dressed in the fashionable shades of black and grey and each of the women wore richly coloured scarves like wine and indigo and mustard.

‘It’s a decorator’s trick,’ one of them told me. ‘Every room needs a splash of colour.’ I nodded, pretending to understand the comparison between herself and a room. Sensing my confusion, she added, ‘Besides, you can tell so much about people by the colours they wear.’

What she said made me think of the reversible hunter’s hat my grandfather gave me one Christmas, the kind with the peak and the ear flaps and the camouflage green cover you could fold down to expose the bright orange cap beneath. I used to wear his for the adventures I would make up and play out within the snow forts he always helped me build or the tree house with the rope ladder that had been there since my father was a child. I kept the hat on a shelf in my closet now, thinking that I might need it for a role or that it might come into fashion the way cowboy boots or work socks had in recent years. I had never had an occasion to wear it but I wonder, had I been wearing it that night after rehearsal, what its colours would have said about me.

When it was my turn, I narrated the planned trip up north. I told them it was a homecoming of sorts but I edited out the real reason for going and tried to pass the trip off as something more existential, something which I felt would better fit the tenor of the crowd.

‘It will be an expedition into my past,’ I said in that artificial voice which I hated the sound of. ‘A reconnection of the self through landscape, an understanding of who I am now by revisiting where I once was. And in the end I’m hoping it will be a journey rich with fodder for my play.’

‘Oh, yes yes yes,’ one of the women said. ‘I heard about that indie film festival they’re having up in the north end. Oh, where is it? You know, up near Lastman’s Square.’

‘I heard about that too,’ I said. ‘But I’m headed *farther* north than that. I’m going to Beaverton.’

‘Beaverton,’ she said and put a finger to her chin. She looked away from the table and up. ‘Beaverton.’

Before I had a chance to explain, one of the men who had obviously heard of the town jumped in. He twisted his mouth and with a country accent, said, ‘What the hell fer? There’s nothing way up there but cows n’ shit.’

We all laughed, but only in gesture, each of us showing with our sophisticated city smiles that the intentional pun was lost on no one.

I am up now and dressed and anxious about going. When I take my suede winter jacket from the closet and my matching winter gloves I think about bringing the hunter’s hat along as some kind of talisman to my past. I put it on and although I am alone I feel silly and embarrassed, an imposter of the man I sometimes imagined myself to be. I return the hat to the shelf and leave.

By the time the office bound people surface from within the comfort of their yardless apartments and duplex homes, the sidewalk snowplow will have cleared the way and salted the ice. By the time the afternoon sun fills the sky, those within the buildings of business or on the stretch of subway that climbs above ground will look to the warmth beyond their windows and forget temporarily that it’s winter, mistaking the sun for the spring they all long for. This will be easy to do and almost comforting because the snow

is not as abundant in this place as it is in the country. It doesn't seem to stay as long and when it does it becomes something other than snow, something grey and filmy and unattractive, like the smoke that's spit from the tops of buildings or the tongues of ruminating cows. There aren't as many opportunities, I think, for winter pictures here.

The city street is empty. The sun is yet to rise and it is cold. Already I am pulling the collar of my suede jacket up around my ears and blowing into my gloves. I've been outside for less than a minute. It is just beyond four in the morning now and I don't know the last time I had to brush snow from a windshield and scrape away the ice. There is no need to own a car in the city. I worry what the locals will think when I arrive in a brand new Suburban, so different in purpose and appearance from the half-tonne pickups I remember seeing in Beaverton when I was young. It won't matter that it's rented and it won't matter that because it is the beginning of March break it is the only vehicle I could get on such short notice. The people there won't be able to see the circumstances surrounding my arrival and I won't be able to explain them. Inside the vehicle, it is not long before I am warm again and protected from the cold.

Coming from the southwest end of the city, near the lake but not by it, the drive home to Beaverton will take over an hour. I don't know this because I've made the trip often. In fact, I've never made it alone and it's been more than fifteen years since I've made it at all. I only know this from looking at the map of Ontario left behind in the dash of the Suburban and a rough calculation of the kilometres I've made. Thinking about it now, it's strange that I say home since I've never even lived there.

The stack of photo albums, now in the passenger seat beside me, arrived at my door two days ago, wrapped in the same disposable placemats my grandfather used to

keep under the sink for cleaning fish. Fastened to the front of the package was a manila envelope with my name and address typed neatly on a law-firm embossed label. Beneath the label was my name again and a date, drawn onto the front of the package in a slanted, sweeping hand. The date was two years old. Until the arrival of those photo albums, the stories my grandfather told me as a young boy had become distant memories, having fallen away in the manner a shining silver lure descends in water, tied to line sliding freely between a fisherman's fingers, the flash of the lure growing dimmer the farther it sinks away until some unmarkable depth swallows it whole. Removed from sight and almost weightless, the lure, like the stories, would be forgotten completely were it not for the fisherman's conscious decision to reel the line in periodically and check the sharpness of the hooks and the security of the knot.

As I begin the drive, I switch the radio on to the CBC and there is someone reading a short story about a man who finds an engraved wooden box full of forgotten love letters while cleaning out his basement for a yard sale. He is a drama teacher from the East coast living in Toronto. It is not clear if he has a family here or if there's someone waiting for him back home. The man opens one of the letters and as he reads it, the story shifts back twenty years to a snowed-in cottage on an icy shore of an inland Eastern lake. At a stoplight, I flip open one of the albums beside me. There is a picture of my grandfather and two of his friends standing with their arms crossed in front of a fish hut with a line of lake trout and whitefish at their feet.

When I exit the 404 and drive east along Davis Drive, I begin to notice the accumulation of the season and I begin to recognize the faded images of country from my childhood. The snowmobiles surfing the snowdrift waves of the ditches that skirt the

road. The snowmen rolled and stacked and stuck with sticks in front yards still decorated for Christmas. The evergreens whose white branches are heavy and sagging under the weight of winter armour. And, just as noticeable, the absence of skyrise and smog.

The space becomes increasingly more rural as my distance from the city grows. Fewer homes and farther reaches of fields and much less traffic, to the point of being alone often on the road and more trucks than cars when they do pass slowly by. And they are the kinds of trucks driven by quiet tired men who transport fill and pull wagons of hay, the kinds of country vehicles whose rust and unclean windshields are the scars of unspoken pride. And the men are the kinds of men who always rest an arm on the window ledge of the cabs of their trucks, faintly lifting a hand as they pass one another on the road. No one waves to me.

And the darkness of the morning is much darker here in the absence of electric light. The digital numbers on the car radio glow and the new time is five thirty. The story on the radio ends and the three-note noise of a transitional jingle jolts me from my daydream. As I drive into town past a row of brick homes there is one that exhales with its smoking chimney the comfort of a rural farmhouse. I wonder as I pass if there is a man inside pulling on his snowmobile suit and his helmet in the routine of a waking ice fisherman, or if there is a woman pulling on layers of clothes to shield herself from the cold as she walks the ten minutes down to the harbour where every morning she opens Jigger's Restaurant, the coffee shop and meeting place for the groups of men who share the same small villages of ice huts two and three and six miles from shore. And then I wonder if there's a young boy inside the brick home who has already been awake for an hour, the first day of his March break, waiting with Christmas morning excitement for the

snowmobile ride far out onto the lake, playing over and over in his head the possibility of watching his father land a large lake trout, or even more, landing one himself. But it is really me that I imagine as that boy on my own March break, waking to my grandfather's winter ritual, having never been allowed to accompany him to the mid-lake distance of his hut. Always too young, always one year away from being 'old enough'.

'Please, can I come?' I asked my grandfather that last break we spent in Beaverton. When he looked to my father I looked with him and asked, 'Can I come, dad? Please?'

My father turned, like my grandfather had to him, and looked at my mother who was lifting our bags from the car. He looked back at me and said, 'Next year Gordon.' When I argued that that is what he had said last year he told me, 'Yes, but the ice is not as good this year. Your grandpa said there are a lot of pressure cracks. And your mother would worry too much if we were all out there. You stay with her. Next year you can come.'

From my room in our house in the city, I could hear my parents arguing the night before we left that year.

'I'm not going up there,' my mother said. 'You spend the whole week out on that lake with him, and Gordon and I are left behind in that stinking old house he never cleans. It's not fair.'

'What do you want me to do?' my father said. 'He doesn't have anyone there. He looks forward to us coming.'

'He looks forward to you and Gordon coming,' my mother said. 'There's nothing for me to do.'

‘He has no one there,’ my father said. ‘It’s my home. And we’re going.’

There was the muffled sound of my mother crying and I heard the bathroom door shut coldly. A few minutes later I heard their voices again but my mother’s was softer than before.

‘Do you know what I saw him do yesterday?’ she said. ‘He poured an inch of milk into a tumbler and threw his head back to swallow it. When I asked him what he was doing, he said, I’m drinking like grandpa does.’ I could hear her crying again.

‘He’s a boy,’ my father said. ‘Don’t be so dramatic.’

I don’t remember either of them saying a word to each other the next day on the northbound drive to Beaverton. When we arrived my grandfather was outside and the snowmobile was already running. He seemed large against my eight-year-old smallness. Except for the bit of grey creeping in by his ears, his thick wavy hair was still its original dark brown but his beard was completely silver.

‘I could never wear gold,’ he would joke, stroking the hair on his face.

When we exited the car he turned the snowmobile off and slapped my father on the back as he always did, said hello to my mother and then lifted me, shaking and squeezing me and growling like the bear he’d shot in one of his stories I never questioned the truth of. I was dizzy and laughing when he set me down and as I think about it now I can remember the cold musty smell of his snowmobile suit.

‘There are very few days for me,’ he said, stepping back with a finger in the air, ‘that the sun rises before the fish.’ He mimed the halted action of a jigging stick in his hand and pretended to reel in invisible line, hand over hand. He ruffled my hair and laughed until he coughed. Except when he had to wait for us or for Kim or for some one

else he had promised to take fishing, my grandfather was in his fish hut every morning before the sun rose.

My mother busied herself emptying the car and my father grabbed his snowmobile suit from the backseat. As he dressed in the driveway, we had the conversation about me coming with them out onto the lake.

‘You stay with your mother,’ was what my had father said. ‘Next year you can come.’

And then my grandfather pulled the ripcord of the snowmobile and they said goodbye, but the ‘goodbye’ was difficult to hear from behind their helmets and over the sound of the revving engine. Straddling the snowmobile’s seat, my father held an empty minnow bucket in one hand and clutched the tow-bar at the back with the other to ensure that he wouldn’t be thrown from the machine as they bumped over the tree-lined trail on the ice. My grandfather climbed on, squeezed the handle and the snowmobile whined and sped off harbour-bound, coughing clumps of fresh snow behind it and marking the white ground with its intricate crisscross track.

I imagined them at the harbour where they’d fill the bucket with water and minnows. The man selling the minnows would ask my grandfather why he was so late today and my grandfather would slap my father on the back again and say his son was in town and my grandfather would laugh and make a joke about how people from the city must be allergic to the dawn because they never seemed to wake up before the sun rises. I would put myself there at the harbour and imagine the man with the minnows patting me on my helmeted head and asking me if I knew the secret to calling the lake trout in. I would nod and mime the act of jigging like my grandfather. They would all laugh and

then my father and I and my grandfather would ride the three miles out to Thorah Island together, and then the three miles beyond.

‘Out to where the lake trout wait,’ my grandfather would say, grinning and breaking into an Irish jig, ‘for the dance of my silver spoon.’

I remember helping my mother carry the bags into the house once my father and grandfather were gone. After, she made me breakfast and then cleaned the kitchen for the first hour we were there, uttering comments of disgust under her breath. Thinking about it now, the only reason I can envision to justify why my mother even agreed to come on those trips to Beaverton was that on some level, she must have felt sorry for my grandfather. Sorry that I spent so much time with her parents who lived only minutes away from us in the city and sorry that I saw him only once a year. Sorry that he lived all alone in that empty house and sorry that he was too afraid or too unwilling to leave the town he had lived his whole life in, even for a day or an afternoon to come and visit his only son and grandson.

After my father died, my mother said she would never to go back to Beaverton again. She blamed the place for his death. And so when I was eight years old, I lost the two men I looked up to the most. Because she never returned to Beaverton, neither did I, even after I could have driven myself. I suppose not doing something can become just as much a habit as doing something, and equally difficult to break. And so now, some seventeen years later and well into my own independence, I have lost my grandfather again. Yet I have not really lost him this time because I did not make the effort to bring him back into my life the way I had promised myself I would. I kept putting it off and putting it off until finally making the return had become something like a nagging chore

that I never got to, and I was very capable of justifying to myself why I should not do it. A few days ago when I told my mother I was making this trip, the only thing she said was that she wished my father was alive to go with me.

While my mother cleaned the kitchen during that last visit to Beaverton, I sat in the living room in my grandfather's chair, dwarfed by its soft bulkiness. I was already waiting for him and my father to return even though they probably would not be back until late that night. I took the whetstone that always sat on the table by the chair and sharpened the hooks of the lure my grandfather had given me for Christmas, emulating the slow methodical pattern I'd seen him use. After checking the hooks I put my lure away and lifted the newspaper, holding the Beaverton Express at arms' length the way my grandfather did at night sometimes after supper. Then I opened the tin of Players tobacco that sat beside the whetstone and tried to roll a cigarette. I licked the paper the way I'd seen him do and spread the tobacco evenly down the middle, but when I tried the rolling part I pulled the ends too hard and the cigarette tore in two, spilling the guts of it on the arm of the chair. I brushed the evidence to the hardwood floor and anxiously swept it beneath, not wanting my mother to catch me pretending again to be my grandfather. She sat in the kitchen drinking her tea and marking the stack of essays she always brought with her. When she heard the distant hum of a snowmobile, she would come into the living room and pull back the curtains of the front window just enough for her to see out.

It takes me less than a minute, once I've come down the hill, to drive across Simcoe Street and through the town. The clock on the car radio still reads five thirty and I think how fitting it is that time seems not to move here. Even in the darkness of the

morning, the place looks exactly as I remember it from my youth. I am at the bridge now but unlike most bridges it is unimpressive and almost unnoticeable. It is not suspended or far-reaching and it does not rise and fall in a grand arc that spans widely running river-water below. Instead, the bridge is flat and looks much like the continuance of road, connecting the two sides of town that are barely separated by the narrow and shallow Beaver River, unfrozen even in winter, flowing steadily under the bridge and out through the harbour's channel into the welcoming vastness of Lake Simcoe. On the south side of the bridge there is an old fashioned stone entranceway with a wooden sign across the top which has the name *The Old Mill Gateway* lettered on its surface—a monument to the long-ago grist mills of Proctor and Calder that at one time named the town. Proctor's Mill was built into the hill behind where the gateway stands, now only a spectral image in the fading memories of the town's middle aged and elderly. At the bottom of the hill and the site of the river's most treacherous water, there is a deep swirling pool. For years after the mill burned down, children and even young men and women used to toboggan on the hill, and as I drive across the bridge now I remember the story of the Mitchell boy my grandfather used to tell me.

‘He was born and raised in Beaverton and slid down that hill every winter of his young life. But that winter there was a terrible ice storm and the whole town looked covered in glass. It was impossible to stop the toboggan on the ice and took two days of searching before the bloated body of the Mitchell boy surfaced, found dumped on the shore where the river turns towards the lake.’ He would look at me then and say, ‘Never take a dare Gordon. If someone has to dare you, there's a reason he's not doing it himself, and that should be reason enough for you not to do it.’

At this hour the town is empty of people. The streetlights shine down on the sidewalk in small circles of light like those that appear on an empty stage just before or just after a play begins or ends. The only other light I can see is in the window of the Fish N' Chips Restaurant across the road. It is the place Hale told me to meet him and so I pull my Suburban in behind what I assume to be his parked and still-running pickup. Exhaust rolls from behind the truck and the ballad twang of a country song trills from within. I cross the street and the snow whines and crunches underfoot. The bell rings overhead as I enter the restaurant and I shiver. The darkness and the sounds of this early and undisturbed winter morning makes me eager for the sun.

Inside the restaurant, an Asian man stands behind the counter. Like the town, he looks exactly as I remember him from all those years ago and although my grandfather brought me here many times, I cannot remember the man's name. The walls of the restaurant are grey and spotted with old pictures in wooden frames, images of the town's long-ago streets and groups of working men. One is marked 1884, a black and white picture of the old Proctor mill with a line of stone-faced men standing in front. Another reads 1912 and is of the Beaverton train station. Three unrecognizable figures stand on the station's platform waiting to board the approaching train. There are two other pictures of the station and besides the dates and the people, which differ by twenty years each, the station looks the same. The two pictures nearest the counter are much more recent photographs. There are no dates on these but they are in colour and not nearly as weathered as the other photographs on the wall. My grandfather and the man behind the counter are in both pictures. They are standing in front of a fish hut out on the lake with a line of trout and whitefish at their feet. There is no way I notice all of these pictures at

once and in fact I remember them now more from when I saw them as a child. Like the photographs in his own albums, my grandfather would point them out every time we came to the restaurant and he always had the stories to go with them.

I stomp my impractical winter shoes on the mat by the door and shake away the cold in a dramatic ‘Burr.’ I ask the man at the counter for a coffee and pretend to read the menu he hands me.

‘You Fisher?’

I look up from the menu and turn to the voice behind me.

‘Yer late,’ says the man without looking up from his paper and his coffee.

The man I assume to be Hale throws back his head with the last gulp of coffee and squeezes his cigarette into an ashtray. ‘Don’t tell me a city guy like you went and got lost in a little place like Beavert’n.’ He stretches and grunts as he stands and drops some change onto the table. ‘Thanks Kim,’ he says and the man at the counter nods.

Hale looks to be in his early forties but it is difficult to be certain because he is unshaven and the farmer’s hat he wears hides most of his uncombed and curly hair. His workpants are wide and bulky, the outer layer to the multiple layers beneath, and they are held up by suspenders. He pulls on a fur-hooded winter jacket and leaves it undone.

‘Yer grandfather was always the first man on the ice,’ he says, pointing at the photographs on the wall.

The bell above the door rings again as he leaves. I pull my gloves back on, grab my coffee, drop some change into a cup marked ‘Tips,’ and nod to Kim. He nods in return. The hold I have on the styromfoam cup, though, is too firm and my effort to

follow close behind is too hurried. The lid of the cup pops off and I catch the toe of my shoe on a loose tile on the floor. I drop the coffee, stumble and nearly fall to the ground.

‘My son was here from city yestaday. I ask him to picks that,’ says Kim. ‘But he like ebbery boy. He nebba listen. Just wait. I get you other coffee.’ Seizing the pot, he hurries through a swinging door to the kitchen behind, mumbling to himself in Chinese or Korean or Japanese. I can’t tell.

Alone, I bow to the empty tables. The bell above the door rings again and gathering myself upwards I turn and see Hale left extending his ungloved hand toward me.

‘I heard you was an actor,’ he says.

Feeling the warmth in my face, I extend my hand in return. ‘You must be Hale,’ I say.

‘Hale?’ he says.

‘From Hale’s Fish Huts,’ I say. ‘The guy I talked to on the phone.’

‘Nah, that’s just the name,’ he says. ‘Was easier not change it. I’m Mike.’

Kim returns from the kitchen and hands me a fresh cup of coffee. ‘Here you go,’ he says and smiles. ‘Now watch your step,’ he says. ‘This place can be berry dangerous for new comma. I know.’

Mike tells me that Kim has been here thirty years, that he’s ‘hardly a newcomer,’ and he tells Kim that I’m Fisher’s grandson and that I’m not really a newcomer either, ‘more of a latecomer.’ Kim and I shake hands and he tells me he remembers me from when I was a little boy.

‘Your grandfather and I pish together for many years,’ he says. ‘But when he told story, he always caught more pish than me.’

The two men laugh and then I laugh with them as though I understand. Yet I don’t feel out of place in doing so and they don’t roll their eyes at me the way my friends in the city do when the table next to us is louder than they deem appropriate.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and Mike tells me we should go.

‘I’ll take you out with the first group,’ he says. ‘Americans. Come all the way up here from Detroit and Buffalo for the lake’s jumbo perch.’

He explains that perch are a favourite among the Americans and that they’re the lifeblood of the business, but I’m not sure if he means the Americans or the perch.

‘The limit’s too high though,’ he says. ‘Fifty a day per man and a hunnerd in possession. They clean’em and ship’em back home by the bucket-full. Lord knows what they do with them all. They say it’s the best panfishin in the country, but not if we keep goin the way we are. Fucken ministry don’t know its arse from a hole in the ice.’ Mike shakes his head. ‘But don’t get me started on that or we’ll never get out there.’

I smile self-consciously, unable then to remember what perch even look like, unable to picture the dark emerald stripes that run vertically to a point against their lighter and more brilliant sea-green bodies and bright orange underbellies. Unable to picture anyone catching fifty fish a day because I’ve never even caught one. And I don’t know then that panfishing refers to the size of the fish and that jumbo perch rarely exceed a pound in weight or a foot in length. And because things here are referred to as *the* city and *the* lake and *the* ministry, it takes me a second before I realize that Mike is talking

about the Ministry of Natural Resources, but even then I don't understand his comment about the arse and the ice.

Again, Mike tells me that we should go and this time we do. I say good-bye to Kim and he tells me he's sorry about my grandfather. I feel strange for thanking him and as I leave he bows slightly and wishes me peace. And as I drive back across the bridge and west towards the harbour, I don't really feel at home but neither do I feel completely out of place. Small clouds of exhaust pulse behind Mike's truck and disappear in the cold morning's darkness like unwelcome fog. I am guided by the pickup of the man who called me Fisher and I am careful not to follow too close behind.

On those March breaks in Beaverton, my grandfather used to sit me down and tell me stories when he and my father returned from fishing for the day. He would use his eyes and his arms and his whole body when he spoke, and he would tell them in a voice different from his own.

'There are winter storms that swallow the shores in whiteness,' he would begin. 'Nights I've spent perched on the edge of a bench hunched over the cold darkness of a hole cut into the floor. Cut clean through two feet of ice to the waveless water beneath. And the only thing keeps me warm is the glow of an oil-lamp and a slug from the bottle under the bench. And all night I wait there for the jigging stick to turn instantly heavy in my hand.'

Sitting at the table with me, my father would smile and then look to the counter where my mother might be with her back to us, fixing us all a lunch of sandwiches and tea and quietly shaking her head.

Often with his storytelling, my grandfather would go to his room and return with the old photo albums that are sitting in the passenger seat beside me now and he would announce their musty and faded presence with the same phrases every time.

‘These here go back as far as *my* grandfather,’ he would say tapping the top of the oldest album, ‘to when they would lure the lakers in with wooden decoys and wait, like a soldier in a ditch, with spears in their hands.’

Getting up from the kitchen table he would crouch down then, confined by the low roof of the imaginary hut, and focus intently on one of the floor’s square tiles. Holding an invisible spear above his head, he would wait and then his hand would come down in one swift and deliberate action and he would grin at the thought of the snared fish below. He was like a seasoned stage actor, and like the actor, it was as though he were showing me something new in the apparent sameness every time.

Because I was small, my grandfather would stack two or three catalogues on one of the kitchen chairs so that I might sit high enough to place my elbows on the table the way he did and lean in so close that my nose would almost touch the page, a movement which would cause the wooden legs to creak beneath me the way I imagined the wooden huts in his stories would do in moments of gusting winds. We would flip through an album together, pausing at each frozen moment so that he might reveal to me the details the camera had missed, or more probably, the details the eyes of an eight-year-old were unaccustomed to seeing, or even still, the details a fisherman so often invents and a grandfather so clearly remembers.

I think of this now as I follow Mike down towards the harbour, down the hill behind the fairgrounds to the end of Simcoe Street where the lake of the same name

meets the shore, and I think of how this will be the first time I've ever set foot on the frozen surface that was for so many winters my grandfather's second home.

Mike stops in front of Jigger's Restaurant as a man dressed in snow pants and a plaid shirt emerges from within. Mike's window is already down and they begin to talk. I stop some distance behind and sit idle in my rented Suburban. Another two men emerge from within Jigger's and walk over to the harbour's edge. Their movement is slow. The one dressed in a bulky snowmobile suit pulls off his helmet with one hand and carries a bucket in the other. The man beside him has on a heavy plaid jacket and a grey toque that doesn't quite cover his ears or the tufts of thick white hair that splay out from the toque's rolled edges. He is the one who climbs down onto the frozen harbour's surface and unlocks and flips open a wooden lid the size and shape of a truck's hood. He thrusts a long pole with a small net at the end down into the uncovered hole. The pole is twice as tall as he is, and from where I sit he looks like a stage magician, plunging his magic fisherman's staff down into a seemingly bottomless box, appearing to penetrate the ice he stands on. He withdraws the pole and deposits the net's shining silver contents into the waiting bucket. He must be the man who sells the minnows, I think, and I want very badly to introduce myself, but then I become conscious of the leather gloves I wear, the impractical winter shoes I have on and my stylishly collared suede winter jacket. The comfort from the coffee shop disappears. I realize that I don't know these men, and although I know they must have known my grandfather, I do not want to risk the embarrassment of appearing as though I belong, when I know that I do not.

There is a loud rapid knock on my window and I'm jolted from my daydreaming. I roll the window down. Mike smiles and asks if I got lost again.

‘Park over there,’ he says and points to a ploughed area of ice just off the shore and only about a hundred metres from where I am now.

‘On the lake?’ I think and my face must have spoken the words.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says. ‘Not even two feet of water there. She’s frozen right to the sand.’

I park beside what looks like a yellow bus, but instead of front tires there are long skis, and instead of back tires there are large black tracks like those on an army tank. The name Hale’s Fish Huts is written in large black letters on the side with a phone number beneath. There are four of these snow-buses lined in a row, each coughing exhaust into the cold morning air, each illuminating with their far-reaching headlights the slow-falling snowflakes that have begun to cover the tracks of the day before. The hoods of the trucks and cars parked on the ice are turning white and the sleeves of my suede winter coat are darkening in spots with the wetness of the snow. My feet and my fingers are becoming cold and the air when I breathe sticks to the inside of my nose and to the back of my throat.

‘Fisher,’ Mike calls out as I climb down from the Suburban.

He is standing in the doorway of a yellow portable, the kind of building used for classrooms when the student body grows beyond the capacity of the main building of the school. He is holding a snowmobile suit in one hand and black snow boots with large leather mitts jutting from the tops of them in the other.

‘Come put this on,’ he says as I approach. ‘You can’t fish all day in them fancy fucken clothes.’

I put the suit on and the boots and the mitts. Mike tells me to wait over there by the Bombardier while he gets a bucket of minnows and a couple of jigging sticks for me. He is pointing with his heavy leather mitt to the first of the snow-buses and as I walk over, clomping through the snow in my new boots, I whisper the new word to myself the way I do when rehearsing lines in public places. First the key words, then whole sentences.

‘Bomba-deer,’ I whisper. ‘Bomba-deer.’ I add the casual pointing of the mitt and then say out loud, ‘Wait fer me over there by the Bomba-deer.’ I smile and check to make sure no one is listening.

The sun was strong and trying to push through the clouds but the light was still low and the snow was falling steadily as the morning ended on the first day of that last March break we spent in Beaverton. In the early afternoon my mother brought her tea into the living room, sat in the chesterfield perpendicular to me. She began to talk, to me I suppose, but not really *to* me. She talked the way the ostensibly insane or lonely do on streetcars and subway trains, trapping people with their seemingly random stories.

‘He always felt guilty for leaving Beaverton,’ she said. ‘For leaving his father in this house by himself. He felt guilty about his mother leaving too. He always feels guilty. And then when his mother died he started coming up here every weekend. I resented him for that. I resented both of them. Why should I come second? But then that’s what I first loved. His closeness to family and home. I suppose it’s what I still love. I shouldn’t begrudge them this time together. Who knows how much time is left? But he drinks so much when he’s here and I don’t like it. Especially when they’re out on the ice. I don’t

care how well he says his father knows the lake. It's not a good example. And you never know. You can never really know for sure.'

My mother finished her tea then and returned to the kitchen. Like a confessional, I'm not sure it mattered who the listener was, just that I was quiet and that I did listen. The afternoon was spotted with return visits to the living room window. Then evening arrived and she made us dinner, and then evening became night and at nine o'clock, as she stood at the window with the curtains parted, she told me I should go to bed.

'But I want—' I said and yawned. 'I want to wait up for grandpa and dad.'

Normally she would tell me once more and then begin counting aloud. But instead of the counting, I remember her taking the woolen blanket from the ottoman my legs were too short to reach and tucking me up to the chin with it.

'I want to hear—' I yawned again.

She kissed my forehead and I fell asleep without seeing her wipe her eyes or hearing the soft and uneven rhythm of her weeping.

A pier stretches out from the harbour a quarter of a mile and at the end there is a concrete standing area bordered by a low wall. People out on walks often lean against the wall or sit upon it and look out onto the vastness of the lake. There is a low tower there from which a bright light pulses out towards Thorah Island three miles away, a beacon of home for those riding the tree-lined trail back to shore at night or in the darkness of early morning. And it is this trail that I am on now bumping over the unevenness of the frozen lake, and it is this light that I see through the dark and blurred window of the Bombardier that I am riding within. Recycled Christmas trees mark the trail, each separated by a distance similar to that which stretches between the hydro poles of a country road. When

I ask, Mike tells me over his shoulder and over the noise of the Bombardier's engine that many people in town put the trees out at the ends of their driveways on New Year's day. He and his son and the other fish hut operators drive around collecting the trees so that they can mark the trails out to the island and out to their huts when the ice becomes frozen enough to hold them. The mention of New Year's makes me think of my Queen St. critic, the woman from the party who remembered my name, and I wonder if she would believe me in the role I'm in now.

There are four other men riding with me, all with buckets and short fishing rods and tackle boxes at their feet. They're wearing the overalls mechanics wear and fur-hooded jackets like the one Mike has on. The colours are all a similar dark blue, dull and well-worn. They nod to me and I nod to them and I mimic the way they say, 'Mornen'. In ten minutes or so, the Bombardier slows and stops beside a row of six orange huts.

'Hope they're bite'n today,' I hear one of them say as he climbs out.

'It'd be nice,' the second one says, 'but a bad day fishen's better'n a good day worken.'

I try to think of something suitable to say in our pseudo parting but I come up with nothing. Instead, we exchange nods again and they wish me luck.

'You too,' I manage and for a moment I feel like one of them, forgetting, although they are more so than me, that these men are not from here either.

Fifteen minutes later and six miles from shore, I am sitting in my grandfather's fish hut and it is just as I imagined it to be from all the stories he told. There is a square hole cut into the floor and Mike has already cleared the ice and the snow from beneath it. He sets up the stove and turns it on before he leaves and wishes me luck. Then I am alone

with the story that has haunted me my whole life and the half bottle of my grandfather's whiskey beneath the bench from which I take two drinks. I think of my father and the last time he was out here with my grandfather and I picture them as they sat here silently jigging their lines and taking intermittent swigs from the bottle they pass back and forth to one another. I think of the relentless and wildly blowing snow that night and how impossible it must have been to see through. And I think of how my father must have insisted on coming back to shore that night in spite of the storm because he knew how worried my mother would be if they did not return until morning. And then I try not to imagine, as I've tried not to imagine for the past seventeen years, the wide and gaping pressure crack that my grandfather could not see in that storm on the lake that he knew so well, and how quick it all must have seemed to him when the snowmobile he was driving hit the clumped and jutting ice in front of the open water of the crack and how helpless he must have felt when he turned and could not see his son.

Awkwardly I bait the hook and send it down the hole, unwinding the line from the jigging stick as the flitting minnow descends farther and farther down until I can no longer see it. I set the stick on its stand and wait. Every so often the stick moves and with my heart racing I pick it up, but there is never anything at the other end of the line pulling back. When the sun is far beyond its midway point in the sky and it is nearly time for Mike to be back with the bombardier to pick me up, I get one real strike and I manage to pull the flashing silver fish all the way to the top of the hole. I'm so excited I can barely contain myself and because I am inexperienced and I have no one there to teach me, the line in my hand slackens when I reach for the net and the large and silver-speckled lake trout frees itself from the hook, lingers for a moment and then is gone. When Mike

arrives I tell him the story of the lost fish and when I am finished he grins and says there is no doubt in his mind that I am indeed a Fisher.

The night of the storm, my mother jolted upright from the chesterfield she had fallen asleep on with the loud inhaling gasp of a drowning man.

‘Oh my god,’ she said. ‘What time is it? Gordon!’ She grabbed my shoulders. ‘Wake up!’ she said. ‘Wake up Gordon. We fell asleep. What time is it?’

It was nearly four o’clock in the morning and as I opened my eyes, I could hear the impatient whine of a snowmobile in the distance, growing louder the closer it came to the house. In seconds, my grandfather’s snowmobile dipped down and then up the slope of the ditch by the driveway and the light bounced over the still darkness of the front yard, illuminating the heavily falling snow. At the same time, the hurried sounds of my mother struggling with her winter boots and jacket were coming from the kitchen, and then I heard the back door slam behind her. I saw and heard all of this after having crawled out from under the warmth of the blanket and the comfort of my grandfather’s chair, shuffling my way over to the window and rubbing my eyes. I pulled the curtains back, put my hands to the cold glass and watched his snowmobile drive into the yard. I wiped away the fog my breath had made on the window and when I looked again my grandfather was climbing off the snowmobile. I waved but he must not have seen me. Just then, my mother raced out from behind the house and only a few yards separated the two of them. My grandfather removed his helmet and his silver-bearded chin fell to his chest. I could hear sirens then and suddenly an ambulance and three police-driven snowmobiles roared into my grandfather’s driveway. My mother fell to her knees. She hugged and rubbed her arms, and rocked back and forth on her heels. She never blinked

and each time she shook her head I could see her breath and I could read the word *no* on her lips.

It is past five o'clock now and the sky is heavy, clothed in the colour of city snow. Soon the sun will descend behind the clouds and down below the level of the lake and soon it will be as dark in Beaverton as when I arrived this morning. I have returned from the lake and I'm wearing my own winter jacket and leather gloves again. I tell Mike that the boots were warm and I ask him what he thinks about me buying them from him.

'As a kind of keepsake,' I say.

'They're not worth anything,' he says. 'You can keep 'em if you want. I was gonna throw 'em out at the end of the season anyway.'

I stand beside my rented Suburban in my new hand-me-down boots and Mike approaches with a bottom-heavy garbage bag in his hand.

'Don't forget yer catch,' he says. 'That's what you come here for wasn't it?'

'Well, not really,' I say, but when I open the bag and see what he has given me, I look at him and extend my hand. 'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, it is what I came here for. And thank you. Thank you very much.'

'Don't be a stranger,' he says.

'I won't,' I say and although the last two statements sound like very automatic things to say when someone is leaving, I hope that he knows how sincerely I do not want to be what he tells me not to be.

I get in my Suburban and drive up the hill from the lake, past the old mill and across Simcoe, back through town. I turn where the statue of the soldier stands in his permanent role of remembrance, and through the passenger window I notice a small

group of older men in suits emerging from within The Little Brown Jug, a coffee shop whose position on the street seems as diminutive as its name. The men walk just behind their wives. The wives have on dark dresses, clutching their purses and reaching for their husbands' hands as they tread tentatively towards Mangan's Funeral Home, caution even in the very few steps they take between the two places on the shovelled and salted sidewalk. Contrary to their pace, the women hurry the men with their anxious hand gestures and impatient looks over their shoulders. The men flick unfinished cigarettes to the snow and they all enter the funeral home, filing past the man who offers his hand in condolence and nods to them as they enter. The shine on his shoes speaks of the seriousness with which he takes his job. And anyone who cares to look can see the black name plate in the corner of the curtain-drawn window, announcing in white letters the name of the person at rest inside.

The road that I am on ascends a hill that leads up and out of Beaverton and it is as though the physical difference in levels is a separation between the town and the world without. I pass a sign that asks politely to 'Please come again' and I wonder if I ever will. Everything seems to be at rest as I drive, unhurried, from my grandfather's town. There are gatherings of grey leafless trees and whitened fields spotted with abandoned bails of hay and a tractor from the fall before. An unspinning windmill bears the obvious but easily missed name Windmill Farms and a vacant restaurant with a 'For Lease' sign in the window marks a curve in the road. There is a golf course to the east hibernating beneath the heavy blanket of winter and to the west, down over the railway tracks, there is a line of lakeshore cottages shielded by rows of high privacy hedges. There is no

smoke rising from any of the chimneys there, nor are there any lights in the windows or tracks in the snow.

The day is ending, but before the light is completely gone there is a moment of sun-silver pushing through the dull greyness of the cloud-garbed sky. Like the shining silver lake trout that hovers in the dark water of the fisherman's hole the moment it shakes its head free of the hook and noses downwards and descends. I picture the fish I hooked and reeled in and then lost in a similar manner today, and already I am unable to name the experience the way I remember it. I try to fix the images and the sensations in my memory, wanting to secure them in the perfection of their own moments. But I know, as with all remembered things, with all pictured things, that fading is inevitable.

In that moment, I pull over to the side of the road and flip open one of my grandfather's albums that are still in the passenger's seat beside me. I take a pen from the dash and on the inside cover I jot down what will become the first line of the play I've only ever talked about writing.

'With every return,' I write, 'there is always the leaving.'

And as I drive away, I imagine the frozen white lake as it stretches far behind the lakeshore cottages and out beyond the island to where the distant villages of fish huts, with their lighted windows and smoking chimneys, dot the frozen landscape of ice and snow in a feigned permanence of home.

The cottagers—

1840. 1841. 1842. 1843. 1844. 1845. 1846. 1847. 1848. 1849. 1850.

On this curving and hilly country road that winds south towards the city, changing yet retaining all of its names as it passes different intersections along the way, there are places as arbitrary as the foodless landings of birds that mark and are remembered for the many and too often fatal collisions of homeward bound travellers. As it happened around six this morning, for instance, when a man in his seventieth year pedalling toward Cedarhurst Golf & Country Club for his regular round of nine holes was struck and instantly killed by a pickup, driven by a man not yet in his twentieth year, returning from a nightshift in the city, heavy-eyed and, as is too often the case, nearly home.

A soft and solemn song passed between two distant and solitary loons that morning as the red sun was lifting its head cautiously above the trees. The departing night had left the earth cool, and in an invisible and quiet discord, the earth's coolness pushed up against the impatient advent of the August morning's heat. The climatic row was settled by the arrival of fog which hovered above the road, and sprawled across the neighbouring fairway of the waking and untouched golf course landscape. Untouched

except for the large and droning mower whose trailing and wingspread blades trimmed a slow and careful swath as wide as the road upon which the old man was pedalling just before six this morning, the bicycle wheels rolling over and through the roadside stones and sand, wobbling very little. On the road, there was the growing hum of an engine, but because of the fog and because of his weakened hearing, it was difficult for the old man to tell how close the vehicle was or how fast it was travelling. And because the young man in the truck had only just begun working the nightshift in the city, he was unaware of this old man's early morning routine. Even if it had not been for the fog or his fatigue, which allowed him to drift into the oncoming lane, the young man still would not have expected anyone else on this early morning road. The thud of the old man's body against the truck's grill jerked the young man to a wakeful but too-late swerving, which caused his truck to leave the road and ram headlong into a hydro pole. The impact whipped the young man forward which drove his throat into the upper rim of the steering wheel, knocking the wind from him and breaking his neck at once. In the wake of the wreckage, the bicycle lay mangled in the ditch on one side of the truck, and the old man's body, lifeless on the other. Wreck beside wreck beside wreck. All of this took less than ten seconds in the usually immeasurable moments of dawn.

A palimpsest of accidents, this stretch of road carries the memory and markings of too many misfortunes—memory for those in town who have lost loved ones or those who were nearly lost themselves, and markings like sections of new fence or scarred bark or roadside memorials of small crosses and wreaths of funeral flowers. Jack Fairell, Cedarhurst's greenskeeper for more than thirty years and a resident of Beaverton his whole life, had been first on the scene before. He was part of these memories, and had a

view from his mower of these markings everyday. Having stopped to adjust the level of the mower's blades this morning, he saw none of this accident but heard it all. The belated brakes and desperately screeching tires. The tin-can collapse of the bicycle's skeletal frame. The thud of the body. The thud of the truck. And then the silence in the wake.

He left the mower, moved across the fairway through the diminishing fog, and shimmied through a gap in the fence that led to the road. The direction in which either man in the accident had originally been travelling was now undetectable. The truck had spun around on contact and was heading partially into the bush and partially back in the direction from which it had come. Curled and peaceful, the old man looked only to be asleep. But there was no breathing. No sound at all really. No radio. No hissing radiator. No pendulous thwunk of windshield wipers. Only stillness, and the hot smell of strained rubber and twisted metal.

The hydro pole had snapped and the upper half now hung suspended by the wires attached to the nearest still-standing poles on other side, suspended like a child swinging between his parents surrendering to the security of their hands. One of the wires had also snapped and now snaked across the hood of the young man's truck. Aware of the potential difference of electricity that lay in the ground between and about the two dead men, a current now quietly humming in the dangerously charged earth, Jack did not cross the road for a closer look. Instead, he went to the nearest house, a short walk down the road. McMillan, a widower, had lived across from the golf course as long as Jack could remember. He knew McMillan would be awake with his coffee and cigarette and

crumpled paper at this early hour, gruff and arguing with an absent Prime Minister about the country's latest overseas expenditure.

Jack knocked on the screen door and let himself in. He picked up the phone and took the coffee being handed to him.

'Can you believe what this goddam country's comin to Jack?' said McMillan, thwapping the paper with the back of his hand.

Jack shook his head sympathetically, and then as he reported into the phone what he had witnessed just minutes before, McMillan began to move hurriedly behind him, squashing his cigarette into the tray and dumping his coffee.

'God damn it,' said McMillan. 'I thought I heard something, but then I said to myself, yer mind's just playing tricks on ya again.' And then quietly to himself, 'God damn it.'

The two of them walked back to the accident and stood on the opposite side of the road. The sun, no longer creeping shyly above the trees, was full now and burning low in the bold blue sky. The day's new light had rubbed out the fog and as though a blanket had been ripped away, the truck and the crumpled metal frame and the still and restful body of the old man, lay bare and exposed to the rising, unsympathetic heat of the morning. In those few minutes that followed, minutes which typically seem so much longer than they are, Jack and McMillan smoked and said nothing.

Soon from the direction of the waking and yawning town, a wail of different sirens grew, the announcement of unrest in their wake. And soon the road beside the fifth fairway was congested with paramedics' vehicles and fire trucks and police cars. Their lights flashed in circled patterns, and their doors slammed behind the rushing men and

women. Stretchers emerged, and orange pylons and flares almost instantly outlined a blocked section of road. A policeman communicated his initial reaction into his radio.

Click. 'Two victims: one elderly male, one young male. The younger male is slouched over the steering wheel of a grey Ford pickup which seems to have left the road heading southbound striking a utility pole.' Click.

The voice on the other end of the radio is muffled and distant.

Click. 'Both men are unresponsive,' said the officer, 'and there is live wire across the hood of the truck.' Click.

There is the muffled voice again.

Click. 'Roger that,' said the officer. 'Standing by.' Click.

The scene was now spotted with brown and navy-clad men and women whose duties hinged on emergency, yet all they could do was lean uselessly against their respective vehicles and wait. Now instead of rescue, they stood beneath their quiet flashing lights only as official markers of tragedy. One of the firefighters, roughly the same age as Jack, lit his own cigarette and stood beside the two men on the opposite side of the road.

'Jack.' He nodded. 'McMillan.'

'Carl.'

'Can't hardly believe, it really.'

'Shouldn'tuh goddam well been on the road,' said McMillan.

'Fog was bad,' Jack said.

'Why don't he drive for Christ sake?'

'Said he liked the mornings. Liked being out in'em.'

‘Wouldn’t have mattered,’ said Carl.

‘What wouldn’t’ve?’

‘If he’d been in a car.’

‘Jesus,’ McMillan said. ‘Nothin seems to make any sense these days.’

Carl pointed to the truck. ‘Gillespie there just got himself that city job a couple months ago. Must’ve just started the nightshift.’

‘Terrible,’ said Jack.

‘Got himself married just last fall.’

‘Shame,’ said Jack. ‘Terrible shame.’

‘Terrible,’ said Carl.

‘God damn it,’ said McMillan and threw his cigarette to the ground. ‘God damn it.’

By midmorning the hydro trucks had arrived. Down the road, one of the men was standing in a bucket even with the tops of trees, elevated by a long extension boom jutting from the back of one the trucks. Another was reaching up to a grey box with a long pole and yanked downwards when he latched into it. The road was only partially sectioned off now, and the sparse but steady traffic was ushered slowly through with the assistance of two summer-job students standing on the road and revolving their Stop and Slow signs with the length of a fairway between them. Those who drove by, stared and then turned and looked over their shoulders when they passed, wanting to examine the scene for as long as they could, wondering and checking for the kind of debris that would identify the vehicles that were in the accident, secretly hoping that they belonged to anyone other than someone they knew.

In the large and comfortable homes down along the lake, the cottagers woke to powerless rooms. The flicks of switches yielded no light, no percolating coffee, no animated television or computer screens and no cool air from preset air conditioners. The refrigerators were dark and silent. The wooden floors seemed to creak more. And the lake sounds were louder—the water against the docks, and the early rising children splashing and bathing near the shore. Then there was the morning train which always rattled the windows and entered the cottagers' homes uninvited, more shrill, it seemed to them, and more present, more intrusive on this already frustrating morning.

Don Cardinal, who managed to wake up without the assistance of his alarm, would still be late, he said, for his ten fifty-eight tee off time.

'The batteries in my electric shaver are low' he said.

'Here,' said his daughter Jaymin. 'Use this.'

'I can't check the weather. How am I supposed to know how to dress?'

'The sun is out,' she said. 'It's warm.'

'How are we going to have breakfast if there is no power? We can't turn on the stove. Or the microwave.'

'Here's an apple.'

'How will I get into the garage. It's an electric opener. I can't get my car out. How am I supposed to get there on time?'

'It's a five minute walk.'

'I'll never make it,' he said. 'I might as well just mow the fucking lawn instead.'

'It's a plug-in mower,' Jaymin said.

'Figures,' he said. 'The day is completely ruined.'

It was half past ten, and by now vehicles lined the perimeter of Cedarhurst's small gravel parking lot. Dotted throughout the parking lot were the company vans and the laddered pickups of the self-employed. There were SUVs bearing bicycle racks and families of stuffed animals in the rear windows. It was impossible to tell whether these were the property of cottagers, or weekend-travellers, or locals from town. Certain cars took up more space than necessary, angled so that others were unable to get too close. Occasionally, swatting his pants while complaining about the incessant dust, a member who owned one of these cars would request that it be washed while he was out playing his round. But if Billy, the fifteen-year-old back room boy, sponged and hosed the car down too early, then his efforts would go unnoticed and worse, *he* would become the cause of complaint. The cars that passed on the nearby road would leave clouds of dust in their wake, and the particles would settle first on the wet and welcoming surface of the freshly washed car, suddenly dull and more in need of cleaning than before. So Billy learned to wait. As with all his duties, he learned not to be too efficient.

Tee-off times were every seven minutes. Members held the right to reserve up to a week in advance. Greensfeers, people who paid as they played, had two days to reserve their times. Normally, there wasn't the need to operate so strictly, but for some, it was a matter of etiquette and tradition. During the busiest periods, particularly weekend mornings such as this, the members' times were fixed—an established routine—changing only when someone was sick or in the city on business. And so it didn't matter when the names came through a small speaker pointed towards the first tee, distorted and loud. Each party knew who came before them, and in turn, that party knew who came before them and before them and so on. No one seemed concerned with who came after. Only

when there was an irregularity in the lineup did the golfers look towards the proshop for clarity. Standing in the window facing the golfers, Raleigh Smith, the pro/manager's son, read the next name on his list into the microphone. Through the speaker his voice was muffled and impossible to discern.

Click. 'Green party on the tee. Rain party on deck.' Click.

A group of men were midway down the first fairway and two other groups were now waiting to tee off. One was a group of members and the other, greensfeers. The greensfeers were locals and owned one of the laddered pickups in the parking lot. They wore collared golf shirts, knee-length shorts, sandals and baseball hats. One of them seemed to be readying himself to tee off. He was standing on the tee block casually swinging a club, sweeping the grass with the blade as it passed through the bottom of his swing.

One of the men from the members' group cleared his throat, and approached the other greensfeer sitting on the bench. 'I believe we had the 10.51 time.'

The man on the bench had to look up. 'Really?' he said. 'I think he's call'n us.'

'No. I believe it's the Rain party he's announcing. We're the Rain party. 10.51 every Saturday.'

Mr. Rain and his companions also wore collared golf shirts but instead of shorts they had on pressed cotton pants, and instead of sandals, leather golf shoes. Their hats were broad-brimmed and made of synthetic straw, and instead of baseball teams, had names like Titleist and Ultra written on them. Each of the members wore either a black or white glove on his left hand.

'Let'em go, Steve,' said the man swinging the club. 'We're in no rush.'

‘You guys go ahead,’ said Steve.

Steve and his buddy returned to their powercart and drank from their waiting cans of beer, their feet crossed and resting on the dash of the canopied cart.

Click. ‘Green party on the tee. Rain party on deck.’ Click.

Mr. Rain motioned for Raleigh to come down to the first tee. Moments later, Raleigh was next to them, his voice live and unfiltered, explaining with absolute clarity that it was in fact the Green party he was calling to the tee, not the Rain party.

‘The Green party’s on the tee,’ Raleigh said. ‘The Rain party’s on deck.’

‘No I don’t think so Raleigh,’ said Mr. Rain. ‘We have the 10.51 every Saturday morning.’

‘They can go ahead, Smitty,’ said Steve.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr. Rain. ‘I just wanted it to be clear, that’s all.’

‘I’m sorry Mr. Rain. It’s just we’re running a little behind because of the accident this morning.’ Turning towards the clubhouse Raleigh drew their attention to the flag at half mast.

‘Oh no,’ said Mr. Rain. ‘I didn’t even notice. Who was it? Was it Fitzgibbons? I heard he was sick. I never got to the hospital to see him. I can’t believe it. I saw his wife just yesterday. She said he was feeling better.’

‘No Mr. Rain, not Mr. Fitzgibbons. It was an accident. Early this morning.’

‘What happened?’ said one of the other members. ‘Who was it?’

‘It was Mr. Johnston,’ Raleigh said. ‘He was riding his bike and a pickup hit him dead on.’

‘Russell Johnston. My god.’

‘We told him about that road,’ said one of the other members. ‘We told him to be careful.’

‘Yes, we told him,’ said Mr. Rain, ‘but what does that matter now?’

The members looked at their shoes and shook their heads. Soon with a very solemn expression, one of them drew a coin from his pocket and flipped it three times, pointing to one of the other men in his party each time the coin landed in his palm. At ritual’s end, Mr. Rain went to the elevated surface of the first tee. All in one motion, bent at the waist with one leg out behind him for balance, he inserted a wooden tee into the soft ground and placed a white ball on its small cradled surface, the black letters on the ball centred and facing the sky. The word ‘Pinnacle’ looked back at him. He then stood behind the resting ball and stared longingly out into the fairway—a seeming moment of silence. After, he nestled the club’s head in behind the ball and stared intently at it. Drawing the club away and back above the level of his shoulders in a slow and deliberate manner, he paused at the apex and then swung with great speed through the pendulous path the ball rested in, sending the ball almost soundlessly into the sky. Only the click of the club against the ball, and the brief and whispered whoosh as he swung through. Mr. Rain and his three companions each followed the flight of the ball with a sheltering hand at their brow, straining to see its journey within the punishing brightness of the sun. Soon it landed, some two hundred yards away in the middle of the fairway, as buoyantly at rest there as it had been moments earlier at Mr. Rain’s feet, where the wooden tee now lay broken in two.

‘Nice,’ said one of the other men.

‘Perfect,’ said another.

‘Beautiful.’

They each took their turns, and then tipping their hats back toward Raleigh, or maybe Steve or the flag at half-mast, it was difficult to tell, the four of them walked with great purpose down the fairway and out toward their respective balls. It was how they started every round, measured by tradition.

Steve stood with Raleigh and watched.

‘So who was drive’n the truck?’ said Steve.

‘Rob Gillespie.’

Steve turned to Raleigh. ‘Was he hurt bad?’

‘He hit a pole. Killed him instantly.’

‘Jesus,’ said Steve. ‘We went to school with him.’

‘I know,’ said Raleigh. ‘I was at his wedding last fall.’ He returned to the proshop then and stood in the window behind the counter with the microphone in his hand.

Click. ‘Green party on the tee. Cardinal party on deck.’ Click.

By 2.30, the emergency vehicles were gone and only the hydro workers remained. The police had measured the length of tire marks on the road and estimated that the truck had been travelling below the speed limit. Their report would read ‘Accident due to fog.’ The ambulance had removed the bodies and Pederson’s Autobody had towed the twisted pickup away. The volunteer firefighters were the first to leave, returning home with news of the accident on their lips. Soon the Saturday morning grocery stores and hairdressers and kitchens would fill with the talk of two men’s deaths.

‘That road’s not safe.’

‘They’re drive’n too fast. That’s the trouble.’

‘How old a man was he?’

‘Johnston? Seventy-something I think. Come from the city originally. Him and his wife was cottagers here their whole lives.’

‘Didn’t she just die a while back?’

‘Cancer.’

‘Terrible shame.’

‘Tis so.’

‘What did he do, you remember?’

‘Something to do with painting or art or some such a thing.’

‘What’s a man that age ride’n a bike for anyway?’

‘Foolish.’

‘Awful shame though.’

‘Yes. Awful.’

‘And the Gillespie boy. My god. His poor mother. And his wife.’

‘They don’t know when to stop they don’t.’

‘Drinkin’ too much. That’s the trouble.’

‘He was come’n home from work, they said.’

‘Don’t fool yerself. I’ve seen them tear outa here in the wee hours of the mornen, drunker’n a hoot owl.’

‘Terrible shame though.’

‘Yes. Terrible.’

The bicycle was still there. Someone would come later with a pickup to remove it from the site. It lay buried in the ditch's tall grass. Only the front wheel was visible, its spokes bent and broken, the airless rubber limp on the rim.

Ernest Smith, Cedarhurst's pro/manager, was forty-five years old and his son Raleigh had just turned nineteen. Originally from the city, Ernest went to school on a golf scholarship and earned a business degree in golf management. He played on the PGA Qualifying Tour for one year after he graduated and during the second year met and married Evelyn Ann Raven. Struggling financially two years later and disinterested in moving permanently to the 'grey Canadian north' as she called it, having spent her whole life in North Carolina, Evelyn divorced Ernest and signed over custody of their son. That summer Ernest was hired as Cedarhurst's pro/manager and had been so ever since.

'Cedarhurst Golf Club. Ernest speaking.'

'Ern, it's Don. What a day. First the power's off when I wake up and I can't get anything together. Can't check the weather. No coffee. Can't shave. Nothing. Then the phone was dead. Jaymin forgot to put it on charge last night. I spent over a god damn hour trying to get into the garage. Finally I get in and drive into town for a coffee, and everyone's trés miserables. Like it was the dead of winter or something.' He sighed and looked at his watch. 'Christ, it's quarter to three. The day's nearly gone. What are the times like?'

Ernest flipped through the time sheets. The afternoon was open but before he could respond, Don said, 'We can still squeeze in eighteen.'

'Well I'm kind of—'

'I'll be there in five minutes.'

Twenty minutes later Don Cardinal's Land Rover ripped down concession road 5, thick clouds of dust billowing in his wake. He parked at an angle, taking up two spots near the front of the now half-empty lot.

'I'm late. Where's my hat?' he said.

'I don't know,' Jaymin said.

'Fuck it. I'll buy a new one.'

Before she had a chance to respond, he was gone and already race-walking down the gravel path to the proshop. Jaymin followed, but at a much slower pace, humming as she walked. When she stopped at the back room, framed by the doorway and lighted by the afternoon sun, she stood as she always stood with the toe of her right shoe under her and tapping the ground. Billy's hands began to sweat. She wore white shorts and a green tank top. Her skin was brown from the summer's sun, and although she always seemed to have gum in her mouth, she had a way which rendered the chewing almost unnoticeable. She held her tennis racket by the head, and let it dangle at her side.

'Hello Billy,' she said.

There was a breeze and the smell of vanilla wafted into the back room.

'Hello,' he managed.

She smiled and Billy tried to do the same.

'Is your cousin up front?' she said, referring to Raleigh.

Billy shook his head.

'He's out on the course?' she said.

He shook his head again.

'Clubhouse?'

Billy nodded.

When she smiled again, he looked down and returned his attention to the golf club he had clenched in his hand, scrubbing it clean.

‘Don’t do too good a job,’ she said, ‘or they’ll never let you out of here.’ She smiled once more and waved over her shoulder as she continued down the path.

Inside the proshop, her father Don Cardinal sighed, dropped onto the bench and grunted as he bent over to tie up his golf shoes. ‘Ern, you’re the manager here,’ he said. ‘We need to do something about that god damn dust. Why haven’t we paved that lot or the road coming in? It’s like we’re living in the age of horse and buggy. Have the boy in the back room wash my car while we’re out will you? It’s terrible. Just terrible.’

Ernest called Billy to the front and asked him to clean Mr. Cardinal’s vehicle while they were out playing their round.

‘No problem, Uncle Ernie,’ Billy said. The formality was for Don’s sake. He always wanted his vehicle washed, and in fact, it had become such a regular request, that it no longer needed requesting at all. Billy had worked it into his routine.

‘That’s your nephew?’ Don said.

Ernest nodded. ‘One of my brother’s kids.’

‘I didn’t know you had a brother.’

‘I think I’ve told you before,’ Ernest said.

‘Hmn. I don’t remember.’ Don stood and stretched. Looking around the empty shop he said, ‘Who died? It’s usually hopping in here on Saturday.’

Ernest was used to these kinds of conversations with Don and knew that he wasn’t nearly as caught up with himself as he seemed to be.

‘Russell Johnston,’ Ernest said.

Don laughed. ‘You are a quick one Ern. Russell Johnston. That old coot’s as fit as fiddle.’

‘He was,’ Ernest said. ‘Early this morning he was hit by a pickup and instantly killed.’

‘Russell Johnston. The art dealer. I bought a painting from him once for Jaymin’s mother. Called *Lightning* or something. By David Milne I think. She left it behind,’ he said. ‘Like everything else. It’s still hanging in the foyer of the cottage. I never bothered to take it down.’ Don grabbed a new hat from the shelf and tried it on. ‘Wasn’t cheap either.’ He looked at the price of the hat and laughed. ‘Neither are you.’

Standing behind the counter, Ernest looked out the window. The gravel path and the first fairway were empty, and it seemed, in that moment, that he was alone in the world with Don Cardinal, and he wondered to himself what he would do if that were ever true. Soon, Jaymin and Raleigh emerged from around the clubhouse and they were walking towards the shop. She was hugging his waist with one arm and resting her head on his shoulder. The tennis racket still dangled from her free hand. She had yet to play. The two of them looked comfortable and easy, and moved together along the gravel path as though they were one.

‘So how old was he?’ said Don.

Ernest turned from the window and raised his eyebrows.

‘Old Russell Johnston,’ Don said. ‘How old was he?’

‘Seventy,’ said Ernest.

‘Too young,’ said Don and then shrugged. ‘Well, when our time comes.’ He took the hat from his head and held it up as though to an admiring crowd. He looked at Ernest and made a writing gesture in the air, which meant, *just put it on my tab*. ‘Speaking of time,’ he said. ‘We’re not making any standing here.’

As evening arrived, the site of the accident was clean, marked only by a new hydro pole and the tire marks on the road. The pole would age over time and eventually blend in with the others in its row, and the tire marks on the road would soon fade and be gone. Cedarhurst’s parking lot was nearly empty now, and the course would soon shut down for another day. Billy was spraying the powercarts clean and then he would sweep the back room and vacuum the front shop. Jaymin had been practicing on the tennis court by herself. Finished, she was locking the gate behind her, and soon she would be coming down the gravel path again and into the proshop where the office was. Raleigh was in the office checking the till and writing up the night’s deposit, waiting for the bell above the screen door to ring as she entered. Soon their summer together would end, the last of their adolescence, and at their age they knew already that there’s never time enough.

Ernest and Don were on the seventeenth green, and Don had just missed his only legitimate chance at par the whole round. As the club pro, Ernest was like the doctor friend who was always asked during leisure hours for free medical advice.

‘What happened there?’ Don asked. ‘I thought I read it perfectly.’

‘You pushed it a little,’ Ernest said. ‘Don’t force it.’

As they walked from the green to their cart, Don inspected the head of his putter. ‘So Jaymin’s off to Oxford in September. Did I tell you that?’

‘I think so.’

He had told him every day since she was accepted.

Don sneered. 'Her mother went there.'

'Raleigh's taking the year off to work and save some money,' said Ernest. 'I think he's already planning a trip over.'

'She's up on the hill now, in Ottawa,' Don said. 'Some kind of mediator.'

'Raleigh's mother is still down in North Carolina,' said Ernest. 'He only sees her once or twice a year.'

'Funny,' Don said. 'She could never mediate a fucking thing with me.'

'I think she thought the people up here discriminated against Americans,' said Ernest.

'Marriage,' said Don. 'I'll never make that mistake again.'

Ernest smiled. 'We were too young,' he said, and thought of Jaymin and Raleigh. 'By the way,' he said, looking back at Don. 'I've been told you and I will be related one day.'

'Hmn,' Don said and looked at his putter again. 'What do you say, three iron off the tee? Play it safe?'

'Nah,' Ernest said, taking the driver from his bag. 'Wake up the neighbours, let the big dog howl.'

The last hole would be difficult to play. The light was deceptive at this hour with the sun just above the trees, and in minutes the temperature would drop slightly and the wind would pick up, and the sky would soon darken again to the early morning red of dawn.

Earlier in the day Jack, the greenskeeper, had had a run-in with Mr. Rain.

The third green was always in disrepair, burnt in spots and dead, in such bad condition the last little while that it had been unplayable. Jack had made a temporary green in front of the real one, but some of the members felt this jeopardized the authenticity of their rounds, and so they complained after games of bad scores about how the third hole had thrown them completely off.

‘So how was your game today?’ Ernest would say to the members as they came in from the August heat.

‘Terrible. The heat is awful and I four-putted that god damn third hole. Four-putted. Can you believe that?’

‘That’s too bad,’ Ernest would say and promised to pass on their concerns to Jack who was ‘surely doing his best.’

Two days ago, Jack was in the proshop at the time of complaint, and Ernest was forced by circumstance to confront him about when the green would be playable again. Jack told him ‘soon,’ that he was doing everything he could. And as they spoke, they both knew that the other was only doing his job.

Late this morning, Jack was tending to the third green when Mr. Rain and his group ascended the third tee two hundred yards away. As per etiquette, Jack waved the group on and stood off to the side while each man in the group took his turn teeing off. The first three balls landed within twenty yards of the temporary green, but the fourth landed on the damaged one, and rolled to within a foot of where the hole would have been had the green been healthy and playable.

‘Well god damn it!’ Mr. Rain said, upon seeing the real green was still out of play. ‘From the tee it looked like the flag was there, on the real green.’ Mr. Rain pointed

to where his ball was. ‘That still counts,’ he said looking over at the other members of his group. ‘That’s a birdie.’ He turned towards Jack. ‘This is a disgrace,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you do your job?’

‘I’m doing my best, Mr. Rain,’ Jack said. ‘Can’t hurry Mother Nature.’

‘Mother Nature my ass. There’s product out now that repairs greens twice as fast as before. The tour uses it all the time. You should know these things. That’s your job.’

Jack wanted to remind Mr. Rain that Cedarhurst wasn’t on the tour, and neither was he. He wanted to tell him that, had he read the sign, he would have realized the green was still under reconstruction, but Jack knew Mr. Rain *had* read the sign and that he was only trying to make it seem as though he had intended to hit his ball where it lay now. And even more, he wanted to ensure Mr. Rain that of all things, he knew what his job was.

‘I’m sorry, Mr. Rain. I’m doing my best.’

Mr. Rain snatched his ball from the damaged green, glared at Jack and headed to the next tee.

‘We’ll give you relief,’ said one of the other members. ‘You can call an unplayable and take a free drop. But that’s not a birdie.’

Mr. Rain threw the ball at the ground where he stood, grabbed a club from his bag and swung, carving out a large divot in the grass which he did not replace. The ball sailed halfway back up the fairway. His partners finished the hole and waited for him at the next tee. Mr. Rain took a nine, six over par, and he did not speak one word the rest of the round.

‘Worse things will happen,’ Jack said to himself, returning his attention to the unhealthy green as Mr. Rain walked away.

It was dark now and difficult to see. Billy was on his final walk-around, collecting abandoned pullcarts, locking the clubhouse doors and drawing the chains across the gates of the cart-corral for another day. He lifted his head to the sound of a four-wheeler changing gears in the distance, but because of the darkness he could not tell how far away the vehicle was or who was driving it. Must be Jack, he thought, which it was, out on his final check, ensuring the sprinkler heads were in working order for the night. From where Jack was now, he could see the light in the window of the proshop and because it was a place of open spaces with no walls or any other sound barriers between, he could hear the people within the shop cheering in a moment of apparent joy.

The cheering had come from Don.

‘Drink up there Ern. I’ve got a bottle o’The Famous Grouse at home. We’ll continue the celebration there. Here’s to the fucking kids,’ he said, raising his sixth beer and yelling, ‘Hip hip hooray!’

Raleigh and Jaymin had just told their fathers they were getting married. That was the trip Raleigh was planning. In fact, it wasn’t really a trip at all. He was moving to England with Jaymin. He would find a job and they would be just fine. They planned to drive to the coast once they were settled and get married by the sea.

‘It’s our life,’ Jaymin said, and ran out of the shop.

‘Christ,’ said Don and then calling after her, ‘you’re nineteen. What do you know about anything, let alone life?’

McMillan, the widower who lived near the golf course, was on his front porch when the evening had come and gone. And now down the road, the railway tracks were cooling, and the lake was quietly slapping against the shore. On a table beside him, the radio was on but because of the poor reception, the banjos and the haunting purity of the Carolina bluegrass, seemed even farther away than it was. On nights like this, clear and reminiscent, McMillan smoked a pipe instead of cigarettes. Tamping in a pinch of tobacco, he thought of his wife Emily and tried to remember her face without reaching for the photograph he kept in his shirt pocket. The whiskey was warm within him, and his brain reeled with images of years gone by, times more present and more real, it seemed, than anything that happened now. He thought of the Gillespie boy this morning, and of Russell Johnston on his bike.

And then as he did so many times every day, he pictured his wife Emily crossing the same road twenty years ago, only twenty-five at the time and entranced in one of her daydreams. He thought of how he had called out to her that day from the same porch he sat on now, how he had screamed out her name as he ran towards her, and how she had lifted her nose from the lilacs she had picked and smiled at him, just as the squealing school bus seemed to pluck her from the road. He could still feel her limp and lifeless body draped in his arms as he lifted her from the road and carried her towards town, forgetting in the moment that the nearest hospital was at least thirty minutes away by car, let alone by foot and burdened by the weight of another. And then after he set her down again and kissed her sleeping eyes, he could hear the sound of his own voice screaming, and he could feel the bone of the bus driver's face as he threw his fist into it again and again. And then he could feel the grip of three men pulling him away from the driver, and

the smell of the blood on his hands, and the flashing lights and the wailing sirens and the purple flowers that fell from her hand as they lifted her to the stretcher, closed the white doors, and raced away.

The rising hum of an engine jarred McMillan back to the present, and in seconds, Don Cardinal's Land Rover tore past him, sailing over the tracks and down towards the lake.

'Slow down!' McMillan yelled. 'God damn cottagers,' he said.

On his way by, Don threw an empty beer bottle out the window which landed in the ditch across the road from McMillan. It would remain hidden there in the tall grass, until the old man who liked to walk the roadsides and ditches would discover it with the foraging toe of his boot. One afternoon, McMillan asked the old man what he was doing, stuffing things into his pockets and plastic bags as he walked up and down the roads.

'Pickin golf balls,' the old man said, as though the balls were fruit. 'I sell'm to the golf course up the way fer forty dollars a hunnerd.'

When the old man sold the balls to Cedarhurst's proshop, it was Billy's job to shine them until they looked new again. Then he would dump them into a barrel with 'Experienced' written on it, and his uncle Ernest would sell them, often back to those who lost them in the first place, for a dollar each. The ones with deep gashes or very noticeable scuff marks never made it into the barrel, but to the old man who collected them, they were all the same.

'Gives me suh'mn to do,' the old man said, 'and a bit of money for the trouble. Collect the bottles too,' he said. 'Only makes sense to pick'm up when I see'm.'

Don's head was out the window when he passed McMillan, and he was driving with one hand on the wheel. Ernest, in the passenger's seat, said nothing and held on. They swerved from one side of the road to the other and Don slapped the outside of his truck. 'Hip hip hooray!' he shouted. 'Hip hip hooray!'

McMillan took the pipe from his mouth. The light in the tobacco had died and he had used his last match. 'God damn it,' he said. He took the picture from his shirt pocket and stared at the ever-fading black-and-whiteness of his wife's eternally twenty-five-year-old face. His eyes began to well. 'God damn it,' he said. 'God damn it.'

Billy was on his way into the proshop when he heard Mr. Cardinal yelling. This made him more anxious than he already was, and so he stopped and stood on the gravel path, his arms hanging uselessly at his sides. He was anxious about the favour his cousin Raleigh had asked of him, and now he did not know what to do. Raleigh had asked him to drop off the night deposit at the bank's after-hours slot on his way through town, and to open the front shop in the morning, neither of which were duties Billy had ever done before. Raleigh told him where the night deposit box was and that all he had to do was turn the key and drop the money in. And then quickly, he taught Billy how to use the cash register and showed him how the time sheets worked and the how to use the microphone to announce the parties' names as they appeared on the list. Billy said he didn't think he would be able to handle it and asked if his uncle Ernie was aware of it all.

'Sure,' Raleigh said. 'Don't worry about it. You'll be fine.' And then he said he wouldn't be around for the next few days, but not to worry, he would call when he got to where he was going.

Without asking any questions, Billy took the keys that were handed to him and said that he would do it, always wanting to please his older cousin. Raleigh thanked Billy and explained what each of the keys was for. One for the night-slot, one for the clubhouse and the proshop, and one for all the padlocks on the corral gates and the back room door. Raleigh said that he would hide the deposit in the old golf bag he had promised to give Billy the week before, and when Billy was finished for the night, he was to come into the proshop and say ‘everything’s locked up for another day.’ Then Raleigh would tell him to ‘hold on’ and he would go and get the bag from the back room. The deposit would be in the front pocket and no one would suspect a thing, Raleigh said. ‘My dad knows I’m giving you the bag. You’ll be fine.’

But when Billy heard Mr. Cardinal yelling, he became more nervous and so he decided to go back to the clubhouse and check the doors one more time, even though he knew for certain they were locked because he had just come from there. As he approached the clubhouse a squirrel leaped from the eaves trough to the nearest tree. It was completely dark and the suddenness of the squirrel’s flight startled Billy, and so now with his heart racing, he turned back towards the proshop and saw Jaymin heading towards him, the bell above the screen-door ringing behind her. He was like an animal caught in the middle of the road, halted by the sound of danger and frozen with indecision. Although he was only fifteen, he was still much taller than she was. Without stopping she walked right into him, threw her arms around his neck, and buried her face in his thin chest. She was crying, and again, he did not know what to do. His arms were straight and rigid at his sides, and he hoped she wouldn’t be able to feel the erection he was getting, or the pounding of his heart in his throat.

‘It’s our life,’ she said into his shirt.

He couldn’t hear what she said but he managed to put an arm around her, the way he had seen his cousin do, and as he was working on the second arm there was more yelling from within the shop, and then Mr. Cardinal came stumbling through the screen-door.

‘Take your hands off her,’ he said. His speech was slurred and when he clomped towards them, Billy pulled away from Jaymin, and she shoved her father as she ran past him.

‘Why don’t you just leave,’ she cried, but because she was running away from him, he could not hear what she said. ‘You don’t belong here,’ she said, continuing down the path and around the clubhouse, crying into the night, ‘You don’t belong here.’

Off balance from the collision with his daughter, Don Cardinal fell.

Raleigh come out of the shop just behind and was running after Jaymin now. Ernest was standing beside Don, offering him a hand. Taking it, Don laughed and grunted as Ernest pulled him to his feet. ‘Tell who *her* fucken mother is,’ he said. Gaining his balance, he snapped his fingers and pointed at Billy. Squinting, he said, ‘D’you clean my truck, you little pervert?’

Ernest looked at Billy as though to say *just ignore him*, and then he looked at Don and said, ‘I’m taking you home.’

‘I’m going home,’ Don said, inches from Billy’s face. ‘I’m going home.’ He had a loose arm thrown over Ernest’s shoulders and Ernest walked beside him with a hand at his back. ‘I’m going home,’ Don sang. ‘Going home.’

Just then a car rolled into the parking lot, gravel crunching beneath the tires.

Don loosened himself from Ernest, snared another beer from the back of his truck, clambered into the driver's seat, and turned the key. Revving the engine, he rolled down the window and tried to make eye contact with the man in the other car, Billy's brother Steve who had played behind Mr. Rain earlier in the day. Ernest apologized to Billy and said he would see him tomorrow, and then he waved goodnight to Steve before climbing into the passenger seat beside Don. Steve raised a hand in return, but Don understood the hand to be Steve's way of accepting a challenge, of saying, 'okay, let's go,' and so without hesitation Don spun the Land Rover out of the parking lot, howling and spinning and spraying gravel and dust behind him.

'Uncle Ern's got his hands full tonight,' said Steve.

'That's Jaymin's father,' said Billy.

'Really, some winner there. Speaking of Jaymin where's Smitty?' Steve said, referring to Raleigh. 'I thought he was working tonight.'

'He was.'

Steve's face said, 'Well?'

'He run after Jaymin. She was cry'n.'

'Women,' he said. 'They're so emotional.' Steve began to sniff. 'What is that?'

'What's what?' Billy said.

'That smell.'

'I dunno. I can't smell anything.'

'I must be hungry or something.'

'I dunno. Let's go home.'

They rolled out of the parking lot and headed north towards town. Billy pretended to look out the window and raised his shoulder slightly so that he could smell the collar of his shirt. Vanilla. That night he would wear the shirt to bed and masturbate to the image of his cousin's future wife in his arms, her cheek warm against his chest, as it had been. And then in his dreams, he would tackle Mr. Cardinal to the gravel path and punch him in the face repeatedly, while Jaymin stood beside and cheered.

After watching Jaymin shove past her father and then run away, Raleigh wondered for a moment whether he should apologize to Mr. Cardinal and ask him again for his blessing, but he didn't know what he would be apologizing for, and he knew that there would be no blessing on Mr. Cardinal's lips tonight, or any night at all. And so then he thought maybe he should wait until Mr. Cardinal regained his feet, and then, inches from his face and looking him in the eye, tell his future father-in-law exactly what he thought, but Raleigh didn't really know what he thought, and so he decided against that too. Instead, he stood there and, loud enough for everyone to hear, he said, 'She'll never run away from me.'

He turned then and caught up to Jaymin just beyond the clubhouse. No one could see them in their growing distance and the darkness. When he took her hand from behind, she turned and they fell into each other like the merging of clouds. Her eyes were wet against his neck and when he kissed her head, his mouth was warm in her hair. They walked down the edge of the fairway holding hands and stopped beneath the tree he had engraved their initials in. They stood holding each other for a long long while and said nothing. There was no sound except for the frogs in the creek and the crickets in the grass and the waking *who* of an owl in the trees. Soon Raleigh's lips were on Jaymin's wrist

and on the skin where her arm bends and then on her shoulder, and he lifted her shirt over her head as they kissed and she pulled his belt free and flicked open the button of his shorts, and the grass was cool against her naked and arching back as he lowered her there and buried himself within her.

After, they fell asleep dreaming of England.

‘Shit,’ Billy said. ‘We’ve gotta go back.’ As he and his brother Steve drove past the bank in town, Billy suddenly remembered the golf bag Raleigh was supposed to give him before he left. ‘Raleigh’ll shoot me.’

‘What are you go’n on about?’ said Steve.

‘The money,’ said Billy. ‘He asked me to. He told me when I was finished to come in and say everything’s locked up for another day, and then he would give me the golf bag with the money in. You’ve gotta take me back.’

‘Yer not makin any sense.’

‘I said, Raleigh asked me to drop off the deposit for him. I forgot to pick it up. We have to go back and get it.’

‘Why didn’t *he* do it?’

‘He said he was leavin to go somewhere and he didn’t have time to go into town.

Are you gonna take me back or not?’

‘Yeah, I’ll take you back. Just relax. But I can’t see uncle Ern want’n you to handle any money.’

‘Well, Raleigh says he knows.’

Steve shrugged. ‘How are you supposed to get in?’

Billy held up the keys Raleigh had given him earlier.

‘Alright,’ Steve said and sighed. He turned at the Old Mill and headed back in the direction from which they had come. Driving down Bay Street they passed the liquor store and the Fire Hall and Pedersen’s Autobody where the remains of Rob Gillespie’s truck sat in disrepair. The collision with the hydro pole had bent the bumper nearly in two, and the grill was shattered. The hood was bent and jutting grotesquely up toward the windshield which was itself smashed in from the accident. A streetlight shone down on the truck and made the strands of grass that were still sticking out from the front wheel-well noticeable from the road. Beneath the streetlight, the wreck seemed like some strange piece of rural art in a downtown city exhibit, called something like, Grass Roots & The Softness of Metal.

Steve looked at the truck as they drove by. ‘You heard about Rob Gillespie,’ he said.

Billy nodded, and said, ‘I helped Jack lower the flag.’

‘He was nineteen,’ Steve said.

‘I remember him from school. You played rugby with him,’ said Billy.

‘Mm-hmn,’ Steve said and exhaled heavily through his nose. ‘D’you know the old guy he hit?’ he said.

‘Sure,’ said Billy. ‘He was a nice old guy. Always tipped me fer cleaning his clubs. I played golf with him last week. I was out first thing and he asked me to join’m. He has his own cart and he let me drive.’

‘*Had* his own cart,’ Steve said.

‘Mm-hmn,’ said Billy. ‘Had.’

Steve looked at Billy, and when he drove up the hill on Osborne, he pulled into the parking lot of Luy's Place. 'Okay,' he said and threw the car into park. 'But don't go blabbing to anyone, or I'll never let you again.'

'Okay what?' Billy said, the neon orange Bar sign glowing behind them.

Steve turned the car off, handed Billy the keys and climbed out of the driver's seat. 'Start'er up,' he said.

Billy's eyes widened and he shuffled in behind the wheel. Steve flopped into the passenger seat and drew the belt across his chest. 'Now go slow,' Steve said. 'And remember, don't be tellin anyone.'

It was beyond ten o'clock now, and they met no one on the dark road as they drove back towards the golf course. The moon was full and the sky was without clouds, and with the windows down, they could smell the freshly cut hay and the clean cool lakeborn air. Strangely, Steve thought, he felt more like an adult by letting his younger brother drive than by the actual act of driving itself. He clicked the radio on, leaned back in the seat, and put his hand out the window. Smiling, he tapped out the rhythm of the song on the roof of the car while his brother, who was also smiling, sang along: 'Take me home country roads, to the place where I belong...'

The rest seemed all to happen at once, the way events that occur in rapid succession always seem to, separate but somehow simultaneous and shared, collective. But no two things ever take place at exactly the same moment. One must come before the next, however briefly and with whatever level of consequence, and something has to come or happen before that first thing, and then something before that which precedes the first, and something before that and so on, burrowing back into history in one direction

and on into the future in the other. No two people can ever hold each other's hand with the same firmness, nor can they ever fall in love together as the sun goes down. The clock never stops at the exact moment a runner crosses the line, nor does that runner ever feel the same pain as the one in front or behind. Fingers do not respond in unison to eyes reading music, and neither do they press down the keys in exact time with the ticking of the metronome. In this way, nothing is ever finished or ever perfect. Nothing ever really occurs in a single moment of love or perfection or tragedy, the way language and memory and feeling make it seem. For the sun is ever falling, and pain only diminishes, and music, once played, sounds on and on and on.

And so it was on this curving and hilly country road that winds south towards the city, dark now and scarred with the events of the morning, that all who had been part of the day seemed to come together at once. But not exactly all and not exactly together and not exactly at once. It was approaching the day's final hour when Billy and Steve rolled into Cedarhurst's parking lot. Around the same time, Jack Fairell was down the road putting the four-wheeler in the barn that also held the tractors and large mowers and all the other heavy equipment a greenskeeper needs for the maintenance of a golf course's manicured condition. He was finished for the day and for the night, having just come back from adjusting the many automatically-timed sprinkler heads that are placed around the course so that over night the greens could become greener and the fairways more fair. But as he was running the chain through the handles of the large barn doors and setting the padlock in place, a loud siren-like alarm sounded up the road. There had been three break-ins over the past couple of months, and Jack had been asked by the club's board of directors to schedule his week so that, particularly on the weekends, he might be there

beyond ten at night. Jack said that he would, so long as they paid him for his time. So it was arranged, and now tonight Jack was in his office with the lights off, dialling the number for the police. Soon from the direction of the peaceful and resting town, a wail of sirens would swell for the second time today, the announcement of unrest again in their wake.

Beneath their tree, Jaymin and Raleigh sprang awake at the sound of the alarm, naked and unsure for a moment where they were. Awkwardly and frantically, they searched with their hands for their clothes, their eyes blurry and still adjusted for sleep. Raleigh found his shorts and searched the pockets for his cell phone. Finding it, he quickly dialled a number.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Pick up.’

‘Try the cottage,’ Jaymin whispered, dressed now and handing Raleigh his clothes, which he put on and then dialled the other number. After five rings, Don Cardinal answered.

‘It’s ten thirty and I’m drunk,’ Don said, barely speaking into the phone. ‘Cheers,’ he said. Raleigh could hear the clinking of two glasses and his father’s voice in the background, slurring a ‘cheers’ in response. ‘I’m drunk,’ Don said again, this time so close to the phone that what he said was very loud and distorted. ‘I’m drunk here with my good friend Ernest Smith, golf pro extraordin—, extraordinaire.’

‘Can I speak to my father,’ Raleigh said. ‘It’s an emergency.’

‘It’s an emergency,’ Don said to Ernest. ‘For my father.’

‘Your father?’ Ernest said in the background. ‘I thought your father was dead.’

‘He is,’ Don said, and Raleigh could hear them both laughing.

‘Who is this?’ Don said into the phone.

‘It’s Raleigh, Mr. Cardinal. Can I please speak to my father.’

‘Raleigh,’ said Don, suddenly sober-sounding and full of anger. ‘What did you do with my daughter?’

‘She’s here. Please, Mr. Cardinal. It’s an emergency.’

There was a pause and then Ernest was on the line. ‘Cedarhurst Golf Club. Ernest speaking.’

Don laughed in the background.

‘Someone’s breaking into the shop.’

‘What’s all that ringing?’ Ernest said.

‘I just told you. Someone’s breaking into the shop. Are you drunk?’

‘Nah’m not drunk,’ Ernest said. ‘When were you gonna tell me yer mov’n to god damn England, huh?’

‘I told you tonight, dad.’ Raleigh sighed. ‘You stay where you are. I’ll call the police.’

‘You stay—’

The line went dead. Raleigh shook the cell phone and thwapped it against his leg, thinking that if he hit it hard enough, the phone would work again. As though the mere force created in the collision of two things could reopen lost lines of communication.

‘That’s not going to help,’ Jaymin whispered. ‘Let me see.’ She took the phone and looked at the face of it. ‘It’s dead.’

‘Well what are we going to do now?’ Raleigh said. ‘We can’t phone the police or anything.’

‘We’ll just have to go up there and see,’ she said. ‘The alarm probably scared them off anyway, or it could’ve even been a mouse.’

‘A mouse. It wasn’t a mouse.’

Jaymin smiled, and was the one to take Raleigh’s hand this time. They walked together back up the fairway towards the shop. The alarm was still ringing and it grew louder as they approached. Jack was making his own way up the road then and in seconds, Raleigh heard him coming through a path in the trees. Raleigh’s eyes widened at the sound of small twigs breaking underfoot. ‘Jaymin,’ he whispered. His heart was racing and he squeezed her hand.

Warm and slow from the whiskey, McMillan had also fallen asleep beneath the dark summer sky, his head fallen to one side while he sat slouched in the chair on his porch. The pipe had fallen from his hand and was now on the slatted floor beside him, burnt black tobacco spilling from its mouth. The radio, with its poor reception, was still on. The sudden wailing of the alarm had broken McMillan’s sleep too, but he was much slower to move than the two beneath the tree. He rubbed his eyes and grunted as he pushed himself up from the chair and yawned with his hands stretched over his head.

‘What the hell’s the matter now,’ he said, stepping down from the porch and looking up the road towards the ringing alarm. ‘City kids no doubt,’ he said. ‘Nothing better to do. Used to be you could live a life and never lock a door. I don’t know what this country’s comin to.’

At first, McMillan was alone and talking out loud to himself, but then he heard the sounds of walking and he saw the shadow of a man pass under the streetlight at the corner, the place where the road from the lake meets the road that winds south towards

the city. He thought the shadow might belong to the old man who walks the roadsides and ditches for golf balls and beer bottles, and so he started across his lawn, wanting to ask the old man what he was doing at such an hour. But just as McMillan put a hand in the air and was about to call out, the alarm up the road stopped ringing, and McMillan could hear the figure across the road talking as though in conversation.

‘Russell,’ came the voice. ‘We told you about the road, Russell. You should know these things.’

McMillan stood at the edge of his yard and strained to see who the person was, but it was too dark and the figure was moving too slowly, which made it more difficult to see. Like looking for fish in dark water as they glide slowly by.

‘Russell,’ came the voice again, louder this time. ‘We told you about the road, Russell. You should know these things.’

Sirens rose in the distance.

McMillan did not move. Like a rabbit, he stood absolutely still. Then he heard something strike a tree. And then again. And again. Not the slick sound of an axe he was used to from his youth when he spent two summers clearing brush and splitting sawed logs out at Walden’s Woodworking, but a hollow thud. He couldn’t see the golf club in the figure’s hands, but he could hear the deadened clunk and the flutter of bark chipping away each time the club’s blade struck the tree. McMillan would recognize the man if he could see his face, but he wouldn’t know his name. Mr. Rain had moved into his lakefront home just last year, and McMillan had only ever seen him in passing.

The sirens grew closer, and the whirling red and white lights lit up the distant darkness. In his somnambulance, Mr. Rain now swung the club back and forth and

downward in front of him, violently hacking the tall grass and gauging the face of the earth. In the middle of a swing, he connected with the beer bottle Don Cardinal had thrown out the window. ‘Russell!’ he yelled. ‘You should know these things! You should know!’

‘Hey!’ McMillan finally said, startled into speech by the sound of breaking glass. ‘Hey, god damn it. What’r you doing?’

Up the road, someone started a car and McMillan turned his head to the sound of gravel being spit from beneath the spinning tires. And then another car started and it too tore off down the road. ‘Damn city kids,’ McMillan said and shook his head at the thought of them getting away. ‘God damn cops,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t catch a cold if you sneezed on’m.’

Suddenly, it seemed, Mr. Rain was within arms’ length, his eyes wildly awake while he stood there steadfastly asleep, naked from the waist up and wearing only his underwear. The golf club was above his head and he brought it down like a sledgehammer onto the road. The head of the club snapped off, leaving only the shaft in his hands. A stupidly oversized wand capable of no magic, jagged at the end where the club’s head had been severed. Just then, the police cars rounded the corner, their sirens whirring almost like the howling of an animal. McMillan and Mr. Rain were only a few car lengths away and although McMillan had heard the cruisers coming, he was still startled by their sudden presence. Hurried and awkward, McMillan stepped back onto his lawn and put a hand out to block the brightness of the flashing and beaming lights, while Mr. Rain turned, threw up his hands and ran towards them.

‘Russell!’ Mr. Rain screamed. ‘Russell, no!’

Thrown from Mr. Rain's hands, the broken club flipped and twisted through the air and landed uselessly beside McMillan who had tripped in his stepping back, and was now scrambling to his feet. His eyes widened, and flashing before him in that moment was the image of his wife those many years ago, crossing the same road and smiling at him with the lilacs in her hand. The lead cruiser screeched sideways and spun into the ditch, striking and lifting the half-naked body of Mr. Rain high into the air. His body, already lifeless, landed with a soft and seemingly harmless thud on the road between the other two police cars, which had managed to stop in time and avoid collision.

The night was suddenly silent. The sirens stopped whirring and there were no more voices and even the night owls seemed to have ceased their lonely calls. The lights continued to revolve atop the cruisers, flashing in quiet circles like those within towers at the ends of piers. Within moments, there was the sound of a pickup approaching. The tires rolled slowly over the gravel and sounded almost to be splitting the dry hard-packed dirt beneath. Like the sound of lake-ice cracking in winter. The truck stopped the length of a hydro pole away and then the headlights dimmed and the engine cut off, and Jack Fairell stepped down onto the road.

Down along the lakeshore, Ernest had passed out in the driver's seat of Don Cardinal's Land Rover, parked in the driveway with no keys. After he had got off the phone with his son, Ernest had told Don that they needed to get up to the course right away, that someone was breaking in. Rushing, they stammered out of the cottage leaving all the lights and the music on, and the front door wide open.

'Hip hip,' Don slurred and hiccoughed, climbing into the truck.

'Keys,' Ernest said.

‘Shit,’ Don said, and squished an index finger into the windshield. ‘I’ll get’m. The door’s open.’ He slumped from the truck and staggered back into the cottage.

‘Keys!’ Ernest called out again, and then let his head fall forward into his chest and fell almost instantly to sleep.

Reaching for the open door, Don tripped on the welcome mat and stumbled into the far wall of the foyer where the painting by David Milne hung. Unable to maintain his balance, he tumbled and flopped backwards.

‘Shit,’ he mumbled, sighing heavily, and in seconds he too was sleeping. The seventy-year-old canvas, cracked from its fall, lay beside him on the floor.

The first time McMillan had put a hand in the air, as though to call out to the figure across the road, Raleigh was up at the proshop, punching in the code to shut off the alarm. Billy and Steve had finally given up trying to find the golf bag with the deposit in it, and had decided to flee the scene before anyone arrived. They would play dumb the next day and shake their heads at the news of another break-in. As they left the shop, Jack stepped out from behind the bushes and seized them both by the shirt and then by the neck. The boys wriggled and shook under Jack’s hold, and screamed, ‘Lemme go. Lemme go. We did’n do nothin.’

When Jack realized who they were, he released them and stood back. The alarm was still ringing and so he had to speak loudly. ‘Billy,’ he said. ‘Steve. What’r you boys doing?’ His voice was stern, and the sensation of his calloused hands was still on the backs of the boys’ necks. ‘You realize I called the cops.’ Jack looked at Billy. ‘Don’t tell me—’

‘God, no, Jack,’ said Billy. ‘Raleigh told me to. He told me when I was finished to come in and say everything’s locked up and then he would give me the bag with the money in it.’

Jack looked at Steve who now had his hands in his pockets. ‘Raleigh asked Billy to take the deposit into town,’ he said. ‘He forgot to grab it before we left and we just come back for it. That’s all.’

Raleigh and Jaymin came out from behind the clubhouse then and were soon standing near the others.

‘Lemme go,’ Raleigh said, mimicking his cousins. ‘Lemme go. Lemme go.’

Jaymin swatted him, looked at Billy and said, ‘Ask your brave cousin here who’s afraid of a mouse.’

Raleigh turned and shushed her, then hurried into the proshop and turned off the alarm.

‘You all better get go’n,’ said Jack and he looked at each of them individually. ‘I don’t want to have to explain a false alarm.’

They could hear the sirens then in the distance and someone screaming, and so Raleigh quickly shook hands with Jack and then with Billy and Steve while Jaymin hugged each of them in turn.

‘We’ll see ya round,’ said Steve, and Raleigh held a hand in the air as he and Jaymin hurried away. And then Steve looked at Jack and said, ‘Thanks.’

‘Yeah, thanks,’ said Billy.

‘We’ll see you tomorrow,’ said Jack and the boys jogged out to the parking lot.

Soon Raleigh's car was started and tearing off down the road away from the sound of the sirens, headed for the city and tomorrow morning's flight and a waiting life abroad. In seconds, Steve and Billy followed, speeding through the wake of dust in the darkness.

Jack walked out to the road behind the proshop, leaned against the side of his truck and looked down towards McMillan's. He could see the lights and hear the sirens, which he was expecting, but his eyes widened at the sound of the one voice screaming, 'Russell! Russell, no!' Almost in one motion, he was in the cab and turning the key as the slow shrill sound of screeching tires reached him.

It was nearly midnight now, and the police had exited their cars and fallen naturally into the movements of protocol. Flares went up, and flashlights flashed here and there, and police tape fenced off the area, and radios clicked on and off with reports of the accident and requests for assistance, official codes of communication.

Jack lit a cigarette and offered the package to McMillan. 'The god damnedest thing,' McMillan said, taking one and lighting it. 'Stand'n there in his underwear with a golf club over his head. Didn't know what the hell he was doing. I thought for sure he was come'n after me, and then the cops tore round the corner and then. Well. I don't know what things is come'n to Jack. I really don't.'

'No,' said Jack. 'I know.'

'D'you see who it was?'

'Up the road you mean?'

'Yeah. City kids was it?'

'No,' said Jack. 'Wasn't even a break-in.'

McMillan shook his head and drew on his cigarette. 'Jesus,' he said. Without thinking, he picked up the broken club and resolutely said, 'Well, god damn it. We're not much good here.'

'No,' said Jack. 'We're not.'

'I need a drink,' McMillan said. 'One for the road.'

'Thanks,' said Jack. 'Thanks. But I think I'll head'er home.'

They both finished and butted their cigarettes beneath their shoes and said goodnight. And almost in unison they walked away from each other with their hands in their pockets, one stepping up into his truck and the other onto his porch and into the chair he would fall asleep in, dreaming of his wife and of a time of unlocked doors.

Down the road by the lake, a train rumbled by. Passing through the country, its horn was sudden and shrill, but somehow barely noticeable in the strange serenity of the night. In the morning there would be people waking, and there would still be sun, and in the air the solemn song of loons.

The Apprenticeship of a Short Fiction Writer

The word 'fiction' comes from the Latin *fingere* , which means, 'to give shape or form to.' It also means 'to invent,' which, etymologically, is an act of discovery. A story is a home for the fiction, within which a family of characters lives, connecting and conflicting with each other in a series of related and separate moments, the way a family does. Some of these moments are more significant than others, more memorable, appearing in a story much in the same way a memory returns to someone in contemplation, with seeming randomness but underlain with purpose and meaning. The fiction writer, then, is both architect and builder: he invents the story, and through the writing of it, gives it shape and form. The short fiction writer is limited by space, and therefore must try to make the most of every corner, every angle and every wall. The collected stories of Alistair MacLeod's Island comprise a community of such fiction, wherein each story is both distinct and cooperative, working together with each of the others, giving shape to their individual identities and the identity of the whole. As an architect of fiction, MacLeod is an expert

in design, and he is a master builder. If there were ever an apprenticeship an aspiring short fiction writer should take, it is in the reading, and in the rereading of these stories.

To collect means to gather, to form a community of individual parts that come to share commonalities not only with each other, but with the place they are gathered in, with the ground beneath them, the landscape. With the exception of “The Golden Gift of Grey,” all of MacLeod’s stories take place on Canada’s east coast, and apart from “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” Cape Breton Island is the fixed point of departure, the place of return, and the forever site of home. When asked if he planned to ‘link’ his stories this way, MacLeod said, “I treated them as though they were children; I cared about each of them individually, but just as I no more planned to ‘link’ my children, did I plan to ‘link’ my stories. They just were” (Personal Interview, Windsor, February 23rd, 2005). And in this way, the stories have become a family, each one inhabiting much of the same physical and cerebral space as the others, while maintaining its individual own. Quite literally, the landscape has come to name the stories and who the characters are within them; and in turn, through their actions and interactions with the place and with each other, the characters have come to offer perspective on what makes the place what it is, and why it is so integrally related to who they are.

However, landscape is only essential to a story if it is meaningful. Describing the appearance of a place—be it the countryside, or a room in a house, or a shanty on a cliff by the sea—for the mere sake of visualization really only distracts the reader from what the story actually is. Straying from the design weakens the foundation and the structure upon and within which a story is built. Consequently, the lines of communication between architect and builder break down, and the story fails. In the story “In the Fall,”

MacLeod says he wanted “to write about the tension of when we want something to happen very much emotionally but [for reasons beyond our control], it cannot happen” (Modestyarbour Interview, August, 2001). Faced with the inevitability of change, what the man wants to happen in this story is actually a desire for something not to happen; he wants things to stay the same. Even before the man is introduced, the narrator establishes the tone of such tension through a description of the place:

Each day dawns duller and more glowering and the waves of the grey Atlantic are sullen and almost yellow at their peaks as they pound relentlessly against the round smooth boulders that lie scattered as if by a careless giant at the base of the ever-resisting cliffs. (98)

The relentlessly pounding ‘grey Atlantic’ is an image of a certain and unyielding pressure to change, where the waves continue to wear away at the ‘ever-resisting cliffs,’ which, like the man, suffer an almost imperceptible but inevitable grinding down over time. The landscape, here, is embedded in the man, and neither man nor place can really help the other to withstand the unavoidability of change.

As with how landscape is depicted—by way of selected details—what the characters say in a story greatly affects what a reader hears and understands. In other words, if an argument or a moment of love is concealed by otherwise superfluous dialogue, then the purpose and the meaning of the argument, or the love, will be lost. In “The Return,” after having spoken with their son throughout the story about his living so far away and the amount of time that has past since seeing him or their grandson, the grandparents each say and do one thing as they bid their grandson goodbye. The grandmother says, “‘Alex, you are the only grandchild I will never know,’ and presses

into [his] hand the crinkled dollar that is never spent”; the grandfather “shakes hands very formally,” and says, “Good-bye, Alex, [...] it was ten years before you saw me. In another ten I will not be here to see” (96-7). The seeming matter-of-factness with which both grandparents speak captures the simple eloquence of who they are and where they are from, while relating both the utter sadness and the inexorableness of the moment of farewell they are in. And each of their gestures, however insignificant they might seem, stay with the grandson well into his adult life and return to him in this narrative as moments that resound with as much feeling and as much meaning as what his grandparents said to him when he left.

The point of view a writer chooses to write from can be as significant a gesture as anything his characters say or do. “The Closing Down of Summer” is told in the first person, which in itself is not particularly noteworthy, but that there is no directly related dialogue in the story makes the choice of first person perhaps as meaningful as any of the words within the narrative. What is written becomes more a monologue of the narrator’s unspoken moments of disappointment and pride, of sadness and satisfaction and loss, and of long-felt hopes and regrets than a plot-driven series of events in a life. At one point, the narrator says:

I would like somehow to show and tell the nature of my work and perhaps some of my entombed feelings to those that I would love, if they would care to listen. I would like to tell my wife and children something of the way my years pass by on the route to my inevitable death. (197-8)

The irony of this wanting is that he does ‘show and tell the nature of [his] work,’ but within the context of the narrative the showing and the telling are confined to what he

thinks and feels. He is unable to articulate “how articulate” he is “in the accomplishment of what” he does (199). In many of MacLeod’s stories, the characters are given a level of diction and expressiveness in their moments of contemplation which reflects a particular eloquence that is rooted deeply in their Gaelic pasts. In “The Closing Down of Summer,” the level of perspective the narrator reaches, and relates through his first person position, is an example of the kind of insight every person is capable of, but not always able to communicate.

The general rule is, as a writer, never let yourself be heard in the writing. There are occasions, however, that when a narrator steps outside the voice of the story, it is, if not necessary, at least unobtrusive, and allows the reader to peek at some of the writer’s original designs. The Christmas story “To Everything There Is a Season” begins this way, with narrator acknowledging from the outset that he is telling a story of another time. In a moment of temporary omniscience that is external to the framework of the principal narrative, he admits that he is “not sure how much [he] speak[s] with the voice of that [other] time or how much in the voice of what [he has] since become” (209). What this quiet declaration does, in narrative terms, is that it gives the story-teller permission to invent—to discover, as it were—what his story means. “To Everything There Is a Season” ends with the only direct dialogue given to the narrator’s ailing father: “‘Every man moves on,’ my father says and I think he speaks of Santa Claus, ‘but there is no need to grieve. He leaves good things behind’” (217). As story-teller, the narrator chooses to make this the last thing he says, placing much of the story’s meaning on the shoulders of something his father may or may not even have said. The reader can believe that the father actually said these words because what he says is real; it is authentic to his

character—like the grandparents’ final words in “The Return,” or Carver’s in “The Tuning of Perfection,” or the anonymous driver in “The Vastness of the Dark,” or the children in “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood,” or the voice in “Clearances.” Yet the reader can also believe that the narrator invented these words for his father because what the father says resonates with the kind of acuity that is often heard in the voice of the archetypal story-teller himself, and so the words ‘He leaves good things behind’ fall from the page with all the attributable insight, irony and ambiguity for which the archetypal story-teller is known.

MacLeod himself often writes the ending of a story when he comes to the midway point, and then writes towards that end. He says that “the ending is your last chance to say something to the reader; better to figure out how it will end before you get there. If you just wait for something to come, it may never arrive” (Personal Interview, February 23rd, 2005). But just as the ending is the writer’s last chance to say something to the reader, the beginning is his first. It is where the builder establishes the groundwork which allows the story to be constructed, to take its shape in the way that the architect had planned. Part of the groundwork MacLeod lays is in his subtle use of vocabulary; with it, he creates patterns of images or ideas or words that reveal themselves in the beginning and then duck just below the narrative surface and move patiently along towards the story’s end, where they emerge again like an underwater swimmer who has finally run out of breath. The eerie image of the narrator’s father waiting for him “in the room below the darkened stairs” in the beginning of “The Boat, ” for example, resurfaces in the final image of the narrator’s father who lay “wedged between two boulders at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs, [...] with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in

his hair” (25). And the first line of “As Birds Bring Forth the Sun” makes the reader feel as though the story were the retelling of a legend; it reads, “Once there was a family with a Highland name who lived by the sea” (310). The intermittence of the phrase “and so it goes” (317) and the haunting and repeated image of the “cú mór glas, the big grey dog” (312) sustain the feeling of legend throughout, and at story’s end, the recurrence of the title image and the context within which it is repeated point to one of the story’s principal concerns: the extent to which legends influence belief. And then perhaps the most lucid example of MacLeod’s deliberate and carefully detailed beginnings and ends, there is the slow, rhythmic depiction of the coastal landscape that opens “The Lost Salt Gift of Blood”:

Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. It bathes the blunt grey rocks that loom yearningly out toward Europe and it touches upon the stunted spruce and the low-lying lichens and the delicate hardy ferns and the ganglia-rooted moss and the tiny tough rock cranberries. The grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise marauders.

Everything before them and beneath them has been rapidly, briefly and thoroughly drenched and now the clear droplets catch and hold the sun’s infusion in a myriad of rainbow colours. (118)

It is like a collection of details in the narrator’s rediscovery of a place he once, but only briefly was. Yet it requires the unfolding of the story to make it clear that the narrator, who is himself a collector, is very much like ‘the grey and slanting rain squalls [that] have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise

marauders' (118). And yet it is not clear until the end, when the narrator sees and hears two small children race toward their father, crying "Daddy, Daddy, [...] what did you bring me? What did you bring me?" (142) And really, it is not even then. Like the stories themselves, it only begins to come clear over the passage of time and the thoughtful attention paid to place, to the people and their landscape, to what they say and what they do not say, to what they do and what they do not do, to the sounds and the smells and the images of their land, to their beginnings and their ends, and to their collective and individual selves.

Alistair MacLeod has said repeatedly that he is "very thoughtful" about his stories. He says he thinks about them for a long time, even before he begins to write them. And then there is always a plan, a direction in which he wants to go. It is like "getting in your car and driving to Orillia or Ohio," he says. "You need to have gas and you need to know where you are going, otherwise you just end up stranded or driving around all night, arriving nowhere" (Personal Interview, February 23rd, 2005). And so this, as the distant and admiring apprentice, is what I have tried to do. I have tried to be thoughtful. I have tried to invent a cluster of stories that reflects a people and a place which I love but do not understand. I have tried to discover them—the people and the place—through the writing of the stories. I have tried to shape them, to build them, to write them 'for home.'

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Vita Auctoris

Daryl Sneath was raised in Beaverton, Ontario, and were there a hospital there, it is where he would have been born. He graduated from the University of Windsor with a degree in English Literature, and after, from the University of Ottawa with a Bachelor of Education. He is currently a Master's candidate of English Literature and Creative Writing, again at the University of Windsor, and he lives in Port Perry, Ontario, with his future wife, Tara. He returns to Beaverton whenever he can.