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Out of Season. (Original writing);.

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OUT OF SEASON

by

Paul David Bellmore

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

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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DEDICATION

This book is lovingly dedicated to my father Leonard and my mother Ann Marie.
I can never express in words what your love and unwavering support has meant to me.

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Home is Where

Sonny opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling. There was a streetlight outside of his window and the frame projected a shadow cross on the ceiling above his bed. The wind rattled the pane defiantly, trying to draw entry. He looked over at the alarm clock and blinked his eyes twice, trying to clear away sleep. Red numbers pierced his tightening eyes. 11:43. *It will come soon like it did in the day. Are there not twelve hours in the day?* He reached over for his glasses that were neatly folded on top of a black bible. His Aunt had told him to take comfort in the gospel of John. Her persistence had eventually driven him away. People had given him other things to start over. The comforts of home.

He swung around and placed his feet on the small worn carpet beside his bed and bunched it up between his toes. *Don't want to fall asleep yet.* Outside a horn sounded in the street and Sonny turned towards the window. *Strange times, strange place.* He reached over and turned on the radio. Voices met him. Talk from the United States.

"O.K. Anthony what's your question?"

"Well, I'm having a problem with my girlfriend. I don't know if she loves me. I mean, how do you know?"

During the evenings he often listened to call-in shows. The airwaves were filled with tales of cheating husbands, absent fathers, sickness, delusion, death; always others going through something. He liked listening to voices at night while warm under thick blankets. At other times, he tuned into a show with a psychic reader. He knew people only wanted to hear about their good fortune. Outside, the days were growing longer and the air was heavy and warm with the promise of summer.

"Where the hell is it?" he said rising past the others on the radio. He silenced the voices with a push of a button. The sounds of the city: engines roaring, cars moving past, wind whistling, voices call to a pop can rolling noisily in the alley. *Must be late tonight.* On the dresser sat an envelope and a letter from home. Mrs. Anderson had written to him in care of his Aunt. "Your father's doing fine. We are all thinking of you Sonny."

He grabbed for his coat which was hanging over the back of the chair beside the dresser. He wanted badly to be out and into the cool night. He coughed and pinched the ends of his nose then dragged his

fingers lightly over his thin mustache. *Ah there it is. Hnnnnmmmm.* The sound of a train in the distance, strong then trailing off, approaching the city and winding along the water's edge. *Just like the one that went in behind my...*

Sonny walked out from the back alley and onto the main street. There were still some puddles from an earlier rain and he carefully stepped around them. He walked upright for now, wanting the wind to waken his still sleep laden mind. He trained his eyes on a point, lone and red in the distance. The street was busy with people. He turned into a storefront and stood on the stairs to watch. The fringes of the awning flapped above him in the wind. There were people, coming in and out of bars, getting into cars, their heads down seeking shelter. A large nightclub was on the other side of the street, and cabs were constantly positioning themselves in front, waiting for people, and then aggressively merging in and out of the steady flow of traffic.

Always something going on when you're not there to see it. Does it still exist then? Same old question. If a tree falls. Where was I before I was born? He noted the forms of strangers. A nose went past him, *red like Mr. Blake's.* A couple approaching with gloved hands joined. Sonny sighed silently, stilled by their unspoken bond. The man looked up, and pulled the woman closer to him with a firm tug.

In the shop behind him, darkened faces met his own. He craned his neck and stood on his toes to see the grandfather and cuckoo clocks against the back wall. *Always liked them. Have to get one some day. Grandpa had one. I can remember waiting for the top of the hour, and the bird would scare me when it came out. Then I'd laugh.* He focused on his reflection in the window. It was faint, and the streetlights dimpled the forehead of his shadow self. The street beyond was wet and glistening. Cars splashed through the puddles and their lights passed through him painlessly.

"Here you are Mom" Sonny said coming out onto the porch and placing a tray down on the small table that sat in front of her. She didn't respond immediately, and the knitting needles continued to click together in her hands. He stood and waited for her. She was always trying to do something, slower now, often telling him "idle hands do the devil's work." It was late August.

Sonny turned away from his mother and looked at the large willow tree that sat in the front yard. The heavy arms swayed softly in the breeze, its long fingers reaching down and gently sweeping the ground.

"Why thank you dear." Her voice sounded small behind him and he turned back to look at her. She was becoming frail, and he was more concerned that she eat well. She slept more and more during the day. She had a shawl around her shoulders and he thought that she looked like a small bird, wings tucked snug, trying to keep warm.

"Here you go Mom." Sonny brought the tray closer to her and she placed her knitting down. He watched her eat in silence, slowly lifting the spoon, tipping the warm broth into her mouth.

"Have you seen your father today?" she asked, resting her spoon in the bowl and looking up at him. "I haven't seen him all day." She had a soft voice that was now almost a whisper lost in the wind.

His father wasn't around much anymore. Sonny still lived in the house that he was born and raised in. He had planned to move out, but some new need always presented itself. He figured his father was at the Legion. He would hear him return at night, his father's heavy feet stumbling and erratic in the hall outside Sonny's closed door.

"I can go and find him if you'd like" Sonny offered while imagining the scene: the men sitting around, talking about the old days at the mill. How things used to be, how they've changed, cards being forcefully slapped down on the table, punctuating points, while the smoke rose above the tables and hung in a thick cloud. His father's ruddy face, downing another drink, his voice growing more forceful, lulling them with stories they'd all heard before and could probably recite in his absence.

"No dear, I'm sure that everything is all right. It's just sometimes, well you know your father."

He did not push her to finish. Her silence was a vestige of another time. The crickets sounded in the late evening sun and Sonny sat down and rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Are you all right Mom? Do you want to go and see the doctor again? I can call in the morning." She smiled, but a small sigh escaped from her dry parted lips.

"No, I'm fine." There was a pause and her eyes brightened momentarily. "And you certainly are becoming a good cook. This soup is delicious."

With every step, Sonny felt his weight rolling off his heel and pushing him forward. He liked to keep a steady rhythm when walking. Measured steps, to stay the pattern, the sidewalk slabs determining his stride. One foot, the crack between, the next in the middle of the next, the crack, the middle of the next. He was just outside the downtown area now. The city had built up over the years, and old neighbourhoods lay just beyond the blank edifices and quickening streets. Old trees lined the sidewalk, and their stark shadows clawed the ground. *Old neighbourhood. Front porches and trees big with time.* He eyed a "for sale" sign on one of the lawns and he noticed the assurance of a realtor's smiling. Before Sonny came to the city one month ago, he worked in real estate. He thought of his own signs; his staged smile.

He looked in the windows as he walked by, curtains enticingly parted, with just an instant to see. A cat silhouetted on the sill, a woman curled on a couch, piano placed and poised for lessons, the vacant taunting of the television. He could see his own house, memory pushing in and taking over his sight. Everything just so, as it had always been. Family, passed on. He pressed his fingers against his eyelids. *Home sweet home. What time is it anyway?* He checked his watch and noticed that it was two minutes to midnight. *Have to work in the morning. Easter. Donna wanted me to come in early. People will be travelling.*

Mrs. Anderson was so kind to him in the days following, and she had helped take care of many of the arrangements and welcomed his family into their house.

"You don't worry about a thing Sonny" she had said to him. Later, his aunt caught him in the kitchen, and asked if he would come and spend some time with her.

"It may do you some good to get away for awhile." He couldn't say no to her mournful eyes.

Sonny and his Aunt then took the train from his home town, but he had only stayed with her for two weeks. At first, he was distracted by the city and spent his time revisiting sights, recalling perceptions so long displaced. After he grew tired of this, he began buying papers and looking for a job. His father had set an example and reinforced through countless comments that "a man has to work." There were a number of real estate companies, although he didn't like the thought of going back to selling homes. He had taken a leave of absence and his boss had told him to "Come back to us when you're ready." Then

one day over dinner, his Aunt told him about a friend who owned a restaurant. She had raised the issue gently, hesitant because of her familial unfamiliarity with her nephew.

"They are looking for some help in the mornings." *Something to do, keep my mind off.*

Donna's restaurant was in the same block as Sonny's apartment building. The sign on the front was neon, and the S was permanently darkened. He felt strange walking in there, two weeks ago, like a kid going for his first job. Donna was a short squat woman with red framed glasses. She was expecting him, and ushered him into the back office and immediately set him at ease.

"Now I know that this is temporary for you, and we will only need you for a month or two. I hear you are a good cook."

Sonny looked down at the dog that was trying to jump on him.

"Uh, I'm sorry, come on Buddy" a young woman in a baseball cap said, tugging at the rope and trying to lead the dog way.

"That's all right really." Sonny bent over and started petting the dog. *Mr. MacLellen had a dog looked like this. Max. Always brought the old man his slippers and the paper.* He knew how to pet a dog and scratched its head and then moved in behind the ears. The golden retriever raised its brown doughy eyes at him.

"You're a good boy eh?" Sonny spoke in the gentle mocking voice that most adults assume when speaking to a child. The dog wagged its tail appreciatively and sounded its delight in a whimper that was just short of a bark. "He's a real killer."

"Oh yea" the woman responded, a slight blush coming to her face. "Actually it's a girl dog, but my son named her Buddy." Sonny straightened up, and the dog looked up at him, pawing his leg searchingly. The woman smiled awkwardly and pulled the dog away.

"Bye." Sonny looked after them. The leash joined between them danced above the sidewalk.

His feet were beginning to feel heavy as he made his way back downtown. *A dog can always find his way back home. They know. Can smell it. I should have known. Why did I ask him? Can never change.*

Cares more for his friends. I wonder if she? He slipped in the side door that had the name "Bottoms" written on it. The night was beginning to weigh heavily upon him.

"Would you like anything to drink" the waitress said standing over Sonny with a tray in her hand. She wiped the table and replaced the ashtray that had accumulated a pile of cigarette butts from previous patrons.

"I'll have a Canadian."

She nodded and headed off to get his beer. His gaze followed her and he looked around. From his vantage point against the back wall, he could see the whole room spread out before him. There was an enormous stage with poles rising up on each side. Suddenly, the lights along the ceiling and above the stage lit up. A woman came dancing out of a bead curtain with the music and the lights working in direct syncopation. Sonny was not interested in the show, but focused on the lights that crossed red and green above him. There was a disco ball that sat just beyond the edge of the stage and a spotlight was trained on it, sending countless spots of white light around and around.

The waitress returned with his drink. He handed her the money and she left silently. Sonny took a long drink and was refreshed by the cold beer. There was no strip club in the town where he grew up, but there was one in the city.

"Hey John how are you, you old son of-" The phrase was cut off by a hiccup. He was standing on wobbly legs and his eyes never seemed to find Sonny's face. He had a few days stubble and was clearly drunk.

"So John, where you been?" the man said through slurred speech and struggling with a chair. When he finally sat down and looked straight at Sonny, his murky eyes turned.

"Hey, wait a minute. What are you trying to pull here buddy? I don't know you." The man held out his finger accusingly. "And what are you doing sitting in John's seat?"

The man immediately struggled to get up. *Father and son reunited.* Sonny watched the man stagger back to his table and begin telling his friend about the deception, all the while gesturing wildly in Sonny's

direction. Part of him wished that the man would have stayed, or that he was John. They could have talked.

Sonny playfully rubbed his hands up and down the bottle to wipe off the condensation. He noticed a lone stripper sitting at the table beside him. She placed her drink down on the table, sighed and then rummaged in her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He wondered why she was sitting alone. She looked over at him and smiled thinly before lighting her cigarette. Sonny nodded in her direction and this was taken as a request to approach.

"Would you like me to dance for you?" she asked taking the chair beside him. She was wearing a sequined dress with thin straps that looked like they would snap under the weight of her generous breasts. Her smile waned, and as she flicked the ash off of her cigarette, her braceleted wrists clanged softly.

"Ah, no" Sonny stammered, "but if you want to sit here it's all right with me." He kept his eyes locked onto hers.

"I just thought you look sad all alone. What's wrong, you shy?" She had an accent. "It's like with some of them. They too shy. I dance nice. Only five dollars?" She raised her eyebrows invitingly.

"No really, I just came in here to sit down. I'm not staying long." She picked up her glass, took a drink, and looked restlessly around the room. Sonny leaned over and placed his elbows on the table. "So where are you girl's from?"

"We all from South America."

"You're sure a long way from home."

"Yes" she said frowning with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "It's nice here. I don't like when it's cold." She shivered and rubbed her hands on her bare arms. Her fingernails were long and painted fire engine red.

"And you?" she said nodding towards him. "This home here?" She took out her hair clip and ran her fingers through her long thick hair.

"I live in an apartment right downtown."

"How come I never see you? I would have remembered you." She smiled to reveal large crooked teeth.

"Oh, I haven't been in here before."

The conversation stopped. The woman, sensing that he was not going to continue, turned to face the stage. The d.j. was in the process of announcing the next dancer in a loud and enthusiastic voice.

"O.K. guys put your hands together and lets give a big Bottoms welcome to the lovely and exotic Tam-ar-a."

The woman beside him yelled "Ola" and a few other words. He looked at her beautiful length of hair. She turned back to him.

"That's a friend of mine." The woman up on stage was stalking around in knee high leather boots. "She's so crazy" she added, rolling her eyes.

"Is that your roommate-you live with her?"

"She oh no. I just live me and my turtles. They so cute. I call them Jo-Jo and Ricky. They have gotten so big." She held out her hands to show him. "They miss me when I'm gone, my babies, but they always happy to see me." She turned and looked towards the stage. "I have to go. You stay and we can talk some more."

She got up and patted him lightly on the head. He watched her walk away, noticing the exaggerated sway of her hips. As the announcer called out her name and cued the music, Sonny drained the remainder of his beer. When the heavy door slammed shut behind him, he could hear the heavy pounding of drums and the muffled cheer that swelled inside the bar.

A red 1:23 stared back at him from the night table. He walked over and turned on the lamp beside the bed. He undressed and left his clothes in a crumpled pile on the floor. Greedily flopping down on the bed, he prayed that sleep would take him away to a place of no thoughts, and no eyes. *Tomorrow, another day at the diner. Work. Should be busy.*

Falling in and out of a restless sleep left too many thoughts floating near the surface. *Streetlights, a dog to call home, far away, who's home to greet me but my turtles. Hey, you're not John who bears witness, dance, dance of lights, too blind to see. I wish I could, I want so bad.* Sonny's breath was short and laboured and it sounded loud in the quiet of the room.

In the dream he was falling, but he caught himself with a violent twitch. He was sitting. *Where? I can smell, what, Mother? Something rattling, or maybe chimes* cuckoo, and he blinked to clear his head. He was in his living room. Home, beats like the heart. His mother's living room. *Safe for here I am.* Soft light filled the room. Dark rich wood accented by a clean white doily. On top of the table were pictures, but they were not the right ones. *Who are these people?* Faces with empty smiles and eyes without pupils. Things were not right. Chairs moved, pictures hung upside down, and the vase held flowers with dried and shriveled drooping heads. *Someone else is here. I know.* The sound of clanging, jingling became louder. The stripper was sitting beside him on the couch. She was wearing a slip and one of the straps was hanging down, and her nipple was taut and exposed. *Not here.* The couch lifted off the ground. *Now no one can see.* He tried to speak, but could not, and she seemed unaware of his frantic movements and voiceless mouth. She stared straight ahead. *A doll in her lap, now she's in a dress. Nice. Better. Flawless smile.* He darted his eyes around the room and reached out to touch her hair. It was soft, falling through sunlit fingers. *She can't feel me.* She shifted on the couch, seeking comfort, and her jewelry chimed. *Sssshhhh. Nobody to hear. It's not time yet.* Then he heard his mother's voice from the kitchen.

"Arthur please! Help me." Mother calling for father. *The couch is high. Jump down.* He ran into the kitchen and saw his mother kneeling on the floor. There was a bird in the house and it was flying frantically around the ceiling, wings beating like flames. His mother had her hands over her head and was cowering on the floor.

"Do something Sonny." He was paralyzed by fear. *What can I do? What!* He turned and saw his father's laughing drunken face. The bird scratched at the ceiling.

He woke with a start and looked around the room to see if he was still in the kitchen of his home. His heart was beating heavily in his chest. He could hear his shortened breath and the radio playing faintly in the background. 6:27. He raised himself up on one elbow, and rubbed his eyes. He had to be at work for seven, and was determined to leave the dream and his memories shut up in the room.

The walk from his apartment to the restaurant wasn't long enough; forty steps he had counted one time. Zella was on cash, and she smiled as he walked by. Sonny did not respond, but looked through her with

ghostbright eyes. His feet felt like they were walking just above the floor. In the back room, the waitresses were sitting at a table. Pieces of their conversations floated around him:

"And he said fuck her then."

The breakfast rush always began like an explosion. One minute the restaurant was calm, the next it was packed with people trying to get their food and get out and on with their business for the day. Sonny took up his position on the egg grill. The kitchen seemed particularly hot, and because of the holiday weekend, the restaurant was extra busy. He permitted himself a look out into the restaurant, and saw eager faces, newly washed. The waitresses scuttled back and forth. Soon they began popping up at the square hole that was cut between the restaurant and the kitchen to yell "order up" while slapping the bill down on the ledge. Monique was the first one through and she startled Sonny. She didn't like him, and was always trying to draw him out by making comments or complaining about his work. Often she would leer at him when the others weren't looking and he would turn away.

The women he worked with arrived earlier to set up. They were all Italian, and knew their way around the kitchen. They did not say much, and communicated through signs or simple commands.

"Toast. Two over-easy." Nothing was ever said in a rushed voice.

The egg grill was now Sonny's solemn domain. He was on toast for awhile, but that didn't work out too well. The toaster was old. He had to feed the bread on a little conveyor belt and it would pull it past the red-hot elements. The toast would then come sliding down a ramp. Sometimes it would come out charred and flaming. He was not on the toaster for long.

He nodded as the orders rolled in. There was a shelf just above the fryer and he placed the bills in front of him in a row. The shelf was stained and held dish rags, glasses and utensils from the kitchen. The orders placed on his right were the most recent. Sometimes there were three or four orders on one bill, and he would have to plan it out. *Western sandwich. Four over easy. Ham and cheese omelet.* He was trying to move at an assured pace, but he was distracted by the noise of the kitchen, his thoughts, the bubbling of the deep fryer, his father's eyes. *Who are all these people? What am I doing here?* Sonny felt waves of emptiness wash over him and his stomach churned. The warm and full smell of bacon grease hung heavy in the air. It felt as hot as the middle of summer. The sounds from the restaurant provided a

steady rumble of indistinguishable voices from beyond. *Two over easy. One sunny side up. Two scrambled.* He began to crack all the eggs in perfect lines. He took an egg from the container beside him, split it gently on the edge of the fryer, and reached his hand out across the hot grill. The golden yoke hit the surface hissing from the heat. Row upon row.

"Hey Sonny what are you doing?" It was Monique. "Those aren't my orders. Where's my omelet? Don't try my patience today."

Sonny could see the other waitresses hanging around the window waiting. He didn't like to look up from the grill, and knew that Monique's eyes were focused on him, trying to sear him with her stare.

"Now you have to be careful that you don't break the yoke" Sonny's father said as a young Sonny sat with his legs curled up on the big kitchen chair, his bare feet safe and warm from the cool linoleum. Sonny can still remember the smell of his pipe and the rough feel of his clothes when he got close enough to touch him. But things were different then. His father would wake him on those far away mornings, shake him gently and call his name. He hated to eat alone when he got off the night shift. Just the two of them, alone in the small kitchen, with the sounds of the breakfast cooking and the words of the father in the son.

He was an only child, but not by choice. His mother had miscarried a number of times, and Sonny had a sister named Murial who died when she was two months old.

"Look Sonny this is your baby sister. Now you have to make sure that you look after her." He loved to go into her room at night and look at her clean soft head poking out past the edge of the blanket. The same face in the little coffin with so many lovely flowers around it. His mother quiet and distant. His father tight. After that, he was more and more critical of his son's closeness to his mother. Sonny can remember his shifting eyes when a man from the mill asked him when he was going to sprout and get big like his father.

"Sonny what is this!" Monique squealed through the window of the kitchen. Her head disappeared, but not before Sonny got a clean look at her reddened face and her great mass of hair shaking in fury. He knew that she was coming back into the kitchen. Sounds reverberated in his head.

"These are sunny side up, not over easy." She was standing in front of him with two plates in her hand, holding them out like they were full of shit. His cheek twitched twice. *"Dad I have to work late tonight."* He was beginning to sweat and wished that he was out of the hot kitchen. Monique waited for him to say something. She shook her head and let out a snort of disgust. *"I won't be able to fix anything for Mom."* The eggs were starting to over-cook now, and as he went back to his orders, he punctured a yoke with the corner of his spatula. He looked down at the ripped yoke as it spread over the grill. He stood there as the other eggs in the line began to approach similar fates, yokes bleeding in gruesome rows. Steam began to rise and he could smell burnt flesh. Someone was calling him from somewhere. *"Make sure she gets something to eat."* Two waitresses came into the kitchen and began talking right beside Sonny at the grill.

"I swear to God Jenny, he must be at least five hundred pounds. He only comes in when Sonny is working. He will order a couple of breakfasts, eat them and then move to another table. After awhile he orders again."

Sonny felt a chill ripple through him, ending at the tips of his fingers. *"Promise me that you won't go out."* *Connected, all to one another. Nothing I can do.* His legs felt weak under him. He forced himself to look out the little window into the restaurant. The fat man sat at the counter right in front of him. He wore dark clothes and was concentrating on his plate of food. The man lifted his head and caught Sonny looking. Wild intoxicated eyes. *"Promise me, promise me."* The fat man smiled and waved. A glob of Sonny's immaculate yoke dripped onto his chin. The man started laughing and calling out to him.

"Forgive me Sonny. Forgive me." Then his view was obstructed and he could see Monique's head in the window. Her eyes were fiery red, crucifying him with her stare.

"I know who you are Sonny. We all know, and what you've done. It's your fault Sonny, all your fault." She looked to the fat man and they all started laughing, laughing and pointing at him. *Mother. So senseless.* All he could see was the fat man's smile, his father's respected smile. Sonny ran to the washroom, the sickness too great to keep down.

Donna was there waiting by the staff room table when he emerged from the washroom. His eyes were puffy and red and traces of tears marked his cheeks. The kitchen was quiet now and Carmella was on the

egg grill. She had cleaned off Sonny's mess, and had started redoing the orders. Donna offered the customer's free re-fills of coffee and juice.

"You just go on home for the day" Donna said softly. "The rush is over, and the girls can take care of the rest. I think you've probably had enough anyway." He mumbled his thanks. Donna touched Sonny lightly on the elbow.

Once back in his apartment, he flopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He was so tired and felt tethered to the bed. He lay there all day, and wept the tears of an orphan. He did not fall asleep until darkness came. The dreams came quickly that night, and Sonny fell into a deep sleep; so deep that he would remember nothing in the morning.

The night it happened. Arriving home at supper time, he found his father in the living room. His feet were up on the coffee table, and beside them a dish was soiled red with ketchup. He passed by his father without speaking, and went to change out of his suit and check in on his mother. She was sleeping, her arms crossed neatly on her chest. He could see her thin body moved to one side of the bed, the other empty and untouched.

"Listen Dad, I have to work late tonight, show a couple a home." Sonny stopped. His father did not turn from the television and showed no signs of even hearing his son's words. "Dad?"

"What?" Arthur Adams responded in his deep voice. He took his feet off of the coffee table and turned his head to look at his son.

"I won't be able to fix Mom anything tonight, so could you make sure that she gets something to eat?"

"Yeah, yeah." His father turned back to the television. A faint aura of scotch lingered around his father. He got up and stood in front of his chair, blocking his view.

"I want you to make sure that she gets something to eat. I want you to promise me that you will stay here and not go out." Arthur Adams stared gravely at his son.

"You better get out of the way boy."

"I want you to promise me."

Sonny didn't get back home until after dark. The couple was nice, but nervous about buying their first house, and Sonny had to spend much time reassuring them that they were indeed getting a good deal and that the house had lots of potential to increase in value. *Why did the couple want to see the house in the evening? If only I would have done one thing different.* When he finally left the young couple, arm in arm, in front of what would be their new home, the clouds had rolled in and the sky was dark.

As he drove down his street, he knew that something wasn't right. He could see that there were fire trucks and cars at the base of his driveway, and the sky burned a smoky orange and black. Kids were driving their bikes, splashing through puddles, and calling out to one another. As soon as he had stopped his car and got out, he was met by a fireman.

"What happened?" Sonny asked trying to push aside the man and get closer to his house which was obstructed by the trucks. The man restrained him and moved him back.

"Now calm down."

"Is everyone all right. Where's my mother?" Sonny was frantically looking around him.

"It's all right, your father is with her at the hospital right now."

In the morning, Sonny did not wake up to the usual noises of the back alley. He overslept and felt settled. He took a hot shower and let the nozzle spray long and hard on the back of his neck. It felt so good, as if the layers of grease were swirling down the drain at his feet. He dressed, but not in his diner clothes. He put them in a bag and left them in the corner of the room.

The next thing he did was phone Donna. Although Sonny didn't know it, the waitresses at the restaurant thought about him a lot that day. He was the topic of conversation, and he would go down in Donna's lore as a nice strange fellow and one of the best egg-grill workers that the place had ever seen. Monique caught bits of the conversation when she walked by, and the other girls tried to hide it from her, changing topics quickly when she approached. Finally, on their lunch break, she stood before them.

"I don't know why you talk about him like that. He was crazy. Never talked to anyone. Who did he think he was anyway?" It was all that she would ever say about Sonny.

Next he called his Aunt to tell her that he was leaving.

"What are you going to do now Sonny?" his Aunt asked in an uneasy voice.

"I'm really not sure" he responded with a slight chuckle. "You know, I think that I need to"

"Are you going to go home?" his Aunt cut in.

"No. I'm going to pack up my things and go to the train station."

"Where will you go?" There was silence on the line. "Sonny?"

"Yes Aunt Gracie."

"Have you talked to your father?" There was a pause and she could hear his breath on the other line.

"Sonny"

"Listen. I will call you" he said shaking it off. "Thank you for everything that you've done."

He gathered his things in an old suitcase that his Aunt had given him. It was yellow and had worn and blackened edges. The few clothes that he had easily fit into it. He left the clock and the book behind. Before he left, Sonny stood at the door of the apartment, making a note to remember. He felt light with only the one suitcase in hand.

The train depot was new and painted in cool and neutral grays. There was a large mural on the back wall of a red bird, rising up past the red tongues of flames, clamouring with beak open and seeking the open sky. Sonny took his suitcase and sat down on a bench. He looked up at the destination board and saw the name of his hometown. The fire ate through the old wood house voraciously. The marshall speculated that it started in the kitchen, but he couldn't be sure. In cases like this, he told Sonny "we may never know."

He never said another word to his father after he had left his home that night. When he arrived at the hospital, his father was sitting in the waiting room with his head down and cupped in his hands. Sonny was met by the doctor who only said "I'm sorry." It was enough. He left the building and sobbed alone in the parking lot.

Mr. Anderson eventually came to get him and offered him a room. His father stayed with some of his old friends from work who lived on the other side of town. Sonny could not bring himself to look at the old man, and turned away when he caught a glimpse of his proud and upright form. During the wake, he

stayed close to the coffin, receiving his mother's friends. His father stood down from him, firmly shaking hands and accepting condolences.

The Anderson's house was a hive of activity the day of the funeral. Everybody from the town showed up in their best clothes, respectfully washed and groomed. They all spoke very highly of his mother.

"And she was quite a dancer. Oh yes, she was quite the young thing. So dainty, and such a sense of style, everyone thought she would move to the city."

Sonny was looking straight ahead, and realized that he had been staring vacantly for some time. He was seated on a bench with his suitcase placed protectively between his feet, his heels pressed against its sides. He looked around the station and saw a mother and her little girl sitting on the end of the bench. The girl suddenly got up and with a burst of energy, started doing a delicate dance using the ceramic tiles as stepping stones. She touched here and there, bouncing and fluttering as her shining black shoes clicked and clacked against the hard floor and echoed around the empty walls. Her long golden hair hung down on either side, framing her plump face. Her dance was full, and she looked beyond the glass roof to the sky. The sun rose above the clouds, fell upon her, and she felt joy and smiled for the sun was warm and good. She noticed that Sonny was looking at her, but she did not stop.

He got up off the bench and looked at the names on the destination board. His eyes caught the name of his hometown, streaking by in blazing red. He thought of home, and puzzled, held his chin between his index finger and his thumb. *Be it ever so humble*. Sonny coughed and cleared away his emotion. *Home is where*. He righted himself. *Wherever I want. The heart*. The names kept rolling by, so many places, so many people. *Is*. Sonny felt the burden of history lifted from him. Ashes to ashes, memories remain. The little girl walked by and shot Sonny a smile, and while she was looking at him, Sonny smiled back.

Let's Shake On It

Bruce Hannerman sat on the end of the bed staring at the overcast sky which hung like a giant silver screen in his window. The rain seemed strange to him because he had grown up in the north, and was used to long cold winters. Here, there was no snow, and he thought it was all like one interminable season. The water beads ran and cleaned canal ways down the dusty window. His face sagged and his eyes flickered dully, sunk and lost in his normally bright and responsive face. His own mother would not have recognized him. The cigarette ash hung long and neglected with its smoke curling up around his stained fingers. His hand was shaking slightly and the ash fell onto the bedspread. Bruce was trying to make sense of what he had seen on the local news. He lowered his eyes to the metal box that sat on the table in front of the window. At times, it would reflect the dying light from beyond the window and look like a polished skull.

Stretches of highway all lead somewhere, and for Bruce this meant another chance at a sale; a chance to win. He had been in a rut, more like a valley for his ego, but he hoped that his fortune would change. He loosened his tie which was tight under his Adam's apple. Bruce had been in sales for just over a year. One afternoon at the factory, he met a salesman in the lunch room who asked him for a cigarette. Bruce talked to everyone, and his gentle curiosity endeared him to many. He wanted people to like him, and was successful on this day, as the two men shared coffee and cigarettes over pleasant conversation. The salesman was so taken by him, that he left him the name of a contact. They just happened to be looking for someone. It wasn't long before Bruce left the factory for good and was a regional salesman for Scott Machine Parts.

Bruce looked at the black and green of the roadside as it clicked by. He had been driving since early that morning, and his back was starting to get sore. A call had come in at the office from a Mr. Smith who was very excited about their product. When Bruce returned his call, Mr. Smith immediately set up a meeting, and even suggested a hotel close to their warehouse.

Checking the clock on the dashboard, he swore lightly to himself that he could not be late.

"Come on, come on, where's that sign?" One sale was all he needed right now, and he knew there was money to be made. A couple of days ago, he ran into a young man in line at the bank who was planning on selling land his grandfather had bought for peanuts.

"You have to act fast and strike while the metal is hot" he had said before walking up to the teller's wicket.

Bruce went over a big dip in the road and cringed as the cargo shifted in the back of his van. Everything had to be just right, and he always wore the same tie when he was going to make a big sale. He had a good feeling about this one; if only he could get there on time.

When Bruce finally arrived at the warehouse, a man in blue overalls with a company patch over the breast pocket approached his window and told him that he could pull right in.

"Might rain" he said, walking towards the van and looking up at the sky. Bruce could hear a distant rumbling. "That way you don't have to get wet."

He parked beside another van, and was surprised at the size of the warehouse. Trucks were constantly coming in and out the big bay doors and he noticed how insignificant his vehicle looked. The man in the blue overalls walked behind him, and when Bruce got out of the van he said:

"She'll be fine right there. Don't you worry about a thing."

"Thank you. It was nice doing business with you Sir" Bruce said, fiercely pumping the man's arm over the closure of the deal. His elation was only tempered by the fact that Mr. Smith's huge ring was pinching the skin of one of his fingers. He withstood the pain and smiled, gritting his teeth. The contract they negotiated was for a specialized part that was the jewel in the company's crown. It was the sale that they all dreamed about landing, and Bruce's mind raced to project his own windfall and the talk that was sure to follow when he got back to the office.

"There is really no reason to thank me Mr. Hannerman." Mr. Smith relaxed his grip and freed Bruce's trapped skin. Looking down at it quickly, Bruce noticed that it was white and throbbing.

"Now why don't you sit down" he continued, motioning to the chair in front of his large oak desk. "Would you like a cigar? They are from my own personal stock. Very hard to come by, if you know what I mean?" Bruce did not catch the man's wink.

"Yes, absolutely" Bruce said, thinking that things could not get any better, and finally relaxing into the comfort of the plush chair. There were colourful pictures displaying the layout of the plant on the wall behind the desk. Mr. Smith placed the open box of cigars in front of Bruce, then reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of gold clippers.

"Yep, one of the finer things in life." He pulled out a cigar, and handled it nimbly in his big hands. The clippers easily sliced off the end and it fell on top of the desk. He handed the cigar to Bruce. "There's a nice clean cut." He clicked open a Zippo and held the flame over his desk. Bruce drew in air until he saw the end was lit.

"Better savour that one. It don't get much better." Mr. Smith consulted some papers on his desk. "Listen, I have to go and speak with my secretary about something. You know how the business is." Bruce was not really listening, for he was still feeling a little dazed by his recent success.

"I landed the big one" Bruce said quietly to himself, shaking his head in mild disbelief. He took a few more deep drags, and swished the smoke around in his mouth before exhaling. It tingled slightly and tasted sweet. Suddenly, his stomach felt tight and cramped. He craned his neck from side to side to survey the office for a bathroom. On one side of the office there was a big picture window overlooking the factory. Bruce could see the tiny workers moving below, oblivious to his happiness and the immensity of the deal that would affect their own work in the near future. He set the cigar down in the ashtray, positioning it with care so that it would not fall off onto the desk. As he opened the door into the waiting room, he saw Mr. Smith slouched over the secretary's desk, hand cupped over the receiver and talking in a muffled voice. He was alone in the office.

"Mr. Hannerman" Mr. Smith said getting up quickly and putting the receiver down on the desk. "Is something the matter, something that I can help you with?" Bruce noticed a slight twitch to his eye. He had not noticed it before.

"No, nothing the matter. I just have to use the bathroom." He flushed slightly, and thought that if he didn't get there soon, he would not be able to hold it. Mr. Smith pointed the way. Bruce walked slowly, clenching his cheeks together and taking baby steps. Mr. Smith watched and tapped his fingers on the desk. He did not pick up the phone and renew his conversation until Bruce had passed through the double paned glass doors.

After they had taken care of the "formalities" as Mr. Smith called them, he suggested that they go for a drink. The hotel bar was a quiet spot, and Mr. Smith suggested that there they would be able to relax.

"I have my own private table" he joked on the way down in the elevator. Mr. Smith talked continuously and excitedly about the city and a new plant that was due to open soon. "There may be other business opportunities for you here in the future" he remarked before getting into his own van which was parked beside Bruce's.

The bar was tucked into the front lobby of the hotel and Bruce arrived after Mr. Smith. He was still dazed on the ride over, and preoccupied with the numbers that were rattling around in his head. The bar was dark and it took some time for Bruce's eyes to adjust. The place was empty save for a couple of old men propped up at the bar. He spotted Mr. Smith at a table in the back corner. There was a waitress leaning towards him, nodding, both elbows on the table. Mr. Smith spotted Bruce, waved him over, and the waitress got up out of the chair and straightened her blouse. She pulled out the chair for Bruce and smiled.

"So what will you have?" Mr. Smith asked once Bruce was seated.

"I don't know, what are you drinking?"

"Gina, why don't you bring us a couple of scotches, O.K. darling? Mr. Smith looked up at the waitress with a smirk on his face, then turned to Bruce.

"That all right with you?"

"Yeah that's fine, why not celebrate?" Bruce didn't usually drink, but he considered this all a part of the sale.

"Great. Make sure you bring us the good stuff eh Gina."

"Sure thing boss" Gina responded lightly, smiling again at Bruce when he looked up at her.

Bruce was drinking on an empty stomach, and in combination with the excitement of the day, things began to take on a different light. Mr. Smith's voice swirled about him and as soon as he was done his drink, Gina magically appeared with another. Bruce felt obliged to drink and Mr. Smith kept offering up cheers to cap off the success that they were both going to share. He promised himself that he would stop after three. Mr. Smith was unrelenting in his questions about the company and the nature of his business. He was excited about what Scott Machine Parts had to offer, and said he had heard a lot about the company. Bruce found this strange because the company was new in the area, having opened up this territory for him.

"So Bruce" Mr. Smith began after the waitress had placed their third drink on the table. "Where are you off to next? I take it your going south down Highway 13, since you came from the north?"

"Well", Bruce started tentatively, wondering what Mr. Smith could be getting at. "I am going down that way to a plant in Fairfield."

"Fairfield eh?" Mr. Smith leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. "Pretty nice little place. Smaller than our good town. Industry has been picking up in this region over the last ten years. Companies get a good tax break out here. Cheaper to build too. You must be going to Nelots Tool and Dye." Bruce nodded and Mr. Smith paused to tip his drink, and Bruce did the same. "Listen, I can suggest another place for you to stay when you get there. Friend of mine owns a hotel."

"You sure know lots of people in the hotel business" Bruce said with a wry smile, loosened up a little by the scotch.

"Well, I've been around. Before I got into industrial machinery, I was in business for myself. You get to have lots of connections." While he was talking, he extracted a pad from the inside of his suit coat and began writing something down. "The place is called the Cardinal Inn and it's right at the third set of lights once you get to town. Can't miss it. When you get there ask for Jim at the desk. He's the owner. Give him this and he'll take care of you."

"Thanks, I really appreciate all that you've done for me." Bruce took the piece of folded paper and placed it in his pocket.

"You're the one that I should be thanking."

Mr. Smith seemed to relax more and more as the evening progressed. Bruce was starting to feel a little light headed, even though he was nursing his drink. Mr. Smith was talking very quickly and this seemed to be the only sign that the alcohol was affecting him.

"Yep, used to be in business for myself. Had a restaurant, and tried all kinds of crazy ideas, I'll tell you. For a time there I thought that nothing could keep me from what I wanted. Restaurant business is no good though. You're married to it. Unless you can get someone that you trust to run the place for you." Mr. Smith was now gesturing in the air and Bruce was once again drawn to the ring that waved in front of his face.

"So what happened, you sell the place?"

"Well not exactly, kind of forced to get out if you know what I mean." He paused. "I noticed that you were looking at this here ring?"

"Never seen one that big before." Mr. Smith pulled the ring off his finger with some difficulty and handed it across the table to Bruce. It was inlaid with six diamonds on a black onyx stone. It looked big enough to fit a silver dollar through.

"I bought that ring at the height of my success in the business. Cost me a pretty penny too. At that time I thought that the world would be mine. Everything was going so good." He scrunched up his face and pursed his lips. "Got me some new plans though. Don't want to be a company man forever. it's an exciting time. There's lots of new technology coming out now. If you can get out ahead, get something that they all want, then you can stand to make yourself a killin'. I'll get back on top." His voice dropped and he said "very soon" too quietly for Bruce to hear for he was still looking at the ring.

"Well, maybe we should call it a night eh?" Bruce finally said, thinking of the things that needed to be done before morning. "It has been good doing business with you, and I hope that we will have a chance to hook up again."

"Yes, likewise Mr. Hannerman. Let's shake on it." He paused then asked: "So I take it you will be leaving early in the morning?"

"Well, I have to get out of here by nine. I have some paperwork at the hotel to get ready for tomorrow. The head office will be faxing you a contract and providing you some more details. If there are any problems you can reach me through them. I'm always on the road."

Mr. Smith encouraged him to stop by anytime he was coming through town. As Bruce was just about to leave the bar, he turned around for one last look at Mr. Smith. He was talking to the waitress, who once again hung over him intently.

Bruce drove by a farm, and yawned after seeing the cows' tails swinging lazily back and forth. He had gotten up early, while it was still dark. He thought it an ungodly hour, and remembered his father saying that the only people up that early are hookers and thieves. The lumberjack breakfast that he ordered at the restaurant made him feel good and gave him some energy. It had been about twenty four hours since he had gotten anything substantial into his stomach. The events of the previous day seemed almost unreal to him. In dreaming of the sale, he never thought that it would have happened so quickly and with such little coaxing on his part. The spoils always seemed better if there was a fight.

The radio announcer came on, and Bruce turned up the volume to hear the weather forecast. It was unseasonably mild, and would remain so for the next few days. The talk of the weather moved Bruce's thoughts back home. It had been five years since he set off to look for work, and he had only been back a handful of times. Winter was always a good time for him, and when he was growing up his father used to flood a skating rink in their back yard. Bruce thought how the in the midst of one season, he always anticipated and yearned for the next. A part of him also believed that the cold made your body more resilient and strong in dealing with extreme conditions. There had been times since he relocated when he talked to some people who grew up in the south. They could recall a few snow falls here, but they never stayed for long. One night he found himself sitting on the patio of a hotel explaining the game of curling as "shuffle board on ice."

There was something shifting around in the back of his van. Craning his neck, he could not tell what was making the noise, and it sounded unfamiliar to him. He was well aware of the parts that he carried and was overly fastidious in packing things so that nothing would rattle or move around while he was driving.

He promptly pulled over to the paved shoulder of the road to check on his cargo. Walking around to the side of the van, Bruce mumbled to himself. He had to repack what he had taken out to show Mr. Smith. It annoyed him that he may have rushed and was now wasting time doing the same job twice.

After moving aside a larger box, he saw something that he had not seen before. It was a small green steel box. He held it in his hands, and tried to think of where it may have come from. "Maybe they loaded it into my van by accident back at their warehouse?" There was a clasp with a key hole, but he tried it anyway, and it popped up. Inside, was a silver disk that had some strange grooves worked into the metal. On lifting it out of the box, he noticed that it was light. "Must be hollow" he thought. "Strange, nothing like I've seen before. Maybe it's a new part?" He decided that he would call the office and find out what it was once he had checked into the hotel. Before he got into the van, he secured the box behind the seat so that it would not move around anymore.

Bruce felt relieved when he finally arrived at the hotel. He took a deep breath and looked up at the sign that had a big smiling red cardinal above the words "Nest here for the night." As he was moving to open the side panel of his van, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Startled, Bruce turned to see two men standing in front of him.

"Excuse me" one of the men said. They were both dressed casually and were wearing dark sunglasses.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Oh no sir" the man said, smiling and taking off his glasses to reveal a set of clear blue eyes. "We're representatives of Steelco Limited. It seems that there has been a mix up, and a part was put into your van yesterday during your visit to the warehouse."

"Yes, actually, I came across it. I was going to phone my office to inquire. I've never seen anything like that before and-"

"So you still have the disc?"

"Yes." Bruce turned and grabbed the box from behind the seat. He was about to hand it over to the men but hesitated, thinking that he should be sure.

"I assure you that both Mr. White and myself are Steelco employees." The other man smiled and took off his sunglasses as well. Bruce noticed for the first time that he had another box in his hands. The man

who was talking to him took out his wallet and displayed an identification badge with the Steelco logo on it. Bruce did not catch the name.

"Mr. Smith told us that you would be coming here." Bruce relaxed and handed the box over to the man, who promptly switched boxes with the man standing behind him. "There is one more thing, Mr. Smith asked us to give you this." Before Bruce could respond, the man shoved the metal box into his hands. "He told us you were going to Nelots Tools tomorrow and wondered if you could give him a hand by dropping this off. They will be expecting it." Bruce put the box inside his van.

"Sorry for any inconvenience." He extended his hand and Bruce instinctively shook it.

Bruce watched the men turn and walk across the parking lot. They were driving an old sedan, and he wondered why they did not come in a company van. Placing the new box in the same place behind the seat, he grabbed his bags and headed for the office to check in. There was a man behind the desk and Bruce asked if he could speak with Jim.

"You're looking at him." the man responded gruffly.

"Hi, I'm a friend of Mr. Smith's." Bruce reached into his coat and extracted the note that he had received the night before. The man read it over in silence.

"Oh ya. I got a nice room for you. How long will you be staying?"

"For two days. I have some business to do in town."

"O.K. I'll give you a special rate. Thirty percent off. You'll be in room sixteen." He turned and took the key off a board while Bruce reached for his wallet.

He placed his suitcase at the foot of the bed and then walked over and put his briefcase on the table in front of the window. Sitting down on the bed, he realized that he was still tired, and decided that he would try and relax before getting back to the paperwork and preparing for the presentation tomorrow. He lit a cigarette and blew the smoke up towards the ceiling, and went over what he had to do. "Find out directions to the warehouse. Check in at the office" He had a strange desire to speak with Mr. Smith again, and ask him about the part. He considered this for a moment, and then decided that he did not want him to think that he was paranoid. "Paranoia will destroy ya" he mused. He checked his watch and noticed

that it was just before noon. The guide that was taped to the dresser listed the stations, and Bruce looked for the local affiliate to see if he could catch the mid-day news. He was particularly interested in the weather over the next couple of days, and secretly hoped that he would see some snow in the forecast.

The television took a few seconds to warm up, and as Bruce sat back down on the edge of the bed, he could hear the opening theme of the newscast.

"This is Fairfield's number one news team bringing you stories from your county and around the world."

"Probably the only one" Bruce said sarcastically taking another drag.

"This just in to the news room. Prominent businessman Raymond Arthur Smith was found murdered outside his Hadesburg county home this morning by a neighbour." Bruce sat paralyzed on the bed. His mouth hung open slightly and a thin line of drool fell from his mouth and landed, leaving a dark spot on his blue dress pants. The newscast continued over pictures of Mr. Smith's ransacked van. A pool of blood was on the pavement. His house stood in the background, bright in the early morning sun.

"Mr. Smith was shot in the head execution style. Police have taken two men into custody for questioning, but at this time no motive has been established. In other news, city council has rejected a-"

A million thoughts flashed through Bruce's mind and he immediately got up and started pacing the room. "Should I call the police? What happened? Maybe I could have been killed too? Why would they kill him? Will I be implicated?" He brought his hands up to his head and squeezed. It was too much. He stopped abruptly and his mind went back to the box. He looked out the window at his van. The parking lot was empty except for a handful of cars.

Bruce now sat at the table with the box before him. Unlike the last box, this had two latches on the front. He flipped them up and opened the lid. It took him a few seconds for the image to register and come clear. Chill and panic gripped him at once. He jumped back and stood away from the table. Inside, Mr. Smith's severed finger and big ring were placed neatly in the center of the box. The white bone was cut and stood out against the congealed blood and the jagged end of the finger. The skin, waxy yellow,

was speckled with blood, but the ring was still bright and shining, and one of its surfaces caught the light and the surface winked at Bruce like a dead man in his coffin.

He went over to the telephone, but had to pause, as he was feeling nauseous and he could not get the image of the finger out of his mind. He did not want to go near it, or even touch the box. As he picked up the receiver, he heard a loud knock on the door and his heart started to race. "Who could that be?"

The pounding on the door continued. He hoped that they would go away, but the knocking persisted, and finally he went and looked through the peep hole. It was two men dressed in suits. Not the same men who had given him the box. "Maybe it's the police" he thought. "Maybe they are from the hotel. Keep calm, keep calm." Bruce took a deep breath to settle himself. He had done nothing wrong. He opened the door and stood before the men.

"Can I help you with something?" Bruce said finding his voice calmer than he felt.

"Where's the disc?" one man said in a deep monotone.

After the Fall

There had been a heavy snowfall the night before and everything was covered and sparkling in the late morning sunlight. It had been the coldest January in ten years, but the new snow signalled milder temperatures. It was the first time in days that people could walk outside without fear of the bitter cold freezing their skin. The snow weighed heavily on the arms of the trees, and even the telephone wires looked crystallized and would crackle when blown by the wind. Adam walked along and looked at the snow piled high and undisturbed on the rooftops. Everything was clean, and in the front yards the wind had carved drifts with amazing precipices and pointed peaks. He figured they had the same dimensions as some of the world's greatest mountains. He wanted to see and feel everything, or look for the tiniest grain amongst the plenitude of white. Looking up, he noticed that the sky was cloudless, and he let his mind go free. The unrelenting reflection of light hurt his eyes though, and he closed his lids and saw red. A gust of wind pinned his clothes to his body and picked at his bare skin.

He had just come from the corner store, as he did every morning, and was taking his route along the streets of the neighbourhood. The paper was folded neatly under his arm, and the plastic bag swung freely from his wrist. When he purchased the paper, he did not like to look at it in advance, but waited until he was home and could sit down. He was watching his feet move beneath him, stepping into undisturbed planes, and listening as the snow crunched under his weight. He liked to go out in the morning before the snow was trampled and soiled.

He passed by a public school. It was not yet time for recess, and the school yard stood bright and empty. The last time he wandered by, the teacher gave him a look and he turned immediately and left. Today, one lone school bus sat in the yard, its yellow and black in sharp contrast to the white banks. He noticed that the snow was already full of prints made by the unrelenting feet of children. He liked the sound of the children playing. The loud screams, calls, and chants all blended together and cut through the air. It was always the same, and was never tempered by the season. Sometimes, late in the morning, he would open his window to let in some fresh cold air. The window was at ground level, and he could see the entrance to the schoolyard if he stood on a chair. Yesterday, he had to go and clear the snow away to let in light.

Funk's convenience store has been located on the corner of Second and Arthur for the past thirty years. The store was built with an apartment above it for the family, and when Adam walked in, he noticed something different. George Funk's ten year old grandson, Jeff, was in the store. The Catholic school had a professional development day, and he pleaded with his mother to let him go and help his grandfather. His family lived on the other side of town, and only occasionally visited the store on the weekends. Jeff was always given candy and thought that if he stayed the whole day, he would be handsomely rewarded. On hearing the bells jingle above the door, he turned and looked squarely at Adam as he walked in. He had been a little apprehensive waiting for the first customer of the day, and expected to see an old lady or man. Instead he encountered a tall, thin figure in a long black coat. Jeff thought it was a robber. The scarf covered much of his face, and just his nose and eyes were visible below the black toque. He turned to his grandfather who smiled and said:

"Good morning. What's it like out there today?"

The man removed the scarf from around his face to display salt and pepper stubble.

"Cold but crisp. A good day to be alive." Jeff thought that the man's voice sounded young, different from the way he looked.

"Yep, it was pretty awful there for awhile. There's still lots of winter left yet."

His grandfather was busy straightening things out, and did not seem interested in the man as he moved to the newspaper rack. Still curious, Jeff went to the edge of the counter and peered over at him, thinking that he would be unnoticed. The man took the third paper from the pile, folded it in half, and put it under his arm. He turned and walked to the other side of the store. Jeff thought that he was trying to steal the paper and tugged lightly on his grandfather's apron.

"What is it Jeffrey?"

"Grandpa, that man didn't pay for the paper and he's hiding it under his arm."

"What?" He looked up and scanned the store thinking that maybe someone else had come in while he was distracted. He saw his only customer reading the ingredients on a can of soup. "Don't worry about him boy."

Not convinced by his grandfather's dismissal, Jeff moved from out behind the counter to the rotating comic book rack which was against the wall. There were big pockets on the man's jacket and they bulged as if something had been shoved inside them. All was quiet except for his grandfather's humming and the occasional sound of cars from the street. After a few minutes of watching the man innocently browse the store, Jeff turned his attention to the comic books. He thought that maybe by the end of the day, his grandfather would let him take one home. Turning the rack around, he looked at all the covers and decided that he wanted a Spiderman comic. He took the comic off the rack and held it in his hands.

"You like Spiderman?"

Startled by the voice, he put the comic book back on the rack. The man in the overcoat was now standing over him smiling. The smile did not put him at ease, for his teeth were stained a deep yellow. Jeff nodded in response and turned to look at his grandfather who was also smiling at him.

"Spiderman is my favorite. Mild mannered Peter Parker, really the amazing Spiderman. Who would have figured?"

Jeff moved back behind the counter, taking side steps and never turning his back on the man who had snuck up behind him.

"Is that all for today?" George Funk said, punching the prices into the cash register once the man had laid the folded paper and a couple of cans a soup on the counter.

"That's all for today."

The man paid his money, and the boy's grandfather talked about how some of his deliveries were delayed last week because of the weather. The man stood expressionless and the boy thought that maybe he was some kind of ghost.

From the window, Jeff watched until the man got smaller and smaller. When he was finally out of sight, he turned to his grandfather.

"Who is that man Grandpa?"

"That's Adam. Not too sure what his last name is: Kadlec, Kadman, something like that. Lives over in an apartment a couple of blocks away."

"He's kind of scary."

"Now you have nothing to worry about with someone like him. He's quiet. Comes in here every morning and buys his paper. Yep, he's as steady as the seasons that one."

"But what does he do Grandpa?" George Funk scratched his head.

"That's a good question. Not really too sure what he does. Always has money though." He paused again and looked out the window as a couple passed by the door. "Now why don't you go upstairs and ask your Grandma if the bread order is going to be delayed today." George went back to his papers and began mumbling to himself. "He better come in by noon or there will be hell to pay."

Before climbing the steep stairwell, Jeff took one last look through the large glass window and the snow covered street beyond.

The door gave its familiar creak under the pressure of Adam's hand. Pausing in the hallway for a moment, he listened for any sounds from the apartment across the hall. Two one bedroom apartments were located on the basement floor. It was quiet and only occasionally would voices or thumps filter through the ceiling from the apartments above. Sometimes he forgot they were there. There was a furnace and storage room in the basement, and only in the summer did other tenants come down regularly to retrieve things. After shutting the door behind him, he leaned over and put the paper and the bag containing the two cans of soup on the table. He was anxious to get his boots and coat off so that he could look through the paper.

"Maybe today it will be in" he thought sitting down at the table. The front page headline was about a strike by a local union, and uninterested, he immediately turned to the editorial page. He had written four letters before this one, but they had never found their way into the paper. Under the headline "Citizen fired up over snow removal" was his letter.

As a local resident, I am concerned and feel I should comment on the article about city council's proposal to cut snow removal service. As it now stands, I find that the snow removal in the city is already sub par, and the roads and sidewalks are often not cleared for a couple of days. I think this is a dangerous practice. There are many retired and elderly people in my neighbourhood, and snow-filled roads and walkways are a threat to their well being. Just last week, I saw an elderly lady fall when trying to walk

through deep snow. I feel that further cuts to this essential service will only lead to more needless accidents and personal injury.

John Q. Public

Nickel Centre

They had changed his letter a little bit, and part of it was missing, but he thought it sounded good. His words looked strange in newsprint and seemed so removed from the letter that he had written out so neatly on a note pad the week before. He had signed his real name, but asked to be labeled as John Q. Public because he was writing for the good of everyone. Looking over it again, he smiled inwardly, excited by the thought that today there would be people throughout the city reading these words. He would have to tell Sherry about it later, and decided that he would cut out the article and tape it on the fridge, or put it between the pages of a book for safe keeping.

Everyday he followed a certain method in reading the paper, and it took him about two hours to work through it. There were so many things going on, and he liked to know about them all. He did not have a television in his apartment, but he did listen to the public broadcast on the radio. Much of what he heard on the radio one day, he would read in the paper the next. He turned back a page and in bold black print were the words: DEATH NOTICES

Coles, (Reggie) William George. The picture was of a robust young man in military uniform.

The family announces with sorrow the death of Reggie Coles, 70 years, Tuesday January 26th, 1985 at his residence. He was an infantryman in the Canadian Armed Forces, fought in France in World War II, and is a member of the Nickel City Branch 588 of the Royal Canadian Legion. He worked for years as an armoured truck driver and later as a security officer at Civic Square. Preceded by his wife Dorothy (nee Playter).

A list of all the children and grandchildren followed, but he did not read the rest. His mind was busy imagining the sights that the man had seen and the stories he surely told. His own grandfather was in the war and had told him many tales when he was young.

One day last summer, he had wandered in on a funeral and sat quietly in the back corner pew. He liked the smell of incense, and it reminded him of the sweet smell of chimney smoke when walking the streets.

When it was really cold, the smoke hung around the rooftops, as if there was an invisible hand keeping it down. The priest walked around, swinging the gold container, and the smoke curled around the rich wood of the coffin. After the funeral, he listened to the people who were standing around the steps of the church. The talk was full of life, and both tears and smiles could be seen on many of their faces.

Beside the obituaries was the headline: BURN VICTIM STILL CRITICAL.

Four year old Timothy Allen Paul is waging a valiant battle for his life at Sick Kids Hospital after a fire ravaged the family home on Monday night. "He has suffered burns to over 50% of his body" the doctor attending Timothy said in a statement today.

The phone rang and Adam lifted his head from the paper.

"Hello" he said somberly, still thinking and preoccupied with why this child had to endure such suffering. Years ago he had been to that hospital, and had never forgotten what he had seen.

"Adam. I'm glad I caught you." It was Sherry; the woman who lived across the hall.

"Is anything wrong?" I listened outside your door, but couldn't hear anything. Are you ready now?" He could hear Sherry's laboured breath on the other line.

"Yes. I dropped my inhaler and it rolled under the bed. My sister won't be coming by until late this afternoon."

"I'll come right over."

"Thank you. You are a real Godsend you know that."

He hung up without responding.

He had known Sherry for a little over a year, but had lived in the building for two. For the longest time, he wondered who lived across the hall. No one ever came out, but there were visitors that he saw outside the door. There were two women that came by a couple of times a day, and he had also seen an elderly man with a mustache and a hat. They were all polite, and would only say "hello", "good morning" or "good afternoon" before going into the apartment. Sometimes voices came through the door, and he was eventually convinced that it was a woman, and that she was young.

The first time he was ever in the apartment was in the summer. As he was stepping out his door one day, a woman came bounding out into the hallway. Her face was white and she was panicked and out of breath.

"You have to help. My sister, she's fallen down. I can't do it by myself." She stared around frantically, and Adam thought that she was about to run up the stairs and into the street.

"I can help" he said calmly. She squinted her eyes at him.

"Come on" she said tugging at his sleeve and leading him into the apartment.

He expected the apartment to be just like his, but it was not. It was dim, and the large living room off the front door was empty except for some boxes and a couple of folding chairs. They walked down a short L-shaped hallway and into the bedroom. It was cluttered, piled high with boxes, books, clothing and wrappers of all kinds. In the corner was an enormous bed, and beside it on the floor was the largest woman that Adam had ever seen in his life. She was wearing a pale blue gown that reminded him of what they made you wear in hospitals. She was on the floor struggling to get up, but stopped and looked up at them when they entered the room. She was breathing heavily, and her young face was flushed.

"Sherry, this is your neighbour."

"Adam" he said standing back and waiting by the door.

"Hello Adam" Sherry responded. "If I would have known you were coming over I-"

"Adam, come here please" Sherry's sister said cutting her off and motioning to him. Sherry was on her side laying perfectly still. "Sherry, if I push on this side, you can get on your knees, then we can try and lift you into bed."

Once Sherry was on her knees, they both positioned themselves under her arms. Adam noticed that her bare skin felt strange on his. The soft flab seemed to hang and mold around his neck and shoulders. It was very white and soft.

"On the count of three now." Adam readied himself, and followed the sister in putting one hand around Sherry's back. The skin here was equally soft, and his hand sunk into her and felt as if it would be swallowed.

"One, two, three, up." Sherry grunted and the sister strained and gave words of encouragement. Adam snorted and they raised her enough so that she could catch the edge of the bed and roll back onto its surface. There was an awkward silence, and Adam again stepped back towards the door. Sherry's face was as red as an apple, and she was silent. Her eyes looked away into the corner of the room. The sister turned to him.

"Come on, I'll show you out."

They turned to leave, the sister leading the way. When he was about to step out the door of her room, Sherry called his name and forced a smile to her lips.

"Thank you."

Adam smiled, nodded and left the room.

The next day, the sister came over and knocked on his door to tell him that Sherry wanted to see him. At first, he was only there when someone else was, and he could tell that the sister didn't really like him. He would wander and look at the things that were piled around the room. The books were piled in columns and looked to him like tree stumps. And there were such strange titles. After a while, Sherry asked for his phone number and would call and talk to him. He began to run errands for her, and go to the grocery store, the pharmacy, or the library. She would always give him a note or a list so that he made sure that he got it right.

He knocked three times on the door before entering.

"Adam, good" she said when he walked into the room. "I dropped it here near the head of the bed." She was wheezing heavily and struggled for every breath. He could see her large chest rising and falling dramatically.

"Okay."

He got down on his hands and knees. He had never looked under there before. It had been reinforced, but there was still a sag in the middle that hovered just above the floor. The purple plastic inhaler was right in the middle, and he reached under and grabbed it. Sherry took it out of his hand, and after removing the cap, stuck it in her mouth. She inhaled deeply and after another spray settled back down into the bed.

Adam walked around and took up his seat near the head of the bed and in front of a small bar fridge. The place was set up so that she could access drinks or food in the fridge by rolling to one side. There was a table on the other side of the bed stacked with the books that she was reading. He loved to sit and listen to her. She seemed to have so much knowledge of things he would have never thought about. Most recently, she had been reading about different religions, and the last book that he had gotten for her was called *The Book of Secrets*. He wondered about these secrets and hoped that Sherry would tell him.

"What's it like outside today Adam?"

She told him that she had not been out of the building for three years. He took the time to really look around and see things for her. He wanted to be as clear and accurate as he could, and that's why he set up a thermometer. Sometimes the radio was off by several degrees, and he always went by the temperature reading outside his window.

"It is minus fifteen today but colder when the wind picks up. The sun is warm and bright and there is not a cloud in the sky. It snowed last night, and it is hanging on the branches of the trees."

She always closed her eyes, and sometimes would ask him more questions about things that he had seen while walking around. She wanted to know about the children in the schoolyard, or what he heard people say when he was in the store. Often she asked him if he thought that he were being judged. He did not understand what she meant. She never made him talk for long. He told her that his voice would echo in his own head and hurt him. He would much rather listen.

"Can you help me up now?"

He got up off the chair and went around to the other side of the bed. She rolled and let her feet fall on the floor. She was getting better, for earlier she could not even do this on her own. She held out her arms and he pulled when she said she was ready. She stood still for a while and he moved back to his chair. Watching her waddle slowly across the room, he thought that soon she would be able to get up on her own. There was a special entrance to the bathroom with a curtain covering an extra wide door, and she disappeared behind it.

While she was gone, he picked up *The Book of Secrets*. On the cover was a man with a long beard and a fur collared hood around his head. He was staring off in the distance. She had read him parts of the book

and told him about life and death. How the two are inseparable, and that fear of death is the same as fear of life. Her words stayed with him.

Sherry emerged through the curtain and slowly made her way back over to the bed. Once she was standing above it, she let herself fall and the bed creaked and groaned under her weight. She settled herself and looked over at Adam.

"You reading some Rajneesh are you?"

"No, I was just looking at the cover. Can you tell me more?" She took the book out of his hands and opened it up to where she had a bookmark. She read silently.

"I was just reading something about controlling your mind and your consciousness. Not allowing your mind to move or wander. Thinking can only exist in movement, and movement stops you from seeing things as they truly are. You have to see everything completely and not waver from it. This goes against how our mind operates and it is only through great concentration that this can be accomplished."

He sat and thought about what she had said, and tried to concentrate on one thing. He imagined the boy from the store this morning, and could see him clearly and completely.

"Why do you read these books?" he asked after some time.

"I read to search for wisdom and truth, and to free myself from all the trappings of this world. There are so many religions and ways to think about life, and we all strive towards perfection, a way beyond sin and death. A way to wholeness and harmony with God. It is the constant conflict between the spirit and the flesh. Only faith will allow me to truly love and forgive and find salvation. Then and only then will I be at peace."

"And then will you go out again?"

Sherry was silent and put the book down on the table. She thought how like a child he was. She closed her eyes.

Adam thought: maybe she is tired. She usually told him when she wanted to be alone again. There were things he hoped to ask her about, but he figured this was not the right time. She had lent him books in the past, but he had some trouble understanding things, or remembering where he had left off the last time. Words confused him sometimes.

"How old are you Adam?" Her voice was soft and peaceful and she did not open her eyes. He had to think for awhile, for he never considered his age. He rolled his eyes and nodded his head while counting.

"I am thirty three." Adam always answered whatever question she or anyone put to him, for he had nothing to hide.

"Maybe someday I will be free like you. Soon I will go, but I am not ready yet. The season is not now." She opened her eyes, but still did not look over at him. "Thank you for helping me today, but I am tired and would like to sleep."

"Do you want me to get you anything?" he asked once he had risen out of his chair.

"No."

Adam left the room without speaking. Sometimes he wondered why she did not leave. He knew that she had money. She had told him about the mansion that she had grown up in, and how money could ruin you. She used the word concupiscence. He did not understand the meaning, but said it over and over in his mind so he would not forget. He did not have a chance to tell her about his letter. She was the one who told him to start reading and writing again. Usually, his visit would last at least an hour, and she could not wait to tell him more things. "Perhaps she is not well" he thought.

When he reached the front door of her apartment, he looked into the living room and noticed a mirror resting up against the wall. He had never seen a mirror in her apartment, not even in the bathroom, and he wondered where this one had come from.

She lay there for a time and tried not to cry. She looked over contemptuously at all the books on the table beside her and tried to blink away the stinging in her eyes. "What good is it?" she thought "if I can not learn from my own words? It is always easier to think than to do." Her mind ventured outside. She had not seen the sky for a long time. She could see the light of the sun, but only through the curtains that covered her window. "If only there was nobody out there. They will never leave me alone." She was saved from her thoughts by the phone.

"Hello" she said, trying to steady her voice.

"Sherry, are you all right?" It was her sister.

"Yes, it's just you said you couldn't come this morning, and I dropped my inhaler, and had to call Adam." The words rushed out of her quickly.

"Are you okay? Did he help you?" Sherry nodded. "I don't know if I like that man. He's strange. We can get the nurse to start coming again if you'd like."

"No, no it's all right."

"How much do you know about him anyway?" Linda was her older sister, and resented the fact that someone else could help. She liked to paint Adam in a different light, often telling people that she thought he might be dangerous.

"We've talked about this before Linda. He's harmless and very sweet to me. He doesn't ask for a thing."

"What do you mean ask for anything? Does he know about your inheritance?"

"No, he doesn't know anything about that." Sherry felt insulted, and her sister's questions aggravated her. "Why do you always have to look for the worst all the time? He's on a government disability, and his cheque is more than enough for him."

"Well if he ever asks for money."

"I don't care about the money."

"That money pays for you to live there so--"

"Listen. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"I worry about you" Linda said awkwardly.

"I know."

Once back in his apartment, Adam sat down at the table. His routine had been thrown off for today, and he thought that maybe it was for the best. He was still thinking about Sherry, and decided that he would go and see her later to make sure that everything was all right. Looking down at the paper, he saw it was still open to the death notices. He remembered the story about the burn victim and closed the paper and folded it in half. He would ask Sherry to loan or recommend some books. Maybe she would let him take some out on her library card, or maybe he could get one himself.

He walked into the other room and pulled out the television table that had puzzle pieces on it. He liked to sit in this room in the afternoon because the sun would shine in and make the puzzle seem bright and real. He bought it at the Salvation Army. A nice man who worked there promised Adam that he would put aside any new ones that came in. Picking up a piece, he fit it into another with hardly any thought. He was good at doing puzzles, and he picked the box up from the floor and looked at the picture on the cover. It was of a fabulous garden with a pond in the middle. The water was a deep blue, and this was the part that he was working on first. He liked the water, and one day wanted to take Sherry swimming. He joined another two blue pieces and smiled for they fit together flawlessly.

A Night His Own

The tires screeched as Thomas Kowalchuck wheeled his black, two door 1976 Delta 88 into the parking lot. He knew that it was a gas guzzler, but he didn't care. The cars these days were not cars, at least not to him. They were tin boxes that would fold up like an accordion if they ever got hit. Tom liked a car with a lot of steel and a big hood stretched out in front to guide him. He eased the car into a parking spot next to a white Honda Civic. Parked beside a small car, the Delta looked that much better. As he slammed the heavy door, he laughed quietly to himself. It was an overcast day in September, and he took his time. He did not notice that some of the trees in the lot beside the store were just starting to show the dying colours of the fall.

Tom walked down the front aisle of the store and only smiled when the people motioned to him and called out his name. He knew he was a little late, but did not hasten his step.

"Hello Thomas" Lisa the cashier said coyly.

"Hey Thomas" called out Ray the deli worker who was on his way to the front office. It was early, and there was an overlap of the employees finishing the night stocking duties and those coming in to start the day. He saw Ronnie putting up a display, and evasively slipped down an aisle. He was not in the mood for talk today.

In the back, he went right to the employee's change room and hung his jacket in his locker. On the inside of the door were pictures of bikini clad women that he had ripped out of magazines.

"Hello girls, another day eh?" Tom said kissing his hand and placing it up against the generous chest of a nameless model. She was frolicking on a beach and the words "summer fun" were written along the top of the page.

In the corner of the change room was a plastic pail for the bloodied coats. Tom had to put on a new coat every shift. Some of the guys would wear the same coat over and over again. Don was a "real beauty", and his boots always had hardened pieces of meat and fat stuck to them. The back room and the change area always had a particular smell from all of the blood and raw meat. The smell never used to bother Tom; at first he even liked it. Now it stayed with him, and the specks of blood remained in the crevices of his finger nails for days.

When he was 18, he got the job in the meat department. Mr. Vallee, a butcher, was one of his hockey coaches. The job at the store enabled him to look out for Tommy so he wouldn't get into trouble. He had never coached a kid who had made it all the way, and he thought for a while that this might finally be the one. Tommy tried to avoid the man's appraising looks and sheepishly avoided any hockey talk. He didn't even like playing hockey anymore, but nobody ever asked him.

The younger guys at the store quickly took him in and initiated him into their unspoken traditions. The produce department was right beside the meat room, and there was always someone who would keep an eye out for any women.

"There's the blonde again. Six o'clock, over by the bulk." Hand signals were used when they were out of earshot and then there would be an inevitable flow of workers out onto the floor. They would keep their hands busy while they maintained a vantage point from where they could see. A particular ripple of excitement went up if the woman of the minute happened to be wearing a sheer blouse and hovered near the coolers. All the boys looked forward to the summer months.

The meat cutting room was always cold, and Tom could hear indistinguishable grunts of French echoing around its cement walls. He could tell by the voice that he was working with Don who had been off for a while with a bad back. One day after work, Tom had seen him carrying some boxes out to his truck.

"What you have in the boxes there Don?" Tom had asked.

"Oh notin' jus' empty." Don struggled in putting them down and Tommy saw the suspension of the truck give under the weight.

"How are you doing this morning Don?" Tom said, taking down a clip board off a metal hook on the wall. Don had the most seniority in the meat room, but it was Tom's responsibility to check the orders for the day. Don couldn't read or write, and both French and English alike had a hard time understanding him when he talked.

"So you watch 'ockey las' nigh?" Don always asked him about the games, and Tom realized that it was about all Don knew about him.

"No I didn't catch it. Who was playing?"

"Bein les Canadiens. Dey beat 'artford. Not muc' but it count." Don left and went off into the back cooler to pull stock for the day. Tom started flipping through the pages and surveyed the specials. He put down the clip board and went to go grab some coffee in the staff room when he was almost hit by the wildly swinging door.

"Uh sorry." It was Bob, the high school student whom they had just hired. "Sorry I'm late."

"Don't worry about it. Just go in the cooler and give Don a hand." He turned to head towards the cooler and Tom looked after him.

The staff room was empty when he took his cup down from the shelf and poured himself half a cup. The coffee was always strong and tasted like mud. It was bitter and left him with what Tom called "high school teacher breath." Greta the cashier was the one who made the coffee everyday, and he had asked her about it one time.

"No one else seems to be complaining about it" she said matter-of-factly, making the coffee as she always did. "If you don't like it, don't drink it."

Tom put a scoop of sugar and copious powdered whitener into the cup and took a cautious sip. Always the same. Walking over to the lunch table, he surveyed the magazines that were spread out on its surface. He thumbed a soiled and rippled cover absently.

He had worked as a runner, then old Alfie took a stroke and they had to train Tom to fill in. By that time, his hockey career was over and he was just one of the regulars at the store. He had just finished high school, and figured he would take a little time off, when Mr. Vallee offered him a full time position. Alfie still had to work because he had jumped from job to job and didn't have a pension to fall back on. The on-going joke was that he would never get out of the meat department alive. He never did make it back, and died of complications a month later.

Tom dumped the rest of his coffee into the sink after having taken only a couple of drinks. He figured he had screwed around long enough and it was time to get to work. Looking up at the clock, he realized that the store was set to open and he had to start trimming and cutting the specials for the day.

Once back in the meat room, he slipped on the metal mace glove that covered the index finger of the hand opposite his cutting hand. On entering the cooler to grab the specials, he saw Don leaning over a red-faced Bob.

"Sacrama', I tol' you tha' one!"

"Sorry" Bob said following Don's finger and throwing the box on a pile. Don left the cooler mumbling something to himself. Once he was gone Bob looked over at Tom.

"I can't understand a word he's saying. I just keep nodding because I get tired of asking him what he said over and over again." Bob exhaled heavily. "No way I would want to spend my whole life working in this place."

"Don't worry about it" Tom said leaving with an armful of boxes "You'll get used to it."

Tom took up his place in front of the saw used to cut down the bigger hunks of meat. The knives there were always sharp, and they cut through the meat and trimmed the fat away with ease. He opened the boxes and laid the meat out in front of him. It was cold and bloody and it splattered on his coat.

"First casualty of the day" Tom said, making his cuts and sending them down a conveyor belt to be packaged and priced.

"Bob you better hurry up and start on these steaks" Tom said calmly. "We're starting to fall behind." Just then one of the boys from produce stuck his head through the door that led out onto the floor.

"Hey you gotta see this one, come on Bob." Bob looked back at Tom yearningly. Tom nodded his approval and watched as the door swung back and forth and finally came to a stop.

The Saturday shift was always busy, and when Tom folded his body back into the Delta he was tired. It was Labour day weekend, and people were trying to savour that last bit of summer before the fall. He worked hard and steadily, making time pass quickly. They had gotten behind because Bob was a little slow and made up some excuse so that he could leave early.

The ride home was the best. Actually, he always said jokingly that he'd like to be buried in the Delta. One day on the radio, he heard of some guy in California who wanted to be buried in his BMW. He bought the plot and had made all the necessary arrangements. Only in America. He wondered if the man was going to be buried sitting at the wheel or lying in the back seat.

Black Sabbath blasted through his car stereo, and Tommy floored it coming upon his favorite stretch of road. He lived in a little community on the outskirts of the city. The area sat just beyond the ridge of a great mineral basin. The road was winding in places and descended through to low land areas. There was one particular straight away that was bordered only by rock cuts. The engine roared, and the car flew past jagged edges. He leaned back and enjoyed the ride.

His apartment building was across from a local playground. Once he finished high school and started working full time at the grocery store, he went looking for a place to live. His father told him that he would never have it as good as he did at home.

"Go den" his father said through his Slavic drawl, pushing the discussion away with the motion of his hand.

The apartment building was quiet now. At first, he moved into the basement apartment, but he didn't like it because the family above him had children. It drove him crazy. Little Tyler would run up and down the hallway, pounding back and forth over his head. This was inevitably followed by the shouting of his mother yelling at him to stop. Finally, he got the top apartment when the previous tenant moved out.

His personal parking spot at the back of the apartment building was reserved by unspoken acquiescence. He waited some time to get the spot, and parked there whenever he could until it became his alone. It was close to the garden hose, so that he could wash the Delta when he wanted to. It was also in a place that offered the greatest amount of shade. The car became unbearably hot if left in the sun. The people who lived in the building knew how much he loved his car, and even the children were careful about playing around the Delta. When he was washing it, they would gather around him, asking if they could see under the hood. Tom would lift it up, noticing the children's curious eyes which could barely see over the side of the car.

He ran his finger gently along the door as he walked by. The paint job was holding up well, and his finger slid along the wax that was generously applied every second weekend during the summer months. Tom looked up and was surprised to see Beth sitting on the steps of the apartment waiting for him. She had gone to a cousin's wedding in Ottawa. They smiled sweetly at each other.

"How's it goin' Beth, I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow?"

"Well, I wasn't supposed to, but Shirley had to get back today, so I decided to come home." Beth stepped in front of him and started to climb up the stairs. The building was old and their ascension was accompanied by a chorus of squeaks and cracks. She got to the top of the stairs and turned to face him, blocking the door.

"See, if you would just give me my own key I could have been here waiting for you." She dragged her index finger along his chest and then moved away so Tom could unlock the door. Once the door was closed behind them, he turned and kissed her square on the lips. She pulled away playfully.

"To-om you smell like meat. Why don't you go take a shower." Tom took off his shirt. He looked directly into her eyes and said:

"Take me as I am."

Tom stepped out of the shower and called Beth's name. They were both hungry after, and she volunteered to take her car and go and get some hamburgers for dinner. Tom stood listening for a moment, but nobody called back. He dried himself and looked briefly up at the mirror. It was fogged. He grabbed a clean pair of jeans out of his closet and slipped them on. The plans for tonight were still up in the air, and Tom knew that Beth would have something in the works. She had mentioned that she had to go see another one of her girlfriends who was getting married. It seemed like everyone was getting married, going through all the bullshit that was ludicrous to Tom. He would hear Beth on the phone, talking about the details. Once one of them got married, it seemed that they all wanted to follow suit, the next trying to outdo the other. What colours to wear, invitations, shoes, hairstyles for summer. When he would hear her talk, he would shake his head and go back to watching television. Tom flipped his head back violently, as his hair was hanging down and stinging his eyes.

He flopped down on the couch and turned on the television. He scanned the channels and finally settled on "Cops". He liked the show because it was not a dramatization. He never knew what they would stumble on, and the camera was always showing streets and alleyways that he would never see unless he visited the place himself. Today, the episode was coming from Alabama, and the local police were busting in on a guy who was growing pot in his basement. He watched and propped up on his elbow with greater

interest. The camera had a large light that illuminated everything it fell upon; peering into previously dark and unseen corners.

Beth returned with some burgers and fries, and headed right for the table and started laying out the portions.

"What are you watching? Is that "Cops" again? I don't know why you like that program so much, it's the same thing all the time." Tom didn't turn around, but could imagine her nose daintly wrinkled up, as it always was did when she didn't like something.

"Well", she said unwrapping her hamburger and placing it down in front of her. "I have to go over to Jenny's tonight to talk about the shower for Laura, but after that I'm not sure. So let's plan something for later O.K.?"

Beth always had a certain quality to her voice; it was high and uplifted and the "O.K." came out like a little squeal. He did not respond, his present fatigue proving him no match for her. He took a big bite out of his hamburger, but was disappointed with its generic taste. Pulling it away from his mouth and studying it, he noticed that the meat was thin and composed mainly of filler. He put it down and said:

"I don't know. I'm not really sure what I want to do tonight. I heard the boys at work talking about going to see a band at the North Star." Beth looked directly into Tom's clear blue eyes.

"I won't be at Jenny's all night, so we'll meet up later?"

"Yea, I guess, why don't you call me." Tom's voice sounded small and his last few words were drowned out by the sounds of gun shots. Turning immediately to the television, he saw a couple of police men disarming and handcuffing a man who they had pinned on the ground. Tom turned back and saw that Beth's eyes were once again staring straight at him, still waiting for a more definite response to her question. She never said that she expected anything, or forced him to do anything. They would usually meet other couples at a local roadhouse bar that had become their regular spot. Always a couples thing, and the last few times they had gone out, Tom barely said a word.

"So we're going over to my parents for Sunday dinner eh?" Beth asked starting up the conversation and for now abandoning the discussion of tonight's plans. He had been absentmindedly chewing his food and looking at a spot on the wall right above her head.

"Yea, I mean that's what we had planned and everything." Tom looked fully at Beth, trying to see her as he did that first time, as a stranger.

"Dad's planning on having the pool tournament again, and all of my cousins are going to come over..." Her words faded away. Tom stared numbly at her and just watched her moving mouth. He noticed a little piece of bread was stuck between the crevice of her two front teeth. The dialogue from the show and her words ran together.

"So Mom is having trouble 'Down here are some of the worst areas of city' getting the place ready 'Can't even begin to tell you the things I've seen' because Uncle Jim and Auntie Julie are getting divorced. 'Last night seen two kids killed in a car wreck.' I hope there's no problems at the house 'They were stoned' this weekend. 'It's sad'. I just want everyone to be happy."

He had heard it all before. Everybody was kept in mind and not a single wedding, anniversary, birthday, or death went by without Beth taking the appropriate steps.

They finished their meal in silence, and Tom took his place on the couch while Beth cleaned up the table and put the empty wrappings in the garbage. She was always cleaning up and taking care of things before Tom would even think about it. He would have done it in his own time, and he had long ago given up on telling her to sit down and relax. Often, she bit her nails right down until they bled. "Cops" was still on, and the camera was trained on the back of a policeman's head as he drove through the city.

"Well, let me tell you" the policeman said looking straight ahead. He spoke in a strong southern accent. "The guy we picked up tonight has been in and out of correctional institutions all his life, and has got a record as long as his arm. I don't know what to think of it." He shook his head and paused as the car rounded a corner. "You'd think that after they'd been in and out of jail, they'd want to try something different. There's nothin' glamorous or excitin' about it." He turned and faced the camera. "And if you want to cross that line, we'll come get ya."

The credits for the show came up, and Tom looked around to see what Beth was doing. He could hear the water running from behind the closed door and listened to her movements. She was just "putting on a fresh face" as she would say. Beth emerged from the washroom looking like she was ready for the start of

a new day. Her hair had some added body to it, and Tom noticed that she had applied a fresh layer of lipstick.

"Tom, I'm going to go now, so I'll call you in an hour or so-" Tom nodded silently in her direction. "What's wrong Tom, you seem awfully quiet?" Beth made a little pouty face and leaned with her thighs against the couch's arm. "You were fine earlier, remember?" Her voice was soft and one corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. Tom thought of their lovemaking and its unspoken charms.

"Oh, nothing." Tom sat up and reached for her hand. "I guess I'm tired. The store was pretty busy today." He squeezed her hand tight. "Call me later. I don't think I feel like going to the bar. There's this metal band playing again. I've seen them before. I may go out and get some beer, watch the hockey game, somethin'?' I guess I'm feeling..."

"What Tom?"

"Oh nothing. It's nothing. It will pass."

"Listen, I have to go now because they're expecting me, but we'll talk about this later." Her hand lingered in his for a while, and when she pulled away, the tips of their middle fingers were the last to touch. She turned and headed out the door. Tom sat and stared at the closed door and hoped for a time that she would return.

He remained on the couch and surveyed the apartment, telling himself that it was good to be alone. He put his hands behind his head and exhaled deeply then said: "King of the castle. Master of none." When he went to the local convenience store, the clerks behind the desk would call him "Mister" or "Sir". He thought this sounded strange, coming from high school girls; not long ago he had been there himself.

After school was out, and he started working at the grocery store full time, his choice was limited. Freedom through servitude. He had to get up for work in the mornings, and couldn't go cruising and screwing around every night with the boys. The weeks and months started to blend into one another, and he began to feel like he never left the store. His friends nagged him for being so serious, told him to "get a life" and stopped coming over to his house.

When he first moved, the excitement of setting up all his stuff had kept him busy. He couldn't wait to be totally set up so that he'd have no one to answer to, and could put his feet up on the coffee table if and

when he wanted to. His mother would come by, without his father knowing, and give Tom some things for his apartment. It all happened fast: the full-time job, the apartment, the girl.

The grocery store had it's own social network, and he couldn't help but get taken in, like a new member of the family. And like a family, he had to see them day in and day out whether he wanted to or not. The newest story line was that one of the young cashiers was pregnant; the mystery of course was who done it? The guys at work also organized hockey leagues in the winter and played softball in the summer. Everyone wanted Tom to be on their team. He didn't care if he played, but he would never hear the end of it if he didn't.

One night after the final game in hockey, some of the guys from the store decided to go out for a few victory drinks. Tom was introduced to Beth through another guy's girlfriend. Their first meeting was not very memorable, but he thought that she was pretty and energetic. They talked, and Beth left him with her number. Then she started coming into the store to do her shopping, and would ring the little bell that sounded in the meat room. She always wanted a select cut. One weekend, out of the blue, she invited him to a party over at her house.

Tom was startled by the sudden heavy pounding on the door. A deep rough voice was sounding against it, as if trying to break it down.

"Hey Tommy, it's me George." George. A flood of images from the past. High school. He sat still for a moment, excited but not knowing whether to answer. There were three more hard knocks before he moved off the couch. He opened the door and there was George, a crooked smile on his face.

"Hey-ee George, long time no see man." Tommy moved aside and let him pass. He could smell that he had been drinking already. Someone he had run into at the store had told him that George was in jail, but he hadn't heard that he was out. George sat down on the couch and put his two big feet up on the coffee table. He could see that he had gotten bigger. The guys in jail usually spent a lot of time working out, waiting for the day that they could finally bust through. George sat there gnashing his teeth together. Tommy went and sat on the chair beside the couch.

"Good to see the Delta outside" George said. "Listen man, you got to help me with something." Having said this, George leaned over and placed a heavy hand on Tommy's shoulder.

George was a part of Tommy's past. Small time deviance. Always somewhere else when they were supposed to be in class. Out in the gravel parking lot smoking dope, doing big donuts in the Delta, spinning around in sweeping circles, gravel flying, music blaring, everyone laughing. George was the tough guy, and Tommy had the wheels. George always had money and dope, and would throw something Tommy's way as payment.

The very first time they met was the night of a big party. Things ended up getting a little out of hand and the cops showed up; George was a big part of the reason why. It was also the first time that Tommy had tried acid, and his memories carried an added potency. The orange tab that he swallowed was given to him by a friend. Gilles was one of those guys who always waiked around with a stone sober look on his face, but had wild darting eyes. They never really knew if he was stoned all the time, or if he was just so saturated with the stuff that he was permanently buzzed. The people at school called him the Count because if he was feeling really good, he would start acting like the Count from Sesame Street. Every time he threw a hit down his throat, he would count it off and do a crazy laugh.

"One, one hit, of acid ah ah ah. Two, two hits of acid ah ah ah." There were rumours about how high he could count.

By the time Tommy got to the party, it was well under way. He made his way past people that were jammed into the house. People shouted his name, clapped him on the back, and he was taken up by the flow of people leading down into the basement. The music was loud and everyone was singing along to the lyrics. The basement couch was lined with people and Tommy was freaked out by the dance of hair. Everyone was banging their head in direct syncopation with the music. He took up a place against the wall and felt as if he was pinned there. Sometimes the wall felt like it was moving and he'd have to adjust his position. People he knew would approach him, but he could barely follow what they were saying as they yelled in his ear, trying to sound above the music.

"Hey man like how's, what, oh ya, I know did you see it man, like nothing. it was moving and I said wicked." People that he saw every day didn't look the same, and words caught in his throat. The beer was going down like water. He was drinking it at a furious pace; partially out of thirst, but mainly to try to settle himself down.

When the effects of the tablet really hit him, all colours seemed to stand out with a particular brilliance, and his vision was blurred. No matter how many times he blinked his eyes or rubbed them, he could not shake the feeling. Patterns stood out, and he could see every line, moving and bending and then folding back in on itself. Everything had depth and the fabric of the carpet was like a fabulous mosaic. People walked by and their figures left after-images. Voices seemed to be coming from above. His stomach was tight. He had heard that it was because there was arsenic in the tablets. All he really knew for sure was that he was alone.

The first time he saw George, he came down the stairs wearing a black leather jacket and black jeans. He was wearing a T-shirt that had a pentagram made of swords with the words "Slayer" written in red. George walked down and surveyed the place. He had deep eyes that seemed fearless as he looked over everyone in the room. George ended up putting the case he was carrying right in front of Tommy. He had been trying to talk to a girl that George knew and they were introduced. Tommy had a hard time following the conversation, and it turned when George started to tell a story about someone who had done him wrong.

"And I better not see him tonight or I'm gonna fuckin' kill him." He punctuated this statement by stomping his foot into the empty bottles that filled half of the case at his feet. Tommy cringed as the glass broke and cracked. George rammmed and twisted his foot around, making a sound that stabbed Tommy's ears. He thought of twisted bodies.

"Here George" Tommy said, throwing him some clean clothes as George emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He noticed that George had a pot belly and figured that they must have fed him pretty good in jail. He also noticed a new tattoo of a grim reaper holding out his scythe and beckoning with a skeletal finger.

"Hey George, you got a new tat there?"

"Yea, pretty cool eh" George replied, twisting around and trying to see it over his shoulder. "There was a guy in there who did it for me. He used a guitar string, and for the black he used ashes from burnt

cardboard mixed together with shampoo." While George's back was turned, Tommy noticed some of Beth's things sitting out, and he put them away and out of sight.

"Yea listen, you got to get me something to eat before we go. I got a little black that I can throw you for helping me out." Tommy left George to get dressed. It felt strange to have George in the apartment so soon after Beth had left. Beth had never met George and some his other friends, but she had heard about them, and asked why he used to hang around guys like that. Tommy never had an answer for her. A subtle fear that she would return came over him. Brushing this feeling away with a smile, he went into the kitchen to see what he had for George to eat.

Tommy used to see George at least every couple of months, and he never knew where he was or when he was going to show up at his house. Tommy's parents lived upstairs. His Dad was retired for a number of years, and never went beyond the living room and the front step with his lawn chair and his ashtray in place beside him. He was Polish, and you could always hear his deep voice sounding through the floor and in Tommy's room. This was inevitably followed by his mother's own yells in response. He spent his retirement sitting on the couch and would send Tommy out when he was low on brandy or cigarettes. His Dad could do nothing to control the business that went on in the basement. He had trouble walking, and his shaky legs seemed like they were always about to buckle underneath him. No one ever mentioned or dared to inquire what was wrong with the old man. The only thing that could threaten was his voice. It was deep and he talked in a drawn out drawl. He would speak with his head slightly tipped back and his large front teeth protruding. In the summer, he would sit and survey the street. The neighbours would come and talk to him, and told Tommy that his father was wise about certain things. He often called his son "stupid" and made this especially clear when Tommy would work on the Delta in the garage. His Dad had sold him the car believing it was worthless.

"Why you try fix car? Car is garbage. You do vork for not'ing. Someone say no, and you do to say yes." Tommy would never respond and would focus even harder on the task at hand.

The back door to their house was always open, and nobody had to knock. There was so much traffic that went up and down those stairs, that knocking was a convention that had been long disposed of.

Tommy's room was big and had lots of seats. Two couches that folded out into beds were placed against the walls. There were always ashtrays filled to the rim with butts, and beer bottles were scattered all over the room.

The only opposition to anything that went on in the basement was from his mother. She had married a much older man, and was now stuck caring for him. His mom didn't like George. He was always nice to her and would smile and say "Hello Mrs. Kowalchuck" politely, but his Mother knew. She would come down the stairs, open the door, and they would have to hide what she wasn't supposed to see. She still knew it was there though. The smell was what usually brought her down. She would come in and stand with her arms folded in front of her, her fuzzy slippers protecting her feet from the litter on the carpet. Shaking her finger at them, and with her raspy accent rising over the music, she would say: "Bad guys, bad bad guys."

Tommy would never immediately respond to her, and his friends sat there trying to hold back their laughter at his mom's shrill and accented voice. He would just look at her blankly and say "O.K. mum." She would leave shouting things, usually giving him hell and asking him why he had friends like this. Once she was safely upstairs, they would go back to what they were doing. When she would hear that one of his friends had gotten into trouble she would only say: "Vell den, dat's the vay."

Once George was fueled up, they went down and got into the Delta. The engine roared to life. George stretched out his long legs in the front seat, a crooked smile again breaking out on his face.

"They don't make em like this anymore eh Tommy-boy."

"Nope. So where to?" Tommy asked looking over at George. Tommy was a little fidgety, and couldn't seem to get comfortable in his seat. He thought he could hear his phone ringing in the apartment, but pushed the idea far out of his mind. Tonight was his night.

"Well, first we have to go to Louie's place. I have to take care of something there, and find out where Gilles is at. Louie has still got connections. He'll tell me where he is. He's one of the old crew, you know?"

"Louie still live in the same apartment?" Tommy asked as he turned out of the parking lot and headed for the highway.

"No, he's got a new place now. He's always moving around. You can't stay in the same spot too long, you know that Tommy. I'll show you where to go, you just drive."

Tommy had forgotten much about the scene. Dealers who were stupid were labeled as "heat scores" and were black listed. George rummaged around in the glove box for a tape that he liked. At first, he stumbled upon tapes that Beth had left in the car, and he snorted and ceremoniously threw them into the back seat.

"What's all this shit?" George asked holding up a Madonna tape.

"Uh, those are my girlfriend's."

"So you pussy whipped or what?" George laughed.

"No way man. I do what I want." Tommy pushed in a Metallica tape and turned the volume up, then stepped on the gas, accelerating to the force of the music. The Delta seemed to be pulling to one side, so he eased off. He could also smell the wet of the pavement, and he shivered from the dampness.

Louie's apartment was in a new section of town. The choice for the place to set up his operations was always made with careful consideration. Accessibility for his clients was important, and the area and the people who lived there were always looked into. He wanted to be able to carry on business without any problems. He specifically didn't want to set up in an area where there were a lot of older people. They always seemed particularly concerned with what was going on, suspecting and secretly hoping for the worst of their suspicions to be true.

Once George and Tommy arrived, George screened the name board in the lobby and rang Louie's apartment.

"Who's there?" Louie's voice echoed in the entranceway.

"It's George and Tommy" George replied. Louie activated the buzzer, and George reached out and grabbed the door.

They took the elevator up to the seventh floor. They walked down the hall and Tommy noticed that the place was very clean and smelled slightly like disinfectant. The apartment building was new, and the carpet was not yet soiled. He could hear children's voices and the sounds of families eating dinner as cutlery

clinked against plates. George knocked on the door. They were called in by Louie, who was on a cordless phone and leaning back in a lazy-boy. They stood hesitantly at the door until Louie motioned for them to enter. While they were taking off their shoes, Tommy looked over and saw Louie slip into the bedroom. He shut the door quietly behind him.

Tommy and George went over and sat down on the soft black leather furniture.

"Pretty fuckin' nice eh?" George said. His big hands were folded neatly in his lap, and he looked around the apartment wanting Tommy to do the same. Louie's apartment was stylishly furnished with matching tables, lamps and chairs that looked like they were bought right off the showroom floor. Tommy thought of his own apartment and his second hand furniture. Unlike his, Louie's apartment was a two bedroom and quite spacious. There was a picture of a sunset right above the couch. Across from the couch was a black entertainment unit that held all of the newest equipment. There was a huge colour television, and a full stereo with equalizer and c.d. player. The only thing out of place was the video game system and the numerous cartridges that were strewn all over the floor in front of the entertainment unit.

"Looks like Lou's doing O.K. eh? He's got all the comforts of home right here." George nodded his head and continued to look around.

"Yea, doing O.K." Tommy echoed, noticing the elaborate crucifix that hung above the bedroom door. It was made out of steel and had a detailed figure of Christ on it.

Louie was not your typical small time drug dealer and always had a nose for business. It started in high school. He discovered early that he could make a good buck from selling. He realized a demand and sought out the right people to supply. Louie was admired by all the boys. Most of the other guys had spent a little time in jail, but Louie never got pinched. As soon as it looked as if things were getting bad, Louie would lay off. There were rumors that he knew some important people. He even went to university for a couple of years. He came back with a new car, nice clothes and a whole new attitude. He never received a formal degree from the school, but his time there definitely improved his prospects and put him within a higher economic earning bracket. After that he always lived in new apartments or rented houses in suburban neighbourhoods. Nobody knew if he used what he dealt. They never saw him doing it, but sometimes they could tell he was on something.

"Sorry for keeping you guys waiting" Louie said as he emerged from the bedroom with the phone in his hands. He went over and placed the phone back in its cradle and wrote a note to himself on a pad beside the phone.

"How are you Tommy? Long time no see. What you been doing with yourself lately?"

"Just working, you know."

Louie smiled at him and turned his attention to George. George was much more subdued in the presence of Louie. He had that affect on people. He never got frazzled, and was always calm and was slow and deliberate in his movements.

"So, George", Louie said with a hint of good humour in his voice. " glad to see you out and about. I hear you have a little problem?"

"Yea, well you know the story. Gilles, just got a little stupid. And now I'm back and there's a few things to settle up." Gilles was George's business partner. They had their own thing going, but were small time compared with Louie. George had helped Louie when he was first starting out, and everyone knew that what goes around comes around.

"Well listen George, I really don't want to know the details of what went down between the two of you. You know, keep my distance." George nodded his head.

Tommy wasn't listening. He thought how serious they seemed. There were no laughs like there used to be. He looked at his watch. It was getting on in the evening. He wondered if Beth had tried to phone, but quickly dismissed this thought and tried to concentrate on the conversation. He wanted to get caught up in the action. "Just like old times" he told himself leaning forward.

Tommy was glad to get outside again. He had started to feel warm in the apartment. The leather couch had begun to make his skin sweat under his jeans. Tommy inhaled the cool night air and looked over at George who had a more purposeful and hardened look on his face.

"You know where we have to go?" George asked Tommy once they had gotten into the car.

"No, I didn't really catch it" Tommy replied.

"Well we have to head back out towards your place. Lou said that he's got a buddy with a small house out there. Gilles probably figured nobody would be able to find him."

George slapped a Slayer tape in the deck and turned the music up loud. He was rocking back and forth slightly as someone might do if they were in pain. Tommy looked down and saw that his fists were clenched. He had big rough hands with scars on his knuckles. One time, George had gotten the worst of it, and had come to Tommy for help. It was George's father who had beaten him up. George was drunk and kept saying over and over: "He wouldn't stop kicking me in the head" It was the first time Tommy saw George cry. The other time was when George beat his cat to death.

They turned off the main highway and onto a dirt road. Tommy could tell that they were getting close to the place as George seemed anxious, looking around from side to side. The road was full of pot-holes and he figured if he drove fast, they would skip over them. The cars high beams were on, and the trees on the side of the road twisted strange shadows. The car pulled slightly as the tires caught in the gravel and Tommy gripped the wheel tighter for more control. He could see a little one lane bridge up ahead. It seemed as if the Delta wouldn't fit, and Tommy looked over at the railing as they drove over the small stream.

There were no streetlights in the area. The only signs of civilized life were from the small houses whose dim light sheltered them against the darkness.

"There it is." George was leaning forward and pointing to his right. There was a small house with a screened porch. The yard was well lit and Tommy could see a tricycle and some other children's toys scattered about. They looked like strange animals on the lawn, neglected and left alone. There was also an old wreck, and this was the sign Louie had told them to look for. As Tommy pulled into the drive way, he could see that George was tensed up against the door. His hand was on the handle, and his shoulder against the door. When they came to a stop, he sprang out of the car.

"You just wait here." George slammed the heavy door of the car behind him.

Tommy started to feel hot again and could smell his own nervous sweat. He began looking around to see if there were any approaching cars. New thoughts entered his mind: "What if George kills him, or the cops show up? This is the last time I ever do this." He had a vision of the roadhouse that they frequented, and the table that they always sat at in the back corner. Maybe Beth was there. It was all happening there.

now, without him. He rolled down the window to let in some air. It used to be only a weekend. A weekend and then a story, telling the guys how George would beat and taunt his victims.

He watched George stroll purposefully up to the door and he looked up and down the road to see if anyone was coming. There were no cars, and the light from the nearest house could be seen flickering faintly in the distance. The quiet was shattered as the tin door of the porch rattled under George's heavy fist.

As soon as Gilles answered the door, George was on top of him. His fist met his face dead on and sent him reeling back into the little porch. Gilles yelled, and Tommy noticed that lights came on in the upstairs of the house. He could hear children scared by the commotion. The porch was curtained, but Tommy could see as the silhouettes performed a violent dance. He could hear Gilles pleading and George swearing. After every exchange, there were thumps, groans from Gilles, and grunts from George. The silhouettes eventually disappeared as the two men scuffled on the ground.

"Are you goin' to give me my fucking money? Are you going to give me my fucking money?" Tommy didn't hear a response.

The fight was broken up when a woman came into the porch and started screaming at George and threatening to call the police. Two children in pajamas stood behind her crying, peaking out from behind her legs. By then George was done with Gilles. He left without saying a word, and acting as if he were deaf to the woman's screams. When George got back into the car, he was sweating profusely. He looked over and smiled at Tommy and slapped his hands together to signal that it was over. There was blood on the sweater Tommy had leant him, and he was breathing heavily.

"Took care of that, now lets get the fuck out of here. His chums are gone out, and I don't want them coming back while we're still here." Tommy turned the big car around and headed for the road. He looked in the rear-view mirror and caught a glimpse of a bloodied Gilles standing on the top step of the porch. He was using the screen door for support and was defiantly flashing the finger at the car. One of the children, a boy, ran out and picked up a rock and threw it at the Delta. It landed softly in the grass, the car already safely out of reach.

They drove in silence this time. Tommy felt a little nauseated. He could smell the blood mingled with George's sweat. It had a different smell than the meat room, and was stronger, more alive. George looked down at his sweater.

"The cock sucker bled all over me." George took off his sweater and tossed it in the back seat of the car. "I think I busted his nose pretty bad. Blood was squirting out everywhere" George chuckled mildly to himself. "People should know better then to fuck around with me eh Tommy?"

"Ya George" Tommy said, looking over at him. George nodded menacingly. Tommy fixed his eyes on the road ahead.

"Hey, why don't you pull over to the side of the road here for a minute." George motioned with his hand to the shoulder. They were still on the back road, and were close to the main highway. Tommy pulled the car over and turned it off. It took his eyes a second to get adjusted to the dark, and the road become visible once again, reflecting moonlight. He looked up and down the road to check for cars, then turned on the interior light. George was leaning over the seat rummaging through the jean jacket that he had left on the back seat. He settled back down and had a wrinkled cigarette pack in his hands. He opened it and pulled out a piece of hashish, some rolling papers and matches.

"Give me the keys" George said holding out his hand. George took a piece of the hash, put it on the end of the ignition key and started heating it up. As he crumbled it on the cigarette pack and mixed it with tobacco, Tommy noticed that there was still a lot of blood on George's hands. It stained the tobacco.

George finished rolling the joint and lit it up. He took large drags on it and held the smoke in a long time, sitting erect so that he could expand his lungs fully. The light off the end of the joint illuminated George's face in the red glow of fire. He passed it over to Tommy. Tommy hadn't smoked in quite a while, and he inhaled deeply and struggled to not choke and let the smoke out of his lungs. His heart started pounding hard, and it seemed as if the tension in his back and shoulders left him. He exhaled and watched the smoke form a cloudy layer in the car. He thought that everything was cool, back to the way it should be. All was quiet except for the crickets and George's raspy breath.

After they had finished they sat there for a little while. Tommy's feeling of calm left him as he looked down and saw that his keys were not in the ignition. He was searching himself, feeling around his clothes

and on the floor. He was confused and panicky. He turned to George and saw the keys dangling gingerly in his stained hands.

"Let me drive"

"Ah, I don't know George, what if we get stopped or something? You don't even have a license." Tommy's words were coming out very slow and methodical. George didn't even respond to the question. He looked at Tommy for a second, then got out of the car and made his way around to the driver's side.

"Move over" George said opening the door and shoving Tommy aside.

George turned the key and the engine roared to life. The Delta had a particularly big engine. When Tommy had bought the car off his Dad, he had a buddy install a 350 Rocket engine from a '73 Cutlass. George tramped on the gas pedal and the tires spit gravel. Tommy was pinned back and he sunk into the worn seat. The purr of the engine that he knew so well sounded strained under George's heavy foot. The car looked strange from the passenger seat. The dash was well lit and Tommy stared at it, letting his eyes go out of focus. By the time they got back on the main highway, George had the needle buried. Tommy's eyes watched the center lines, and the lights along the highway seemed to be guiding them. George was passing cars and whipping around as if in a race with the devil. The engine screamed, George laughed in the face of the moon. The poles clicked by faster and faster.

One of the cars that George passed on the wrong side of the road, contained a young couple who were on their way into the city to see a play at the newly opened theater centre.

"Asshole" Paul Sullivan said looking after the car and shaking his head. "Just hell bent for nothing."

Mary Jane, Tom's wife of five years, heard her husband's comment, but did not desert her own thoughts. She was thinking about the play. They had made a pact early in their marriage that every year they would see at least see one live performance. This year it was Mary Jane's turn to pick the play, and she had decided on a modern adaptation of Othello. Mary had read an article which detailed how Iago is a presence in Othello's own mind. They rounded a large corner on the highway and Paul immediately reached out and turned off the radio.

"Look at that Mar" he said pointing to a car that had gone off the road and into a rock cut. "That's the car that went flying by."

Tommy opened his eyes and immediately felt screaming pain shoot up his back. He could barely see as his eyes flashed white. He moaned and struggled to turn. He saw George leaning back in his seat, his head hanging unnaturally to one side. The windshield was shattered and sprayed with blood where George's head had struck the glass.

"I'm O.K." Tommy said out loud through rasped and struggled breath. "I'm going to be O.K. Beth, I'm going to make it." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Open Season

Rachel and her thirteen year old daughter June reside in a modest two bedroom apartment near the downtown core of a mid-sized city. It is an older section of town, and its lack of strategic urban planning is apparent. There are roads that curve around and come to dead ends, and bars, small grocery stores and salons are strung together in amongst the rows of houses. The apartment complex that they live in borders a used car dealership, and the running joke is that some of the tenants' cars have been sold off over the years. The houses and back alleyways are reminiscent of another time when coal was delivered along these routes, and young boys were paid to sweep the slag from the streets in the summer. Many of the old families in the neighbourhood have left; the children grown and moved on looking for work in the larger cities. The area now boasts more retirees and single parent families and many neighbours are now strangers left only with the occasional wave or "hello" called out across yards.

Rachel stood looking out the patio doors that led to the small balcony off the living room. When people came over, she always joked about their "beautiful view of the parking lot." Looking to her right, she could see the roofs of a jagged row of cars. Her eyes kept returning to the lane way, because she was waiting for her daughter. June was at a friend's house that was obscured by the old trees in the fenced in back yard. She was ashamed of herself for worrying so much.

Rachel reached down and picked up the pack of cigarettes that lay on the table and saw that the warning read: "Cigarette smoke can harm your children." She never smoked in front of June, and always opened the patio door to blow the smoke outside. It was a stupid habit, but she knew that everyone had their vices. Martha would get the clerk at the store to give her a new pack of cigarettes that had a warning that wasn't applicable to her. She told her that she liked that one that read: "Smoking during pregnancy can harm the baby."

"Don't have to worry about that anymore" she said with a chuckle during their coffee break at the bank.

Rachel was the neutral third party that her coworkers tried to enlist to shift the balance of power in the office. She thought how her desk was symbolically placed in the middle, a barrier and territorial line between the women who worked in the front and those in the back.

She looked down at herself and noticed a long white hair clinging delicately to her sweater. She grabbed it and flicked it off her fingers. She never worried about getting old, for there always seemed to be other things that were more pressing. What high school should June go to? Did she have enough to send her to university? Would the car make it through another winter? Glancing over at the picture on the end table, she smiled warmly. It was June as a child, smiling with the whitest baby teeth, the edge of her hair illuminated like a halo in the summer sun.

"Why do you keep that picture out?" June had asked one day looking at the photo.

"I keep it out because I like it. It reminds me of that time. You were such a happy baby."

On another day, June had come home upset and asked about her name. The other children had been teasing her at school.

"Well first, that was your grandmother's name. Besides, June is my favorite time of year, and you were born on the first day of summer."

She remembered the day the picture was taken. It was 1980, and her daughter was almost two. It was early spring and unseasonably warm, and they had gone to play on the swings. That afternoon she had realized that she must leave him. She had to fight back the tears as she pushed her baby higher and higher on the swing, hoping that her laughter and squeals of delight would drown out any of her sobs.

She moved her gaze away from the picture and caught sight of her daughter coming up the lane way. Rachel was slightly startled, as if caught peeping. June looked up at her mother and she waved in an exaggerated manner as if to say "Here I am mom and I'm all right." June had her own key and took herself to and from school everyday. Rachel backed away from the window.

The phone rang and Rachel put her out her cigarette. As she picked it up, she heard June open the door.

"Hello" Rachel said sitting down in the cushioned chair beside the little table in the hallway.

"Hi Rachel." Rachel could hear the dog barking and some children's voices in the background.

"Hello Martha." June emerged around the corner with her coat in her hand. She smiled and mouthed "Hi mom" and went to her room. Rachel watched her daughter walk down the hall and noticed that she was getting tall. She was at the age where her body was lanky, preparing for the advent of puberty.

"I forgot to tell you about tonight when we were on our coffee break." Martha began talking in her quick and slightly exasperated voice. "The girls were planning to go out tonight for some drinks and then maybe over to Sally's later. John's going out curling and the kids are with her parents."

"Well" Rachel said stalling. She was trying to think up an excuse. She was feeling lethargic lately and wondered if she should spend a quiet night at home with June. "I don't know Martha, I might stay home tonight, I'm feeling a little tired." Rachel heard a sigh on the other end and a new commotion brewed up in the Richardson household. Martha's voice receded as she addressed her youngest child:

"David, if you play rough like that, you're going to get hurt. Sorry" Martha said picking up her conversation with Rachel. "Well, listen, if you don't feel up to it" Martha sighed, letting her speech linger on the last three words. "Listen, I'll call you later-after dinner and tell you when we're going to meet if you happen to change your mind."

They exchanged good-byes and Rachel slouched over in her chair and pulled on the big blue sweatshirt she was wearing. Martha never took no for an answer; or she didn't openly acknowledge those no's anyway. She would most assuredly call again later.

"Mom, are you off the phone now?" June's youthful voice sounded from behind the closed door of her bedroom.

"Yea honey, it's all yours" Rachel responded, turning her head towards the bedroom. She waited and soon heard her daughter's quick and excited talk. The phone in her room was a new thing. She didn't like talking in the hallway anymore; she needed privacy now. *What is she talking about?* Rachel pondered. She strained to hear, but could not make out any words. *I hope that she's not keeping things from me. That's silly, I'm being silly.* Rachel tried to shake off these doubts, but they persisted. She tried to think back to what it was like to be her daughter's age, but she really couldn't remember. It seemed long ago, and the memories that came to her were flashes, selective moments that didn't mean a lot to what was going on now.

Rachel sat with her back to the television. She was watching June absentmindedly eat her dinner while watching a program over her mother's shoulder.

"How was school today?" Rachel asked, trying to draw her daughter's attention and moving to put the dishes away.

"It was fine. Me and Lisa don't hang around the others" June added flippantly, shifting her position now that her view to the television was unobstructed.

"Well, you should be friends with everyone." Rachel thought of the bank; the levels and separations under smiles and polite words.

"Everyone mom?" June asked with a note of disbelief.

"Well you know honey" she sighed.

She moved to the counter and started to rinse off the remains of the stir-fry. She thought of her ex-husband and what she saw of him in June. *She does have his nose, and the little curve of his upper lip.* The picture albums were tucked away. It went fast, her marriage, and it seemed like part of another life, a lost season. They had only known each other a year before June was born. She remembered how she thought then that she could not be happier. When the baby came things changed. He said he would stop gambling, but the money began to disappear, and he started to show signs that he was using again. She could see that he was falling apart, and she didn't want them to be around when he finally self-destructed.

After they divorced, he left and never returned. His family was full of apologies that were torture for her to endure, for they only knew a small part of what he was. *Don. Don.* His name sounded almost comical to her now. A big nothing. He had been creeping into her thoughts recently. The memories were like a drowned body that eventually breaks free of the weeds and rises to the surface of the water.

She looked back at June playing with the remains of her dinner. The bean sprout looked like a little snake and she baited the head and moved it around the plate. Occasionally she would look up at the television to find out about the latest Hollywood production. The voice was merely background noise for Rachel, and when alone, she often turned on the television simply to hear other people. It was easier now, but there had been times. Times when June had to go and wake her mother at night. It was always the same: she needed light, but just a little. Sometimes the darkness threatened to steal her breath.

"Damn it" Rachel said moving back from the sink and shaking her hand.

"What is it mom?"

"Oh, I wasn't paying attention and I've burned my finger." June abandoned the television and walked over with her own plate. She discarded the last bite of her meal into the garbage and prepared to dry the dishes.

"You should try to relax mom" June said tilting her head and looking smartly at her mother.

"I'm all right. I just wasn't thinking."

After they had finished the dishes, Rachel sat on the couch in the living room. She was watching the local weather woman give a re-cap for the day and a forecast for the weekend.

"It's going to be mild, and temperatures will be above seasonal values, so expect a little warmer weather. But the three day forecast shows temperatures will be slipping back below what's expected for this time of the year."

Rachel knew the weather woman. She had gone to high school with her. She was a nice girl, but always battled with her weight. Her name was Emma, and the kids at school used to tease her tirelessly and call her Mega. The summer after high school, she went away, and when she came back she was thin. Rachel noticed that she was back to wearing dark jackets. When she addressed the regional map her profile displayed a rounded belly. "Doomed to repeat ourselves" Rachel commented.

"Mom, can I go over to Lisa's tonight?" Lisa was the girl who lived just behind the apartment building. Rachel knew Lisa's mother because she came into the bank, and after handling someone's money, an unspoken confidence is established. The MacDonald's had five kids who were all decent and smiled and were polite to her when they passed her in the street. They had a nice home that was always busy, and at one time Rachel thought that this was the kind of life that she would have: running around, trying to take care of the household, everything bright and bustling. *Maybe it is better that June goes over there. Maybe these are the kinds of influences she needs in her life.*

"Well" Rachel said, "I thought that maybe you and me could do something tonight. Rent a movie, or go out for ice-cream."

"Mom" June said whining a little. "We're going to have a sleep over in the basement."

This was pretty standard fare at the MacDonald's, and Rachel allowed her to go over to her friends on Friday nights. In the morning, Mr. MacDonald would make them a big breakfast, and June would return home looking well fed, but not well rested.

"We even have the whole basement tonight, and her mother said that Jeff and Ryan will have to watch the hockey game somewhere else." With so many in their home, strict rules were maintained.

"Why don't you go out tonight and have some fun?" The question sounded bold and Rachel was taken aback.

"What do you mean, have fun, you don't think that I have any fun?" Rachel responded with a slight whine of her own. More and more she was going out. After June had gone to bed, she would take a walk to get a little fresh air. One night, she had stopped in at the local bar, and she had been going back ever since.

"Well, you do go out with the ladies from work, but I hear you talk to them and it doesn't sound like you have that much fun." June threw off this statement and then turned and promptly headed back to her room to make some preparations for tonight. Rachel looked at the clock and noticed that it was already eight thirty. She expected Martha to call again very soon, and was hoping that she could get June off and slip out beforehand.

The International Hotel was a local bar that had been a fixture in the neighbourhood since it was built in the early 1950's. At that time, there was a lot of building going on with no shortage of work for men. The original owner of the hotel thought that he had chosen a good name. Many of the people in the community had emigrated from Europe to come and work in the mines. His greatest concern was for the big sign that sat above the entrance way. He thought the white letters framed by red bulbs looked beautiful at night. The original essence of the hotel was now lost, and only surfaced in stories told by people old enough to remember or care. The large murals of colourful, but not accurate forest scenes were the backdrop where many a romance blossomed. Now, the old timers belly up to the bar. If you sit there long enough and they think that you are listening, they will talk.

"Those were the days boy. Yep. I met my wife here back in 1952. It was good. Used to be able to get yourself a hearty meal in the basement. Even had a big fountain at the bottom of the stairs. And upstairs was a gentlemen and escorts half and the other was a pool room for the men. It has changed lots, bar used to be over there, and couldn't enter the escort's side unless you had a date on your arm. Drove cab back then and knew everyone in the city, including Mayor Stanley."

Anthony sat up at the bar with a few of the regulars. He got to talking to the man beside him who introduced himself as Al. Anthony had a way with people, and he had started asking Al questions to counteract the awkwardness of sitting with a group of strangers. This was only the beginning, and he had already heard about Al's years with the company, his son the engineer, his daughter the nurse, his grandchildren, his health problems, and the weather. Anthony noticed that Al had a big round head and a belly to match. He was now talking ceaselessly about his trip to Florida.

"Retired you know. They call us snowbirds down there." Al knew it wasn't the season to go, but he liked it because it was quiet.

"So you go straight down old I-75 eh?" Anthony asked. He knew that this would keep him occupied for a time.

Earlier in the evening, he had received a call from his friend Rod.

"We're going to the I to see the band tonight. Why don't you swing by and check it out. Jen's friend Cathy is gong to be there." Many of his friends had moved away after they had finished university. He had met a few people at work, but they were more casual acquaintances and more and more, he was finding himself alone with no place to go. Lately, he had started wandering into local bars to talk to the men and stand a round or two. Sometimes he'd hear a good story; something he could write about.

"Like travelling in the States boy" Al continued. "The highways are nice and smooth, no winter frost to make them all bumpy and rough. Gotta have a truck to drive around when you live in the north. Down there, you just put the old cruise control on and the car drives itself." Anthony nodded to the man, trying to be respectful and hold back negative thoughts. *Who the fuck cares there Al? Tell me something interesting, something I don't know.* His face was listening.

"Excuse me Sir." Anthony slid off his bar stool and took two steps back. "Don't want to break the seal, but I have to." Anthony forced the comment. Al didn't hear him because he was looking down at a new stain that had collected on the front of his shirt.

Rachel pushed open the heavy door to the upstairs bar which was only four steps up from street level. She could hear the thumping of the music and the fading calls and laughter coming up the stairwell from the basement. She mounted the stairs and noticed a rough looking young man talking on the phone. He was clearly drunk and was standing close to the phone, as if trying to possess and protect the sanctity of his conversation. Rachel noticed that he was pleading with someone to meet with him. She moved past him undetected.

She surveyed the bar, and noticed Al and Nick were up at the bar in their usual places. She looked over into the corner where the ladies usually sat. They would come in the early evening, have a few drinks, huddle close and fill a couple of ashtrays full of butts. Then they would go home and maybe sneak a few more drinks later in the evening. Rachel headed for the corner table where there was a chair already pulled out. She took off her coat and shivered slightly. It felt like someone had touched her with cold hands.

Anthony pushed open the bathroom door and walked out towards the bar. His hands were still wet and he wiped them on his jeans. He was looking down at the floor, watching his finely leathered feet, feeling pleased with himself because of what his Dad would call "a belly-full of courage." Looking up, he noticed a woman taking off her coat at the corner table. She had her back to the bar, and was wearing a long dark skirt and a knit white sweater. The clothes fell on her nicely. He slowed his pace ever so slightly, enough to gaze a little longer. He wanted to see her face. He wanted her to turn around.

Sitting down at the bar again, he noticed the waitress had arrived. Anthony thought that she was looking at him, but realized that she was looking past him. She held out one finger and silently mouthed the word "one."

He had been quite bold this evening. He had planned on going to the downstairs bar, but when he arrived the stairwell was hot and there were already people standing in line. He decided to go upstairs and made his way directly to the bar. Usually, he would sit just outside on the perimeter and gently maneuver

himself into the conversation. There was a television mounted above the bar, and the hockey game commanded most of the men's attention.

"Excuse me Denise, but I think that I'll have a draft instead of the usual. Hello Al."

Anthony heard the soft voice beside him, and her arm brushed against his elbow. He pretended to watch the hockey game, but all the while he tried to see her out the corner of his eye.

"Hello Rachel" Al said. The two quickly started up a conversation and Al started to tell her about his trip to Florida. Anthony thought that he detected a faint mocking tone in her voice and he allowed himself a look at her. All he could see was the top of her hair and her delicately lined forehead, for the rest was blocked out by the back of Al's disheveled head. Mildly frustrated, he grabbed his beer and finished it in one gulp. He noticed that the bartender was done replacing the keg, and he motioned to him that he wanted another. Denise had moved down the bar and was involved in the conversation between Al and Rachel. He again tried to focus on the announcer's voice, but he was drawn into the laughter and snatches of conversation going on beside him. *They must be flattering the old man.*

Denise had walked over to the table with her once they left Al, and placed a draft and a clean ashtray on the table. Rachel now watched as the smoke rose off the end of the cigarette. Rachel liked Al, and on a number of occasions they had talked quietly at the corner table, leaning towards each other and reveling in their shared laughter. He had helped her in ways that he could never really know.

She felt pangs of guilt. She tried to convince herself that it was fine. *I'll only have a couple tonight, then leave. June doesn't know I'm here.* When the women at the bank asked, "So what did you do on the weekend?" she always made something up, giving the girls the satisfaction of thinking that their lives were at least more lively than hers. Sometimes, Rachel would get sneaky and ask the girls about the bar. She would say something in passing, and it never took more than one mention of it to get them going. She recalled Martha saying "It's not the kind of place you want to rub up against the walls."

"Who's that lady that you were talking too?" Anthony asked.

"What?"

"The woman sitting over there. You were talking to her earlier." With some difficulty, Al swiveled his body around in his chair and looked over to where she was sitting. "Why you asking?" Al cocked an eyebrow and seemed to instantly shed his jovial nature.

"Well, I heard you talking to her, and I was just wondering that's all." His response sounded somewhat menacing to himself. He added: "I think that I may know her..umm..friend of the family."

"Oh, that's Rachel. Now you don't get any funny ideas." Al's tone was still very serious, and he got off the stool. "Well, I'm off" Anthony thought: *Sure you're off Al, just like a rocket there eh Buddy.*

"See you later Al."

"Have a good trip Al."

"See you when you get back."

"All right, good-bye everybody, I'll be thinking of you while I'm soaking up the sun."

More and more people were drifting in from the streets to sit under the soft and unobtrusive light of the bar. Earlier, Anthony had walked over and watched two men play pool. He thought of getting in the game, but he figured that they were too good for him, and flinched as the balls clacked together loudly. They had brought their own cues, and the little cases sat over on their table. He stood watching and listening to the conversation. It was a lot of one-upmanship.

"Watch this shot. Combination and into the corner pocket." Coins were piled on the edge of the table.

"You rack em, I'll crack em."

They didn't mind that he was watching, and Anthony could tell that their conversation and the intensity of their game was influenced by his presence.

Back at the bar, the conversation had died down since Al's departure. The two men on either side of him stared plaintively down into their beer or gazed at the game on the television. The bartender was standing with one foot up on a shelf and was also watching the game. Anthony noticed that he had placed at least three phone calls. Periodically, he would change the channel to get a sports ticker update so that he could find out the other scores. He only moved when the waitress or someone asked for a drink. By jerking his

head around. Anthony noticed that there were four tables occupied behind him. Someone had put Willie Nelson on the jukebox.

Oh what the hell Anthony thought as he slid off of his chair and grabbed his jacket. He decided to try one more joke before leaving.

"Well I'm going to make like a baby and head out." There was no response and he left as unceremoniously as he arrived.

He knew where she was sitting, and he kept his head down as he walked to the table. He wanted it to be casual, spontaneous, like he was just looking around and happened to find her. When he finally did look up, she was rummaging around in her purse.

"Hi" Anthony said. Rachel looked up and was somewhat startled.

"Hi, you don't happen to have a light do you? I thought that I had some matches in my purse but I don't." Anthony was taken aback. Her eyes were a unique and clear crystal gray.

"There's some up at the bar." Anthony walked over and grabbed some matches that were sitting in a little tray by the cash register.

"Here you go."

"Thanks." Rachel took the matches and lit up a cigarette.

Anthony stood there shuffling his feet, wanting to leave, his courage slipping away from him. He couldn't think of what to do and stood with his mouth slightly ajar.

"So?" Rachel said after she had taken a long drag and blew smoke up towards the ceiling "Would you like to sit down?" His shyness seemed genuine to her.

He noticed that her face had hard lines that played out against it's fullness. She had a slight dimple in the middle of her chin.

"Well, I-" He had his hands in his pockets and was looking around the room. The people at the tables around him were starting to stare.

"Listen, just sit down, there's nothing much else going on here, so we might as well talk. I won't bite, I promise."

He moved to the other side of the table, and grabbed her jacket off the empty chair that was across from her. Rachel put her cigarette in the ashtray and got up to take her own coat from him. They both sat down again. The waitress came over, and Anthony ordered another two draft. After she returned and he had paid for the beer, he moved his glass around in figure eights and the water pulled and dragged behind it. It seemed as if they were waiting for someone else, with their coats saving the places for those who were yet to arrive.

"So, you come here often?" Anthony finally asked although he couldn't believe that exact combination of words came out of his mouth. *Maybe I should have left with Al, or should go downstairs and listen to the band.*

"Well, I live just around here, so I come in sometimes in the evening. It's all right, something to do. Don't want to make too much of a habit of it. I saw you sitting up at the bar. Those guys are real characters eh?" Anthony nodded and suppressed the desire to say something derogatory. "I don't think I've ever seen you around here before." She squinted at him as if trying to recognize his face within her memory.

"No I usually go downstairs." He cocked his ear and could hear the music pounding distantly in the basement. "It's really loud and smoky down there. Don't like it much."

"So why do you go?"

"I don't know, why do we do anything?" Anthony started to relax. He tilted his head to one side and caressed his chin with his hand. "Nothing much else to do. Some of my friends asked me to go. I live around here too, so it's within walking distance. It's Friday." He stopped and they both took a drink. "You ever feel like a stranger in your own town?" Rachel did not respond

They sat in silence for awhile. People who have been together for a long time can tolerate silence, but with strangers, it always seems so awkward and empty.

"Do you want a smoke?" she asked, picking up the pack and extending it to Anthony. She had just put hers out, but she lit up another once he was done with the matches. She didn't usually talk to men she didn't know, and was starting to get a little suspicious of him. He seemed silent and brooding now. *Maybe I trusted him too soon. What if he's looking for something other than conversation?* She looked over at

Anthony clumsily holding the cigarette up to his mouth. Some of the smoke had gotten into his eye and he was blinking and brought his hand up to it.

"So are you a student?"

"Well" Anthony said exhaling and setting his cigarette down in the ashtray. "Aren't we all students of life?" He quickly righted himself. "Actually, right now I'm working at the Salvation Army. I just graduated from university last semester with a degree in English. Hopefully it's just a job to tide me over. I'm looking for something better."

"Aren't we all" Rachel said under her breath.

"What?"

"Oh nothing. I was just thinking out loud. So what do you hope to do?"

"Well, I guess I'm a writer. A poet to be more exact, although I don't really like to say that to people. It always sounds so pretentious." Anthony flung up his arms and made a wild theatrical gesture. "I'm a poet" he intoned, feigning a British accent. Rachel laughed.

"As long as you do it, you've a right to call yourself one."

"Well, I don't know how well I do it, and I haven't been writing much lately. I'm waiting for sweet inspiration, but it doesn't seem to come around very often anymore." Anthony took another drink of his beer and asked: "So what do you do now that we've covered me?"

"I work at a bank" Rachel responded, thinking how at one time she thought that her bank job would tide her over until June started school. "It's not really the most exciting job in the world. I figure, at least at the Salvation Army, there is always something different going on. You work in the kitchen?"

"Actually, I work in donations at the thrift shop. Clean up the stuff that the people donate and help to sell it. A lot of people come in bringing stuff of relatives who have died. Lots of stories attached. Maybe it's all part of the grieving process. Sometimes I sit there and listen to people talk for hours. Yesterday, an elderly lady came in and told me all about this overcoat that once belonged to her husband who fought in the war. She was so sad. You could tell that her life will never be the same without him. Kind of makes you want to believe in love."

There was a loud but light-hearted shout over a shot that one of the players couldn't believe the other had made.

"Something is going on over there anyway" Anthony said turning back towards Rachel.

"Will you excuse me for a minute?" Rachel smiled at him and put her hands on the arms of chair, preparing to get up. Anthony thought that maybe she was politely giving him the hint that she wanted to be alone.

"Hey, we didn't even introduce ourselves. My name is Tony."

"Well, hi Tony", I'm Rachel." They shook three times, but their hands stayed together for a moment longer. Anthony noticed that Rachel hands were smooth, and was surprised at the strength of her grip. She didn't shake with the limp hand that he expected from a woman; the handshakes that he remembered from church when the congregation was to give a sign of peace. Rachel was taken by the heat of Anthony's hand, and as she pulled away his touch lingered slightly on her skin.

Rachel looked at herself in the mirror in the bathroom. She had just finished washing her hands and placed her cold hands on her face. She moved in close and examined the crow's feet around her eyes. Her cheeks still had a youthful plumpness to them and were lightly flushed. She was thinking about him waiting out there for her. The faces of men from the past flipped through her mind, like a revolving sign in a restaurant displaying the specials. Last week, a dark haired man had slipped her a note along with his cheque. It was casual. They had talked before this. The conversation had worked its way around.

"Nice to see you today" he said with a smile and a flash of blue eyes. "What are you doing this weekend?" She couldn't remember his name, but she could see his face. She thought about how she worried about June, and cautioned her about strange men and getting yourself into situations. *Little polite talk and all the while making sure that my glass is always full.* She promised herself that she would be cautious. She wanted to distrust him, but there was something about his voice.

Rachel pushed open the door and walked into the dull light of the bar. The washrooms were located on the side with the pool tables, and she could see one of the men hunched over the table setting up a shot.

She rounded the barrier and noticed that her table was empty. She felt something give inside her, but then noticed that his jacket was still there.

The night passed rather quickly and the beers kept coming, at least for Anthony. Rachel sipped slowly on hers. The golden draft had started to leave a little bite, but Anthony didn't care. They had moved on from the general to the specific in the conversation. The bank, work, taxes, government spending and their dismay over ineptitude wherever it may be found. Anthony was a well versed conversationalist and when he got going, it was hard to slow him down.

"Sometimes I wonder if our expectations are a little too high. They say that the world will never see a time of as much prosperity as after the good ol' W.W.II. War is good business. The problem is now we're used to being spoiled. We overlook our standard of living. We have because others have not, and Buddy is not happy with his home and car, and he figures he deserves more. It seems like nobody thinks collectively anymore. It's like the one with the most at the end wins. Everyone keeps taking the fruits, but nobody wants to work and till the garden. Something has to change."

"People don't like change" Rachel added.

"I agree. It's hard not to be totally pessimistic or negative about things. Maybe the world changed too fast for the people. What's left to the average person who does want to work? We're so smart that we've made ourselves obsolete. It's like we're in some crazy race, but we don't know what we're rushing towards, or if we're even going to like the end when we get there. We should be careful what we wish for." He wouldn't go so far and admit that some of the speeches were rehearsed, but he had talked of these things before. Sometimes the repetition bothered him.

The conversation moved and became more personal. Anthony told Rachel about Tina, his on again off again girlfriend, but was slightly embarrassed to do so. Alcohol always moved him to heightened sentimentality. Rachel talked about June and her own short life with Don.

"Everything seems so obvious now. He was so smooth." She paused, shook her head, and Anthony waited for her to finish. "It's almost better that he left instead of sticking around and screwing things up even more. He had his problems, and I didn't want to see it, or maybe I didn't want to face the part of me

that settled for him. He was the first man I was ever with, and I had some code that no matter what, I had to stick with him. He told me all these things about what he wanted and how he wanted to live his life. When he would slip up, and I'd catch him, he'd straighten up for awhile, but always ended up falling back into his old habits. There's only so many times you can hear someone say sorry and forgive them. I think Don never really cared about anything that he couldn't make something on or get something out of. He said he loved me, but he never did. He may have loved my body, or sex, or the fact that I was always there keeping house for him. It was really an anti-climax when I left. It didn't seem to affect him that much at all, although I think he was back into the drugs pretty heavily by then."

"But you were in love with him once. To me it is one of the greatest mysteries. Love, I don't even know what it means. How do you know? I mean, you thought that you knew."

"I was young then, and don't think I was ready or truly understood it. It's amazing what you overlook or can make yourself believe. I wanted to believe him, and I wanted to believe that we had a "love" that would last forever. I think love is lots of things, and if it is true, it is beyond words or simple explanations, it just is, and is effortless and without conditions. But practically, it means communication, trust, compromise, sacrifice, loyalty, tenderness, good sex." She raised her eyebrows, "at least once in awhile. But seriously, it means that you get all the hard edges knocked off. I see some of the women at the bank, and they're in the same place I was, but they tolerate it, or can't bring themselves to leave. They have their lives invested in it. Love and marriage do not necessarily go together. Some of them lead separate lives from their husbands. It's like you can live with someone and never really know them. You're just sharing space."

"You're starting to sound like-

"I'm not sounding like anything. It's the truth. People like you seem to want to complicate everything with words. It's no great mystery.

"Maybe there are different degrees of love." Anthony paused before saying: "Have you ever heard of Dante?"

"Vaguely."

"He was an Italian writer from way back. Anyway, there was this woman that he loved since the moment that he saw her in his youth. Beatrice was her name. The glorious lady of my mind is what he called her. 'La gloriosa donna della mia mente.' And he could not profess his love for her until after she died! She never knew."

"But why didn't he tell her? He must have been more in love with himself, or more in love with the thought of love. By the sounds of it, he never even really knew her at all. He only knew what it meant to love an image created in his own mind." This made her think about the difference between illusion and reality, and her mind turned back to the people at the bank. "You know, I see a lot of the girls at work, and how they complain about superficial things. Money, trips, home renovations, new cars. I know some of them are trying to stick it to me. They look at me and think that I'm lonely or somehow worse off than them, like my life is just repetitious and boring. But I see how they are, and even with all the things they have, they're still miserable."

"People are always measuring themselves up against others. Ask some people what they do or why and they won't be able to tell you. I spend a lot of time trying to write about it."

"Why don't you read me one of your poems, if you want to." She was intrigued by him. He seemed so passionate about everything. Anthony sat there for awhile trying to think of something that was appropriate to their conversation. He finally decided and leaned back in his chair.

"This is called 'The Scavenger King':

So where are the memory truths?

The childhood chaffing of feet in rubber boots.

Who says time is a measured thing?

Who says an old man is but a paltry thing?

We were all there, or so it seems.

Or maybe it only happens in a child's fevered dream.

Or maybe, it was a story born of a book.

Or maybe it's stranger's eyes that meet in a look.

Or maybe it's a shoe box of old pictures, no names to the faces.

Or maybe it's the line that an idle finger traces.

Or maybe, everything is joined by strings,

Pawns to the laughing scavenger king.

"That's really beautiful. You're very good."

Anthony blushed, for he did not accept compliments well. He stared down at his half empty glass of beer. There was a time when he fancied himself something of a poet, especially at the university. When he would give a reading, people would come up afterwards and tell him how wonderful his poetry was and ask when it was going to get published. He knew that at times it was more about the performance than the words, and he never associated with other "poets" who not only acted, but dressed the part.

"So now why don't you explain what it all means."

"It's about lots of different things. There's a reference to a Yeats poem in there. Name dropping, you know. Always a favourable thing to do with the literary crowd." He took another drink out of his beer.

"It has to do with time, the passage of time, and what it means to be alive. What is more real than anything else? Can a child live a lifetime on his deathbed? And time is measured because we have constructed time, or tried to give order to it and contain it. Really what's a minute or an hour? Think of those moments when you're happy or free. What is time then? We have constructed these mechanisms to divert us from the truth and absurdity of it all. Like in literature, we always look for things that give meaning and order. Symbols, metaphors, religious or mythological parallels. Is one character a foil for another? Is a rose a rose, a cross a cross, or does it symbolize something else, something deeper? Or the seasons. We give seasons human characteristics. Old man winter. Or we change it around, and align the seasons with our own feelings. Horny in spring. Depression soars in winter. It's crazy because it's fiction, but we struggle so hard to give it all meaning and make it more living than life. Maybe life does imitate art, or through art the artist discovers life. People are looking for insights, truth, salvation, for answers from above, but we look for patterns, order and things to put our faith in down below. I think that is the job of the writer to see everything and write it down for everyone. All the things that people forget or maybe never look hard enough to see. The silly and the serious." He paused to let the words catch up with his thoughts.

"One of my profs told me once that to make things real, you always put a little of the opposite, a point of contrast to make it more poignant. Like you could be standing in front of a glass window in the dead of winter, and the sun shining on you is so warm you think it's the middle of summer. But can you feel it when it's happening? So many people can't feel, they're so sanitized and pre-packaged, victims of created needs and desires. They're so drawn in, yet so removed from themselves" Anthony was talking as if in a trance. He closed his eyes. "Nostalgia. I read somewhere that the time between the event and the nostalgia is getting shorter and shorter. Soon we will not be able to take one step without longing and romanticizing about it. People are always searching for something in the past. Maybe it's the search for perfection, something indivisible and never ending like God or the summer's of our childhood. I can't remember the last time that I felt like I was really warm. The sun feels different now. It doesn't soothe, but burns the skin." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "What about your daughter?"

"June?"

"I bet if you asked her she would tell you, or not tell you."

"What do you mean?" His talk was intoxicating.

"She may not be able to explain it, but you may be able to see if you ask the right questions. Can you really remember what it was like to be a child? How you saw and felt things; the way the world looks through thirteen year old eyes. When you can feel without words? We have to censor things out, and put on blinders to keep our sanity. Maybe the insane are the visionaries, the ones that are really alive."

"Why do you talk like this? You're still pretty young."

"Twenty four. You?" he asked smiling coyly.

"It's not nice to ask a woman her age."

"Age is one of those thing that never understood lying about. It's undeniable, like death and taxes and bad television. Lying about it will not change it. I had a mid-life crisis at twenty one. You know I actually look through the obituaries every day to see if someone I know has died." Anthony stopped and she could see that his thoughts were turning inward. His eyes looked glossed over.

"Maybe someday you'll see yourself in there." Rachel was smiling. There was a pause before Anthony laughed.

There was some shouting from the other side and a glass shattered. Anthony turned in his chair. The bartender came out from behind the bar. Their words were loud and indistinguishable, and the bartender's voice soon rose above them.

"Why don't you guys take it outside."

"Come on out here fucker."

There was some more yelling and everyone on Rachel and Anthony's side looked at the wall as if they could see the action. Some were now cautiously making their way around for a look. The television droned over the bar.

"The native's are getting restless" Anthony said once the excitement had died down and the bartender was back behind the bar. He was on the phone, and the men were listening in to hear if he was putting a call in to the police.

"It's usually pretty quiet in here. I have never seen that before." Rachel shook her head and reached in for another cigarette.

"Survival of the fittest eh? Yep, just a couple of guys staking out their territory. Can't take the animal out of us no matter how hard you try to civilize him."

"And the booze doesn't help either. I don't see why things have to get to that level."

"It's never going to change. Always some bullshit going on. There are people who love to stir up the pot, and can never leave well enough alone. There are two types of people in this world: some who would run to see a fight. No. Some who would run to a fight and stop at a car accident and some that wouldn't."

"So what about you?"

"I'd never run to see a fight, and I would only slow down at an accident. Like Conrad said, "fascination of the abomination." Anthony paused for a moment. "Are we ever supposed to be happy? There's guilt for not doing this or that, and then we judge others that we condemn for judging us."

Rachel could feel things opening up to her, like that day in the park. She was feeling warm and his words moved her.

"But there is a cost to happiness" she added, "or at least a gamble to start." Anthony was now slumped over in his seat. His glass contained a finger full of draft that was flat and warm. He mumbled:

"I don't know, I don't know." He was about to spiral down and end up in the place that he tried to avoid. *Too much thought can rot the brain.*

"Hey" he said sitting up with a new found burst of energy. "Why don't we go see what's on the jukebox?"

They were walking close to each other and Anthony was leaning on her slightly to keep straight.

"Why don't we give old Martha a call eh?" Anthony said sarcastically. Rachel giggled and touched him lightly on the arm. They looked at each other and tried to stifle their laughter. They knew that some of the people in the bar were looking at them.

"Why they got a lot of oldies on here" Anthony said calming himself, and turning his attention to the jukebox's flickering lights which illuminated their faces.

"Yea, it looks like some of these selections have been in here since they built the place. Oh, here's some Elvis" she said pointing. The Elvis selections looked yellowed, and the newer releases stood out among them. "You know I really love Elvis." Rachel turned to Anthony who was fumbling around in his pocket looking for change.

"Yeah" Anthony said conjuring up a picture of a fat 70's Elvis in jumpsuit.

"Well my Mom and even my grandmother listened to Elvis. He sang something for everyone. The music seemed so simple and pure back then. I know that they think of him differently now, but his voice always seems to take me away. It's so strong. I always think about sitting by the record player and looking at the covers when I was a kid. Sometimes I even used to catch my mom singing in the kitchen."

"So it's Elvis then. Which one?" Anthony looked at her, cocking an eyebrow. Rachel scanned the board one more time.

"Well they have Teddy Bear, but I never really liked that one so much. Oh here, this is the one I want."

Anthony handed the coin over to Rachel who moved in front of him to hide her selection from his eyes. She pressed the numbers on the pad that she thought looked like her adding machine at the bank. This thought left her quickly once the music started up and the voice of a young Elvis Presley filled the bar. "*Treat me like a fool. Treat me mean and cruel, but love me. I'll be sad and blue, crying over you, but love me.*" Rachel had her head back, swaying and mouthing the lyrics.

"So-oo would you like to dance" Anthony said extending his hand. He bowed slightly, wanting to be sweet.

"Why I would be delighted." Rachel smiled and responded in the soft voice of one suddenly taken. She took his hand, and they walked out from the corner of the room. The place didn't really have a dance floor anymore, so they danced right in front of the bar.

They swayed to the music and both felt steady in each others arms. One of his hands was resting on her hip and the other was pressed lightly on the small of her back. She felt that he had big hands, and he did not force her towards him. They moved to the slow simple beat of the music, their feet shuffling slightly over worn carpet. He moved in close to her ear. He wanted to say something, but his voice came out as a struggling moan. The heat between them was intense for both. Rachel exhaled and moved closer to him, almost resting her chin on his shoulder.

"Don't say anything" she whispered. She shuddered when his reply was the faint caress of warm lips on her neck.

Last Supper

The late afternoon sun shone in through the window of the apartment and cast its light on the hallway wall showing cracks and chips normally unseen. Dust motes danced and floated down, undisturbed for the moment. Gerry walked down the hallway and moved his tongue around in his mouth while working his jaw up and down. He squinted as he moved past the light, having just gotten up from a late afternoon nap. *Bright, ow the sun. Taste in my mouth, pasty, feels like someone shit in my mouth.* It was Sunday, and when he returned from the office, he went straight to bed. Gerry worked for a company that exported meat to Japan. Working with the Japanese was something that he "This is Mister Yshiko for Mister Gerry" was just starting to get used to. They had their ways, and Gerry realized that they asked questions they already knew the answers to test his loyalty. The events of the morning still swirled in his mind as he entered the kitchen. His stomach was rumbling and he rubbed it with his right hand.

"Jesus Christ" Gerry said as he stood looking at the contents of his fridge. The light inside looked bright set against the emptiness of its shelves. There was a container of Miracle Whip, a jar of olives and a bag with the butt end of a loaf of bread. The bag was folded around it carelessly, a futile attempt at preserving a freshness long past. But he kept staring in the fridge, thinking that there was something else tucked away; something maybe behind the empty salad crisper to satisfy him.

Fighting Sunday drivers, he had consumed a donut and a coffee with distracted satisfaction. Today was supposed to be a shopping day, but work had superseded his need to hunt and gather food for the week.

"God damn Japs" Gerry said out loud, cursing a whole nation because he did not have any food in his apartment.

He could feel the cold from the fridge on his bare feet and he closed the door and proceeded to open the freezer compartment. A blast of cold air met his face as he looked in. *Have to de-frost this thing. Could eat ice, have lots of that. How long can a man go without food anyway? Forty days?* There was even less in the freezer. There was a bag of hot cross buns that his girlfriend Melanie had recently brought over. He rummaged around. *Frozen peas. Christmas cake that Mom sent last year. Oh, wait.* He reached into the back of the freezer and when he brought his hand out from the cold, he looked down at the package. *Freezer burned to hell. The steak was old, and a flank steak at that. Must have been a lean week. No*

telling how long it's been in there. It was covered in a layer of frost and he brushed some of it away to take a better look. *I work selling meat all day, and I'm stuck with this! Guys on welfare eat better. God damn, may as well go down and get in the soup line at the Sally Ann.* He slammed the freezer door, and walked over to the garbage can. He threw the steak forcefully into it, content for a moment with the loud thump that it made when it hit the bottom of the pail.

Slumping down on the couch in the living room, he took stock of his situation. He noted that it was four-thirty. He thought then of some of the restaurants that he frequented. *All the same on the menu. What do I want? I have to get myself a nice piece of meat. They like their meat in Japan, but only because they want to have everything we have here. Heard that they think we have a different smell because of all the meat we eat. You are what you eat. We reap what we sow. How late are the grocery stores open until today? Five thirty? Six? God bless Sunday shopping. Better get my shit together or I'll never get a good supper.* He felt as hungry as he could ever remember being, and decided that tonight he was going to have a supper to end all suppers.

Grabbing the channel changer on the coffee table, he flipped on the television hoping to distract himself momentarily from his rumbling stomach. There was a football game on, and he eyed the action with mild interest. Bodies flew across the screen and collided amongst grunts and cracks of equipment. He put the remote back down on the table and noticed that the light on his answering machine was flicking on and off. Messages.

"Hi Gerry, it's me." It was Melanie. Smile in her voice. *Too much.* "Where are you? I know that you had to go into the office, but you should be home by now. It's three-thirty. I was calling to see if you wanted to go out for dinner. I'm supposed to meet the gang at the Beef Bistro. It's Heather's birthday, but we are going for an early dinner and then back to Heather and Rick's for drinks. They were asking about you. Come to dinner if you want. I know what you said, but why not try to make it over later all right. Bye."

Always ends on a cheerful note. The Beef Bistro. They just go there because they think that it's trendy. All atmosphere. Waiters and waitresses in the imitation cow shirts. He shook his head in mild disgust. *The food sucks there.* Gerry's thoughts were interrupted by another beep by the machine.

"Hello Gerald it's mom. Just called to see how you are. Your father and I are going to your aunt's for the weekend in case you were thinking of calling. Bye son, talk to you next week."

Mom. Calls every weekend. Gerry smiled in his mind. Boy what a cook. Nice to get some home cooking for a change. Never disappointed there. Maybe I'll have to take a drive home next weekend.

The doors that led into the Supermarket opened magically before him. *Welcome to the promised land Gerry, where all your food delights can come true.* His mind was filled with the endless possibilities. *Tonight I'm going to dine like a Caesar.* Gerry thought back to things that he had heard about the side rooms where the Romans would go and puke so that they could eat more. He was so hungry that he openly embraced the thought. *And after that, I'm going to lay around. I don't even care if I bathe. Not going to move from the couch Monday.*

The track lighting of the store was bright and in striking contrast to the darkening sky outside. He had decided to wear his summer coat, which he had had to retrieve from the closet. He wanted to believe that the fall was on hold, and he was in the mood to defy the change of season. On his way out of his apartment, he had picked up his keys which were thrown neglectfully on the kitchen table, and had ripped a leaf off a notepad. He was always forgetting something, and had to constantly employ new techniques and memory aids. Little post-it notes could be found everywhere in his apartment. "Phone Mr. Nakuru at 12:00", "Push for extra orders of ribs", "First communion gift for Becky". Gerry looked down at the note that he had scribbled to himself, and could barely make out his own writing. *Sometimes I don't know where my head is. Like last week when I drove away with my briefcase open on the roof of the car. Papers flying everywhere.*

Waiting patiently, but impatiently tapping his foot, Gerry stood behind a young boy who was blocking his way and prohibiting him from taking a shopping cart. The kid, messy haired, was standing on the back bottom ledge of the cart and making car noises.

"Vroom" the boy said shaking the cart as if trying to make it go faster. *Come on kid, I'm dying here.* Gerry turned to look for a parent, and was greeted by a young round face that was moving by him. She extended her hand and retrieved her child. Gerry smiled cordially as the woman walked by, but she was

distracted and scolded her child for leaving her side. He tucked his list back in his pants pocket and grabbed a cart.

The supermarket, located only ten minutes away from his apartment, was the biggest one on this end of the city. The fresh stock was located around the perimeter of the store, and the aisles for the dried goods in the middle. He figured he could proceed in a counter-clockwise motion around the store, cover all of the major food groups, and end up back at the check out in about twenty minutes .

Gerry strolled purposely toward the meat department which was located right behind the cart corral. He was taking big strides and noticed that there was only a handful of people, mostly with shopping carts already full, still milling around the store. *Never do my shopping this late. The place must close down at five thirty.* He glanced down at his watch and saw that it was 5:05. The wheel on Gerry's shopping cart started to skip and bounce across the floor and made a horrendous screeching sound. *Please not now.* He stopped and went around to the front of the cart and gave the wheel a kick. *Piece a shit.* Gerry's face dropped when he finally made it over to the coolers. The shelves were nearly empty. He spied a young man packing up the meat and loading it onto a cart. He made a bee-line for him.

"Hey, what you got there?" Gerry asked, coming right up to the young man and startling him out of his end of the work day coma.

"Just packing up for the day." Gerry started immediately sifting through the meat in the cart with mild disgust.

"Is this all you got?"

"Listen mister, the store is set to close in about a half an hour and I have to leave early, so we're starting to take down. I've already brought a couple of loads into the back room, so if you go back there and ring the bell..."

Gerry didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. He was back pushing his cart, dragging the jammed wheel across the floor, and leaving a long black streak that the floor cleaning crew would be swearing over in a few hours.

The buzzer sounded loud inside the meat room, and Gerry heard the movements stop behind the door.

"Ya, come in" a voice said.

Gerry left his cart and pushed open the door and walked in. Standing before him was a man who was cleaning a saw blade located on a long steel table.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he asked, putting down the wet cloth and wiping his hands on his soiled and blood-stained white coat.

"Yeah, I got in here late and I'm looking for some real prime cuts. There wasn't much left out there and the kid sent me in here."

"What are you looking for?"

"Something good. Do you have any sirloin left?"

"Well, we've packed up everything for the day. Crazy with the long weekend and all, but I have some things that I put away for Tuesday. Hold on while I get them."

Gerry looked around the room while he disappeared into a side cooler. *I guess this is where it all happens. Quite a smell in here. Raw. Sell the meat, but don't ever have to see it or smell it.* Gerry started to think how what he was really selling was flesh. The transubstantiation of cattle flesh into American dollars.

"Here you go mister, this is all I have." He laid out six steaks on the table. "I hope you don't mind that they have a little extra fat in them."

Gerry looked down at the steaks and immediately had visions of them cooking on his barbecue, lovingly marinated and giving off a smell that would make all his neighbours jealous. He eyed the steaks greedily. *Might as well take all of them, he offered them, so-*

"I like my steaks with a little fat in them" Gerry responded, taking up all the steaks and cradling them in his arms. "Actually, I work selling meat wholesale." The bloodied meat cutter folded his arms on his chest and nodded. "I was just talking to an American wholesaler and he was telling me that Americans like more fat in their meat than Canadians." Gerry thought enviously about the cuts of meat that the salesman had described. "That's why they raised long horns, because the meat is more marbled."

"Really. That's pretty interesting. Listen, I don't want to be rude mister, but I really want to get out of here. It's been that kind of day."

"Thanks for your help. I hope it gets better tonight for ya."

"Yeah, so do I."

Gerry looked at the blank face of the man standing in front of him and gave him a weak smile.

Produce next. What will go good with the steak? Get a whole bushel of fresh vegetables. Mushrooms, onions, cauliflower and some spices in some tin foil and grill them up. Everything, tonight I will feast from a veritable cornucopia. Gerry's mouth started watering at the growing thought of the paradise that was going to be his in the end. The list that he had brought was still in his pocket, but it was long forgotten. The produce was still all out, and Gerry figured that they were a little behind. He ripped some bags off the roller and approached the counter where there were rows of open boxes containing picked over vegetables. *That's what you get for coming so late in the day. Wonder how many hands have been through here already?* Gerry began to root through the mushrooms, casting aside the bruised ones. He was about to start cursing the lack of selection, when the annoying face of his economics professor from university surfaced in his mind. He could never visit a grocery store without at least once having a thought of the man he vowed to completely forget on the last day of class. He quickly pushed this thought away, and resolved to find every good mushroom that was left.

Mr. Socia was a short fat man with a monk-like beard. To Gerry, he never seemed like a professor at all, and there was always a "sermon" to accompany his lessons on supply and demand or the free market system.

"Now I want to tell you all a little story before we move to taking up the case study from last week." The students in the class always started to fidget when he would stop and rest his folded arms on his belly. A young and still pimple-faced Gerry sat in the back row with his feet up on the chair in front of him. He shook his head and wished that he could slip out and come back when this was over.

"A couple of years ago, we had some friends who were from communist Russia." He paused and looked thoughtfully around the room to see that the students were paying attention. "Now they had an aunt visiting who had never been out of the country. They took her to a grocery store and she started to run frantically around the store filling her cart up with everything that she possibly could. She was

overwhelmed by our bounty." Mr. Socia's arms moved in circles as if he was heaping food into an imaginary cart in front of his lectern. He paused then and stood silently before continuing.

"Now finally they had to stop her and tell her that it was all right and that there was lots of food for everyone. She was panicked and confused and worried that someone was going to take the cart away from her. Well, she just fell to her knees right there in the middle of the floor and hugged the shopping cart and started to sob uncontrollably." Gerry felt like raising his hand and asking how the aunt reacted when they took her by the toilet paper aisle. Mr. Socia looked over his glasses at them. "I think you can figure out what the moral of the story is."

Next stop bakery. Gerry had already formed a plan of attack. The wheel on the front of his cart seemed to be behaving for the time being. He decided to quicken the pace, as there were only a few stragglers, including himself, and he didn't want them to close up before he was done. The steaks were placed in the center of the cart surrounded by all of the vegetables which included: a bag heaped full of mushrooms, three Spanish onions, broccoli, a head of cauliflower, asparagus, brussel sprouts, a bag of green and yellow beans, a five pound bag of potatoes, two heads of lettuce, five perfectly red tomatoes, and two plump green peppers. *Coming together.* The food in his cart showed a striking contrast of colour and texture. *Don't worry my lovelies, you will have more company soon enough.*

Gerry rounded the corner of the last aisle, and noticed a woman bent over a display rack of bread. She was reaching out, and Gerry could see that she was squeeze testing bread. *Well hello there. Talk about buns. Heart shaped, just how I like them. Melanie's is flat and long.* A faint tingling registered in his loins. Gerry passed behind the woman very closely, his hip swiping gently by her rounded bottom. He looked back lustfully, but the woman did not seem to notice. He grabbed a French stick off of a shelf and held it in his hand for a moment, pointing it towards the woman who was still bent over. Throwing it into this cart, he took one last look at the woman who was still bending down in her never-ending search for something fresh. *Need it nice and fluffy and soft. Let the bread rise. What happens if it doesn't? Unleavened bread. The host. That time I only pretended to eat it and put it in a peanut butter and jam sandwich later that afternoon. It was crunchy. More like a cracker.* Gerry circled back in behind the

woman and started looking at the deserts. Melanie's weakness was her sweet-tooth, and she said sweets should be included with the seven deadly sins.

"Deadly for my hips" she added slapping them with her hands. When he looked up again with the angel food cake in his hand, the woman was gone. He looked around and tried to spot her, then he let the thought fade.

Have to get some milk. Gerry was on his way to the dairy cooler. *Getting all the staples down. Should have enough food for a little while.* He left his cart a couple of feet away and approached the cooler. Melanie had been bothering him lately about his eating habits, and made him make the switch to skim milk. Skim milk, for Gerry, tasted like glorified water with a little milk flavouring in it. Because he hated her nagging more than he did the milk, he tolerated it. Today however was something different. He reached up and grabbed a large carton of homogenized milk off the shelf, put it in his cart and then went back to the cooler to get some butter. The same debate raged here.

"Gerry you have to watch your cholesterol levels" she said lovingly patting his stomach. Gerry was twenty nine years old and was starting to develop a paunch that he told her ran in the family. On his last visit home, his mother noticed that he had gained weight and reminded him about his uncle. Uncle Chris smoked and never watched what he ate and died when he was 33.

"He always figured he could eat and live like a king and never face the consequences" she told him shaking her long index finger at him scoldingly. Melanie had also made him switch to soya margarine as a "healthy" alternative, but Gerry reached out and took a stick of good old butter. His mother always liked butter, and it was always on the table.

It was Sunday, and the Richard's family sat around the table about to have dinner. His mother had just come in from the kitchen because she had neglected to bring the butter to the table to go with the vegetables and the buns.

"All right now, I know that you are all hungry, so let me get settled. Jim, do you want to say grace or shall I?" Gerry's father nodded indifferently. Elizabeth Richards, dressed daintily in her old fashioned

frilled apron, solemnly folded her hands in front of her. Gerry and his younger sister Jennifer bowed their heads as a matter of routine.

"Lord, thank you for this food which we are about to receive, from your bounty." There was a collective and mumbled "Amen", and before the word was even out of his mouth, Gerry's father was already reaching to grab the plate of lamb chops that sat steaming in front of him. They passed around all the dishes and ate in silence until Gerry asked his mother to pass the butter.

"Here you go dear" his mother said reaching out and passing the plate to her son. "I remember the butter that we used to get on the farm. Dad used to make butter and ice cream and it was always so fresh and so good. Not like the things nowadays." She looked up and scanned the faces at the table. Gerry looked over at his sister who was sitting across from him and rolled his eyes.

Once again approaching the front of the store, and completing his circle, Gerry figured that he had all that he needed. He had no plans or desire to buy any canned goods, as he wanted everything to be fresh. On the way to the checkouts, he had to pass by the deli counter and noticed a young blonde serving a woman. Gerry got that feeling again, and was tempted by the sight of blonde hair and a fair face. He decided to go over and see if she was only good from afar, but far from good.

"Well hello there" Gerry said, letting a coy smile break out on his face once he was positioned in front of the counter.

"Hi" the girl said brushing away a long lock of hair that had come out of her pony tail and was hanging in her face.

"So you have any specials that I may be interested in?"

"Well all the specials are clearly marked sir."

Gerry stared at her for a moment and then moved down away from the cold cuts to where some sausages and other meats were laid out under glass.

"I think that I'll have some of these sausages." They were still all linked together and Gerry asked for six of them. He watched as the young woman reached in, counted off six, and then cut the chord with a knife. Holding the sausage in her hands, which were in rubber gloves for sanitary reasons, she slapped the

meat down heavily on the counter behind her. She then wrapped and priced them and then slid them across the counter.

"Will that be all sir?"

"Actually" Gerry said, pausing and looking for a favourable smile from the clerk, "I think that I would like some cheese to go with that. So do you know what goes well with a nice white wine?" Gerry smiled at her.

"No, not really"

"I think I'll take a half a pound of the old cheddar then."

He watched her remove the cheese from behind the glass with steady motions, but the expression on her face didn't change. Gerry still persisted in making small talk about how the taste of a good cheese only serves to accent the flavour of wine. He wanted the girl to smile at him, to think that he could offer her something that she could not get anywhere else. The girl's back was to him and she only said "Uh huh" at the appropriate times, and Gerry eventually let his words fade and was silent. *Just a high school girl. She wouldn't know a good wine if it came up and bit her on the ass. What am I doing anyway, I'm way out of this girl's league.* Gerry stood brooding, his pride wounded, but he quickly regained himself once he turned his thoughts back to the supper that was going to be his.

"Here's your cheese mister. Enjoy."

By the time Gerry got to the check out, there was only one cash left open and the cashier was just finishing with a customer. While Gerry put his food on the conveyor, the women started to ring it through.

"Just made it, eh?" Gerry said looking up at her. She nodded and started punching in the prices. Gerry pushed his empty cart through and looked at the magazine rack behind him. There was a weekly rag called The World Star and he caught sight of the headline: "Wine turns to blood in small Italian village." Below it was a picture of a balding priest holding an elaborate chalice in his hands. Gerry figured this was supposed to be the wine in question, but the picture was in black and white. On the rack beside this was a daily paper with the headline: "Twelve schoolchildren killed by gunman." *Still so much evil in the world.*

He looked back at the priest with his pious face. *I guess everyone is looking for proof. Something to believe in. It's all just their own wish fulfillment.* Turning to the cashier he said:

"Did you see this one?" Gerry pointed at the tabloid.

"No, I don't even pay attention to them anymore."

"You're missing out on a modern day miracle here." He looked one more time at the face of the priest. *Like Father Worthington sneaking drinks of the altar wine. Chanting creeds like a blind cult.*

She finished ringing through the last of his order and looked up at him. "That'll be \$96.66 please."

Gerry reached for the inside pocket of his jacket. He clenched his teeth tightly in his mouth. He felt his face turn red and his blood pressure rise. He could feel the wrath within him and a silent scream rose to deafening heights in his mind. No wallet.

Water Babies

Noticing for the first time that he had left the busy afternoon streets behind, John loosened his grip on the steering wheel and rolled his shoulders to try to get the tension out. He had to travel only twenty minutes north before finding himself in the middle of great coniferous forests. For him, the city might as well have disappeared when he was no longer there. The clouds rumbled and thickened above him and the car groaned up a steep incline bordered by a vast marshland. *There's that sound again. This hunk of junk better make it.* A light blush appeared on his cheeks. *People see me driving this. Once I start working full time, I'll get a new car. First thing.* He imagined himself on the side of the road trying to wave down cars while steam poured out of the engine. Sometimes he would think of the worst, so that it couldn't happen and catch him unaware.

The sun shifted behind the clouds and a great shadow crept across the earth and darkened everything in its path. Above the forest, black birds circled and dove. John thought about his destination. *The camp. Not really a cottage. Could build a real cottage with money.* He leaned back and stretched his legs. *Got to see the place. He won't care. Needs too much work. "Should sell the God damn thing." In due time, in due time*

"I've going to make my move" is what he told a number of his friends. He was just shy of his twenty fifth birthday, and he felt invincible. "School's over boys, it's time for real life and for the big wheels to start turning."

You have to know how to talk to get anything in this world. Sound. Smooth, yes, yes I know, subtle smile smooth. Becky always fell. Actually they all fell for it. Say the thing, buy the ring. Love is gold. He brushed his hair away from his forehead and then smiled at himself in the rear view mirror. *And she used to go crazy when I'd touch her. Mom said that Lauren is going to be there.*

"Hasn't Lauren blossomed into a beautiful young woman?" his mother asked, holding a picture in front of him as proof. "See?" Lauren was wearing a white summer dress with a pattern of small blue flowers. Thin straps lay daintily on her smooth shoulders. She was flanked by her parents. They were standing on grass, smiling and squinting slightly against the sun.

"She's not a tomboy anymore" his father added.

"Well, today is the summer solstice" the radio announcer bellowed triumphantly. "It's the longest day of the year, so let's get out there and make the most of it. Now here's a song that's sure to set the summer on fire."

John leaned over and turned up the radio. The speakers strained and the crash of the cymbals rattled the plastic in the door. It was Jimi Hendrix. *"You don't care for me. I don't care about that. You got a new fool, I like it like that. I have only one burning desire. Let me stand next to your fire."*

Not too many cars on the road. He gripped the wheel harder, and shook it as if trying to force the car to go faster. His black sun glasses hid from passing cars his piercing blue eyes. He noticed the distortion of colour through the sunglasses. *Everything's a yellowish-brown. Can't see colours. Beautiful country though: priceless. Where are the signs?*

"Can you see it John?" his brother asked nudging him with his elbow. They were both sitting in the back seat of the family station wagon. It was the middle of July, and they were heading out to the camp for the weekend. Just prior to this, they had been watching the cars and seeing who could pick out their makes.

"Like Moby Dick. Can you see it? Look over there. The tree line looks like a big whale and there is its tail at the end. Can't you see it?"

A big blue truck passed by and kicked up some gravel, sending a rock that snapped loudly against the windshield. He was startled, and looked at the truck as it receded in his rear view mirror. There was a canoe in the box. *Just like Grandpa's truck. A spot green Custom Deluxe. Plain Jane. No radio. Grandpa was a simple man.*

John looked over at his grandfather as he maneuvered around a sharp corner. He was always doing things to give John a thrill, like going down the road extra fast, or pumping the breaks when they were at a stop and jerking him forward. This never failed to surprise John, and when he would turn, he would see

his grandfather's silent but smiling face looking back at him. Our little joke. Sometimes he would pop his bottom false teeth out and roll his eyes around crazily. This always made John laugh.

Once they got off the highway, they would travel for about twenty minutes down a tar sprayed gravel road. It was relatively smooth except if it was raining, then the road would become like a washboard, the old dash of the truck rattling and keeping time. There were small farms along the road, and John would always lean out the window and yell "moo" if he saw any cows. He loved the smell of warm vinyl, and the sound of tires spitting gravel. He would sit up as straight as he could so that he could see around the edge of the world.

The road into the lake was slow going. When the truck came close enough to the bush, John would reach out and try to grab some leaves off the trees, pulling them in and looking at what he had taken up in his hand. The road had two bald patches for the tires with a strip of long grass growing up in the middle. He could hear it gently brushing the underside of the truck. Time and weather had also created big pot holes, but his grandfather knew where they were. The suspension easily handled them, and the truck rocked back and forth while continuing on its way. John liked the ride and thought that the truck must like it too. Just tickling grass.

John had to turn the radio up once he was off the main highway. The gravel road was in rough shape because of the recent rainfall. The car rattled and the dust was shaken up off of the dashboard. The farms were still there, but they looked vacant and neglected. Most of the fields were overgrown with weeds and he didn't see any animals. He spotted a barn that was blackened and had great holes in it where the sun shone through. It was leaning over to one side and looked ready to crumble. *Looks bad. It used to be nicer. We'll bring some much needed revenue to the place. Maybe I could stay on when the deal's done. Why not, I'm free right now. The added pleasures of Trout Lake: Fishing. Hunting. Swimming. Recreational water sports. Have to develop some nice brochures with gloss photos. Girls in bikinis in fishing boats. Bright, everyone wearing smiles. No-power boats. Guys on jet-skis, kicking up a big wave. New, has to have everything. Plus take in the farmer's restaurant and gift shop.*

John pulled the Chevette over when he spied the boarded walk leading to the spring. Some of the slats were missing. *Thirsty. All that dust. Maybe better if it rained again. Wonder if it is still running? Could we bottle this stuff? We'd have to get it tested. Another thing to consider. Trout Lake pure natural spring water. The best nature has to offer. Filtered nature's way. Cool and clear as a spring day. Would have to trademark the slogan. Who told me that the trademark building was built into a mountain and can withstand a nuclear blast?*

He did not plan on drinking the water himself, and instead opted to open the hatchback of his car and take out the cooler that he had packed before leaving home. The beer was cool and John twisted off the cap and flung it into the bush. He gulped down about half the bottle and let out a satisfying "ahhhh" before dragging his forearm across his mouth. It was beginning to warm up considerably, as the sky had cleared and the sun shone brightly. Putting the bottle down on the boardwalk, he removed his sweatshirt and threw it on the hood of the car. Picking up the beer again, he made his way down the path to see if the waters still flowed.

"See here John" his grandfather said noticing the boy's eyes glazed over and far off. They were walking up the boarded walk that lead to the spring. John looked down and tried to step on every board individually, coordinating his feet and humming a note as he touched each one. "La, da de dum." Quicker. "Ladadeedum." He fell behind, the words moving faster than his feet. His grandfather waited for him.

There was an old washtub with a big steel lid. The tub was cut way on either side and acted as a catch basin for the water. Some of the faded and chipped white and red paint still remained on it.

"This here is spring water that runs under ground" his grandfather said once John had caught up and had forgotten his song. "Runs into the lake from here. Feeds it."

His grandfather was a man of few words. He nodded once to the boy before taking the lid off and plunging the steel cup into the running water. John watched his grandfather's every move. He could see everything, the clear water magnifying the stones and the earth below. His grandfather held the cup out to

him and John gripped it in both of his hands. It was cold. He drank deep, thinking that water this good must come from a magical place.

John bent over and looked at the barrel. There was no longer a lid covering it. *Rust*. It looked old and primitive and he took another drink of his beer. He could see dirt floating by in the water. Black flies flew around his face and he waved his arms frantically to try to sweep them away.

"God-damn bugs" he said remembering other aspects of time spent in the wilderness. *Must be a way to get rid of them. Fumigate the whole place until there's no sign of them. Gone.* The Chevette sat on the side of the road with its windows down. He could hear the cicada's, and their high pitched call seemed to intensify the afternoon heat. He thought that he had caught voices then, faintly passing by and rushing off into the thick bush. *Only the wind through the trees.* His heart started beating harder and he could hear it pounding in his ears. He looked around nervously. Nobody was there, but the voices returned, getting closer to him, whispering coolly in his ear, then retreating. He started quickly for the car, searching for the sound of the radio.

As John stood on the path to the spring, Lauren Baxter sat on a lawn chair looking out at the lake. Her camp was in the lot next to John's. She was wearing thong slippers, red track pants and a blue shirt with a faded white logo on the front. She was starting to get a little warm, and the sun felt good on her legs. She brushed her hand through her long hair and held it at the top of her head. Her face was angular and her pointed jaw and green eyes reminded people of her father. Her skin was smooth and clear, unflawed by childhood pock marks that leave their mark on many. She looked out at the sun shimmering on the water. So many surfaces of light. Memories cluttered and overlapped in her mind. Laughter, squeals of delight, plunging under water and frantically looking to break the surface once again. "I'm going to swim out to the rock!"

"You shouldn't go swimming when you're alone": her mother's voice. Her mother had asked her to come and get the camp ready and she had just talked to her earlier in the day. She worried when she came out alone, and nagged her father into getting them a phone line with the standard, "But what if something

happens?" She was always worried that something was the matter, or was making sure to consider all the possibilities before hand. She figured John would be up soon. Her mother had phoned to find out if anyone was going up to the lake. Lauren was anxious for John to arrive. *I wonder what he's like now? Heard stories.*

"Oh, that John is going to be successful."

"Yea, your mother's right, that's boy's a real mover and shaker."

She got up from the lounge chair on the deck and started down the stairs that led to the boathouse and the dock. *It's so peaceful.* She could hear the water lapping against the dock and the wind gently blowing through the corridor of trees. Black flies flew around her head, but they did not bother her. She couldn't hear any motors. A steel boat with a Johnson 50 motor was tied to one side of the dock. *Have to take a ride later. Hope that it is a nice clear night.* At the end of the dock was the old wood ladder that her hands had gripped many times before. It looked warped and worn with age; it's two shanks sticking up like proud old warriors. Moved by the raggedness of the dock, she looked at her smooth young hand and ran a finger over top of it. She would catch her mother sometimes at a certain angle, and the years would show. Her face seemed tired, and her skin sagged and showed age spots carefully concealed by the base she would never admit to wearing.

Lauren heard the sound of a car, and caught a quick glimpse of blue paint through the trees. From her vantage point on the dock, she could make out the Avery's camp and see parts of the access road. There was an empty plot of land that separated the two camps, and there were still trees nestled in amongst the sauna and the fire pit. The paths that their feet had worn were eventually covered with patio stones. The dock stretched along the shore and could be accessed from both camps. She smiled and looked again at the cooling lake, her eyes reflecting its deep blue.

John stopped the car and the tires slid on the grass. He was annoyed and slammed the door shut. The car had bottomed out a few times, and he crouched and looked under the wheel well to see if he could spot any signs of damage. Seeing nothing but dried mud, he went around and opened the hatch-back. The cooler came out first, then a briefcase, suitcase and the camera. He turned and looked at the lake for the first time. He exhaled. *It's a perfect spot.*

Back in the mid 1950's, John's grandfather and his brother-in-law had bid on three lots along the end of the lake. At first, it was a fishing spot for the men in the summer months. Back then, they couldn't drive in, but had to take a boat from a landing fifteen miles up the lake. His great uncle also had a small pontoon plane and it was a perfect location to land.

"It's like our own homestead here."

After he died, the camp had been rented to the Baxter's. They were supposed to buy the camp and the lot, and John was sure that the deal was never finalized.

He turned and looked at the camp. It was painted green and white, and lattice surrounded the base. The paint was chipped, and John looked down and noticed that grass and weeds were springing up between the patio stones which led to the deck.

The key for the camp was on a string, and now only a little frayed end of it was left, tied by a still defiant knot. Getting the key to open the door was a task.

"Come on, come on" he fumed getting more and more annoyed. The lock would not give. He looked at the key again and studied its long and jagged teeth, reassuring himself that it was the right one. John slid the key back into the lock and could feel it grab. He turned it slowly. It did not move. He swore, and felt like turning and throwing the key away. He tried one last time and the lock clicked open.

He opened the door, and it gave with a sigh, as if satisfied after a long winter of being held tight and denied fresh air. The room smelled damp and musty and John noted that nothing had changed. He walked to the end of the room and opened the curtains to let in some sunlight. The furniture, dated in style, was from an old living room set. The couch was L-shaped and covered with a dark, gaudy green material. Just then, he spied her on the wooden deck, and turned and stared out the picture window.

"Come in" John said after hearing the light rattle of the screen door.

"Hey John long time no see" Lauren responded. Her voice was light. She knew how to handle the old screen door, and she held it an extra second so that it gently eased into its frame.

"Hello Lauren" he said turning around, trying to greet her in a calm and confident voice. "So what you been up to?"

"Just going to the U. Got a couple of years to go. You're done now eh?" She smiled warmly.

"I'm happy to be out of there I'll tell you" John remarked before moving over to the couch. He patted the cushion beside him in an invitation for her to sit down.

"Class of '85 eh. So you got any plans? Got a job lined up or anything?" Lauren followed John's lead and went over and sat on the couch. A cushion separated them.

"Actually, I have a few options right now. I was working in the provincial building downtown. They had to lay me off, but that's the name of the game. I was the low guy on the ladder. I understand how the political wheels turn. I've worked there the last couple of summers, and they weren't going to offer me a full time position. This is the first summer that I haven't been working full time since I was fifteen." John noticed that he was rambling and decided to turn the conversation back to her. "What about you? You're taking phys-ed at school right? What are you going to do with that, teach?"

"Well, I'm not too sure. I'm only in second year. I think I may try to get into rehab, but that's still a couple of years off. I'll worry about that later. One thing at a time."

"God, it's good to be out here. Nice to see the old place. All the way here I kept thinking about all the great memories. Gee, when was the last time I saw you?" John leaned back and cupped his hands behind his head.

"It's been a while. You guys don't come up here very much anymore. Your parents are only up a few times in the summer." There was an uncomfortable pause and Lauren looked around the camp. "Well, I'm doing the old spring cleaning routine for mum. It gets pretty filthy in there. The dust bunnies have multiplied. So how long you staying?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet. There's a few things that I want to do, but I really don't have a set agenda. I have enough food for a couple of days." He looked her up and down and could make out her slender figure despite her oversized clothes. He did this with the utmost subtlety and Lauren was unaware of his roving eye.

"Is anyone else coming up?"

"No, just me. It feels kind of strange being here all alone like this. There's usually so much commotion with Dad running around and boats on the lake. I was noticing how quiet it is. It's so peaceful out here." She paused and looked out the window at the lake. "My parents may come up this weekend, but they're

going to call and tell me. I may have to work this Saturday. So why don't you finish getting settled in and then come over later." She smiled at John, and then got up and moved towards the door.

"O.K. I brought some food up, so maybe I'll throw some burgers on the barbecue. I have to take care of some things, so how about we have a late supper?"

"Sounds good."

After she was gone, John finished putting away the groceries and then sat back down on the couch. The camp was laid out in the simplest fashion. The main room had the kitchen at one end, and the second half was the living room. There were three other rooms: two bedrooms and a bathroom with a flush toilet. In front of the picture window there was a large old bureau. On top of it were old pictures. John looked at the one where he is looking at his brother at the end of the dock. Rob has a white fishing hat on and a little fish on the end of his line. John is laughing and pointing. *My brother the family man*. He kept telling John that he wanted to make it up, but it was a long way to come with the two kids. There was also a picture of his grandparents, one of his parents, and a group shot of the men putting in the big logs that formed the solid base of the camp. They were all taken in the early days of colour film, and they had the look of a washed and faded rainbow. There were also two cheap paintings on the wall beside the bureau. They were on black velvet; one of a bull fighter and the other of a flamenco guitar player. His eyes returned to the end of the room. There was something missing, but he couldn't think what it was.

He got up and took his own bag of clothing and put it into the bedroom which still had the bunk beds he and his brother used to sleep on. He walked over and scanned the titles on the bookshelf. There were old mystery magazines and comics.

"There's so much junk up here" he said picking up one of the magazines and blindly fanning through its weathered pages. Beginning to feel tired, he went back into the living room and lay down on the old couch. It was uncomfortable and John had to shift around to find a place where there was not a spring sticking into his back. He felt a slight chill, and pulled a comforter around him. It smelled of moth balls, and he kicked it off him until it sat in a pile at his feet. He groaned, and worked his body into the couch.

I haven't been up here since the summer of '82. Yeah, because that was the year I broke my wrist when I fell off the dock and onto the rocks. Now Grandpa died in '80." A face appeared in his mind. *Uncle*

Albert. He opened his eyes and they shifted back and forth. He died when I was in Miss Ducharme's class. Grade five. The principal came into the class and asked for me. Everyone thought I was in trouble, but Dad was waiting for me out in the hall. He told me Uncle Albert died of respiratory problems.

"Uncle Albert" He said the name out loud and thought how strange it sounded. He yawned and closed his eyes.

Albert Avery had lived and worked in Toronto and was a manager with a large company. He used to tell John about the big office buildings downtown, and the trains that ran underground. John liked to think that he was involved in big dealings and would brag about him to the other kids at school. *Those funny smelling cigarettes he used to smoke. What was it he always used to tell me? The turtle. Ask the turtle.* John's eyes opened and he turned his head and looked. There used to be a strange piece of stained drift wood on the floor beside the bureau. The wood was warped and was bowl shaped. One piece stuck out and looked like a head. Albert had brought it back from one of his afternoon hikes, and had shellacked it and glued on two plastic red eyes that were cut like small jewels. John could remember it vividly because he used to sit on it and thought he could talk to his uncle through it if he tried hard enough. He closed his eyes and let fatigue wash over him. *And he was always writing something, I always thought it was plans for business, or my inheritance...*

John and his grandfather sat in the truck parked outside the funeral home. John was fidgeting, had the glove compartment open, and was now flipping through the owner's manual. He became bored with this and closed it. He looked over at his grandfather who was staring blankly out the window at the polished hearse that had just pulled up.

"Are we going to ride in that grandpa?" John asked.

"No John that's not for us. You're going to stay with grandpa today."

He reached over and put a hand on his leg, and John noticed that his hand was very hot. He could see that his grandfather's eyes were moist and glistening. John had cried a lot at first, but his mother told him to stop or he would make himself sick. There were many people staying at the house, and one of his cousins was a police officer and had showed him his badge.

"How come I can't go in there?" John asked fingering the end of his tie. He had never been inside a funeral home before, and when they drove by, he wondered what went on inside.

"Your father doesn't want you to. Now just stay quiet."

Lauren made herself comfortable in a big quilt covered chair that was in front of their picture window. She had a copy of Chatelaine that was five years old. The cover was faded and warped from having been left in the sun. She was no longer reading the magazine, and had her index finger shoved in to save her spot. Only the clothes and the hair styles seemed to change. Lauren did not care much about fashion, and she was never pampered, although her mother had tried. Being the only child, she became Daddy's little girl. At first she felt strange being around the men without her mother. When she got a little older and her father's friends would bring their sons up to the lake, Mr. Baxter would bring Lauren. She was always thin and had broad shoulders. One time, they had stopped at the bait shop and the man said, "Going out with your boy to do a little fishing eh?" Her hair was cropped short, for she was active, and when it was long it would become tangled and matted. She could still remember her early trips out with the men. They had a certain smell out there, and would talk differently without the women around.

In the summer, John and Lauren would be left together. They would play on the dock, go swimming, or run around in the woods. John was good at making up games. There was one summer in particular when things changed. Lauren started to notice that he looked at her differently when they went in for a swim. One afternoon, John persuaded her to hide under a boat that was turned upside down inside the boathouse.

"We can go under here." He motioned to her and cocked an ear to hear if their parents were around. Lauren agreed without any hesitation, but was a little surprised when the darkness and the water soaked wood of the old boat covered them. The smell of gas lingered sweetly in the air. John told her that he was a mechanic, and his hands found their way to her newly forming breasts. She resisted slightly at first, giggling nervously, then gave way to her own interest and the strange comfort of his nervous touch. She told herself that they were just playing another game, like checkers, or when they chased after strange birds they had seen in the bush.

John stirred on the couch, and for a few moments did not know where he was. He had been dreaming and the tail end of it was caught in his mind. His uncle was sitting on the turtle down on the dock and he was writing. At first he did not recognize him, and he looked different than he remembered. He was dressed in a blue pinstriped suit with bare feet and had a briefcase full of gold beside him. He was so consumed that he did not hear his nephew approach him from behind.

"What are you writing uncle Albert" John asked. His uncle spun around, almost falling off the turtle.

"Thoughts, ways to succeed. I have all kinds of plans and ideas. There have been many men with brilliant thoughts, who do not choose to write them down." He closed the book. "One day when you are old enough you can come and work with me." John sat cross legged beside his uncle. "When in doubt, just asked the turtle." He winked at his nephew and turned his gaze towards the lake as if looking at something on the other side. John looked too, but could not see anything.

The lantern sat on the table and illuminated one side of Bob Avery's face. His wife Elizabeth sat beside him with her eyes trained on her husband's eyes. It was 1981, and John and his brother Rob were sleeping peacefully.

"Bob?" his wife persisted, waiting for him to pay attention to her words. "You're going to have to make some decisions."

His father had been dead for a year, and he was left as sole heir. He was a man that kept to himself, and his wife had learned long ago to leave him be and wait for him to come to her. If he was troubled, he would quietly walk off on his own, or take a canoe ride to be soothed by the sound of the paddle in the water or the sight of a water bug skimming along the surface. She was worried that he would never speak or let go of what she knew he held deep inside.

"I don't know what to do Liz. It's just this place. I don't know if I can ever be happy here again. And what about the boys?" He got up and pushed himself away from the table and moved beyond the light of the lantern. He turned his back to his wife and rubbed the top of his head.

"Do you want to sell? We have been renting to the Baxter's for so long, maybe they will want it. They're doing so well for themselves." On this suggestion, her husband looked over at her and raised his eyebrows. "And what about Albert's things?" she added.

"I don't give a good God damn about his things." Elizabeth sat and looked at her husband with unwavering brown eyes. Bob Avery got up and left the camp, the screen door shutting noisily behind him.

John held aside the branches as he passed, and they sprung back and wet leaves slapped him in the face, as if protesting his entry. His shoes sunk into the soft forest bed. Leaves and brittle branches still covered the forest floor and were in colourful states of decay, blending together in reds, browns and black. John thought that it smelled like dog shit and began breathing out of his mouth. He was heading for the little cabin that was right in behind their camp. His Dad had told him that it used to be a chicken coop on his grandparents farm, but was transplanted to serve as a tool shed. John kept his plans from his Dad. He understood how his father worked. If there was a possibility of this going through, he would have to have everything laid out and in place before he pitched it to him. Bob Avery did not like uncertainty, and was never one to gamble or put his hopes on a long shot.

The little shed had patches of wet rotting wood and was largely concealed by the undergrowth which had surged up around it. He pushed open the door and was immediately hit with a foul smell. *This is just a great day for the senses. Some animal must have died in here.* There was an old mattress on the floor, but only small shreds of material were still clinging to the skeletal springs. The room smelled and looked like waste and abandonment. John walked about quietly. His footsteps sounded loud shuffling along the wooden floor. He opened up the old cupboard, but it only contained some cooking utensils and some sheets of yellowed newspaper. The date on a cover page read June 10, 1971. The paper seemed as if it would crumble if he handled it too roughly. There was still an old table with three legs up against the wall, as well as a wooden chair with a huge split in the seat. John lightly dusted off the seat and sat down.

What am I doing here anyway? There was a triangle of glass missing in one of the corners of the window across from him. The late evening sun shone through the heavy coat of film and looked like a glowing shroud. The beam that came through the missing triangle went across the room and John followed

it. Something in the corner caught his eye. After clearing aside some old newspaper and plastic bags, he saw that it was the turtle. It was covered in a thick layer of dust. He knelt down before it and wiped its eyes, exposing the plastic jewels that sparkled brightly in the sunlight. He straightened up and looked around the room and found an old stained rag on the table. He wiped the dust off of the turtle's back and noticed that the varnish still had a nice shine to it.

"I wonder how long you've been in here" he said picking the turtle up and placing it under his arm. He noticed a clean oval spot left on the floor in its absence.

John went back to the camp, but paused on the deck. *It's getting late. Hope Lauren will still want to go for a swim later. Wonder if she'll drink?* There was a little chill in the air now, and he worried that she would think it too cold to swim. *She'll be plenty hot enough in the sauna.* He smiled inwardly. *The water off the dock is shallow. It rained earlier.* He looked down at the turtle under his arm. *Maybe we'll get lucky tonight eh buddy?*

The beer was cold and John slumped into a chair and tilted the bottle back and drank deep. He was upset that he had not accomplished what he wanted today. He had planned to take pictures of the lots to show the realtor and put together some proposals for any perspective buyers. He finished off the beer in a couple of large gulps and was mildly surprised as he looked at the foam that had gathered at the bottom of the bottle.

The flames shot higher and higher and the fire snapped and spit as it ate through the old dry wood. Only the occasional loon, whose call echoed loudly on the lake, silenced any conversation. It was 1970, and Bob Avery, his brother Albert, wife Elizabeth, and his two sons John, 10 and Robert 13, sat around the camp fire. Bob and Albert's father was back in the city because their mother had come down with a rare summer cold. They had to move their chairs back, for the fire was raging and their clothing had become hot to the touch. John and Robert sat on either side of their Uncle and were listening to him. It was usually the grandfather who told the stories, but Albert had begun, knowing that his older brother was not the story telling type.

"I was wandering in the bush one day. Dad had sent me to fetch some wood, when I saw a rustling in the leaves in front of me. I saw a flash of what I thought might be a deer. Well, I had never seen a deer before, and being young and impulsive, I took off after it, and could hear it in front of me, and I blindly followed the sound hoping for just one look. When I stopped, I was out of breath and realized I was lost. I had no idea what direction I had come in or where the camp was. Everything looked the same. I started wandering and looking for familiar markers, but could find nothing to set me on the path home. I couldn't figure out if I was going in circles or moving deeper into the bush. I was a little scared, but it was the middle of the afternoon and I knew that I would have time to get my bearings and return before dark."

"I eventually came upon a little clearing with a small stream and a cabin standing beside it. When a man is lost in the bush, he not only has to confront the forces of nature, but he has to face himself and the monsters of his own mind. Little did I know what waited for me." Albert stopped and looked around at the faces around the fire. The two boys stared up at him in wonder, not knowing where the story was going to lead. He looked next at his brother who only smirked in the firelight.

"I walked up to the little cabin and tried the door. I could smell something cooking, so I knew that someone was around. I opened the door slowly. " Both boys both cowered slightly. "But no one was in there. Curiosity had brought me to a place I would have never imagined. On the table sat a book. It was old and worn. The cover was missing and the ink had bled into the paper. I flipped back to the beginning and it had all types of different writing in it. When I got to about the middle, I noticed that the writing was all the same, and I began to read. It was the story of a man who had lived another life back in the city. It read: 'I can never go back. I will only kill again. I must never see another for I do not know what I would do. I must stay here and repent for the sins I have committed.' Just then, I looked up, and in the window was the smiling face of a man holding an enormous double bladed axe. I will never forget his crazy yellow eyes and that twisted smile. I was paralyzed for a second, and then heard the screeching of the axe head against the glass."

"What happened then uncle Albert" John asked wanting the story to continue.

"I ran and ran until I thought my heart would burst."

"Did you ever go back and find out who the man was?"

"No I never did, but sometimes I hear noises and voices in the woods and I think that he is still out there waiting for me to return." There was quiet around the campfire and it continued to snap and soothe them with its light and heat in the damp night.

"It's just about time to go to bed eh guys?" Mr. Avery said looking over at his sons.

"Ah Dad" they both moaned in unison.

"So Robert" his uncle asked, trying to aid the boys in prolonging their stay. "Your mother tells me that you have a new girlfriend."

"No Uncle Albert, she's just a friend. Everyone teases me because she always brings me treats at school. I don't know why." He shrugged his shoulders.

"How come you're not married Uncle Albert?" John interjected, voicing his thoughts as soon as they entered his mind. Bob Avery coughed.

"Well John, I guess the right person has not come along yet."

"The right person all right" Bob Avery said, immediately drawing an undetectable slap from his wife. He rose without looking at his brother and mumbled something about seeing more wood although the fire would most certainly burn unattended for hours.

The sun had finally set, but there was still some light in the sky. It was a clear night and the moon was three quarters full and faint in the sky. John went over to the cupboard and took out the Coleman lamp. He shook it and felt that there was still a lot of kerosene in it. There were some wooden matches in an old orange juice can by the big wood stove, and he carefully lit the lamp and hung it on a hook over the table. He went out the screen door and onto the patio to light the barbecue

John was cooking the hamburger patties that his Mom had prepared, when he saw the dancing light of a flashlight.

"Hey Lauren, I hope you didn't spoil your appetite, these burgers look pretty damn good."

"I'm hungry as a bear" Lauren called back and then made a large growling sound that fell into laughter.

After they were finished eating, they sat in John's camp under the light of the kerosene lamp. They both leaned back in their chairs, lethargic because their stomachs were full. John gazed over at her and smiled.

"What?" Lauren asked, thinking initially that she had ketchup on her face and bringing her hand up to wipe it off.

"Oh, I don't know, I guess I never really noticed how beautiful you are." John slowly reached out his hand to caress her face.

"So, are we going to have a sauna and swim or what?" Lauren got up and started to clear the dishes and put them on the counter. John rose at the same time and headed almost too purposely over to Lauren and stood beside her. She tried to ignore him, and moved back to the table to put the condiments away.

"I'm going to slip my bathing suit on. Why don't you start the fire in the sauna."

"Hey, forget the bathing suit, why don't we skinny dip huh?" John tried to say this light-heartedly, as if he was joking, and if she revolted against the suggestion, he could say just that.

"No, I think I'll keep my suit on."

John leaned over and poured some water on the hot rocks. They hissed and a big cloud of steam rose from them.

"Get ready for it" John said looking over at Lauren. They were both seated on the top bench of the sauna. It was small, and was the first sleep camp that his grandfather had built when they were clearing the land. After the main camp was up, they made some modifications and turned it into a sauna with a fire grate that you could access from outside.

"Wheh, that 's hot" Lauren said wincing as the steam enveloped her. She closed her eyes and tried not to inhale too deeply, for it was hard to breath and the hot air felt like it was burning her lungs. John took this opportunity to look over at Lauren. His own eyes were burning from the heat and the sweat, but he had to look. Her nipples were erect and could be easily seen through the bathing suit that clung tightly to her body. Lauren opened her eyes and caught John looking at her. He smiled innocently.

"So have you had enough?" John asked sliding down the bench and getting ready to leave the sauna.

They made their way down to the lake, carefully descending down the cool patio stones. The steam hovered around their bodies like a strange aura clinging onto their skin. John didn't wait for Lauren to catch up, and let out a scream and broke the surface of the water while his voice was still echoing around

the lake. He felt the shock to his body, and the cool water felt exhilarating and his heart raced in his chest. He heard a splash and Lauren was soon treading water beside him. One of his feet touched bottom, and he bent his knees and swam harder. The undergrowth was soft and slimy.

"Remember what we used to do when we were kids Lauren?" John said, his voice choppy as he struggled to catch his breathe. He didn't wait for Lauren to respond. "We used to float right in the center of the lake." He looked over at her and maneuvered himself onto his back.

"Yes" she responded, moving into a similar position. They both were floating on their backs, trying to breath effortlessly so that there would still be enough air in their lungs to keep them afloat. Their hands fanned out effortlessly beside them. Their ears were under water and all they could hear was the hollow sounds of their own movements. John reached over and gently took Lauren's arm and linked it around his own. She did not hesitate. They had perfected this when they were children, and would often swim for hours on end. Above them, the stars seemed ready to burst from the night sky. With their free hands they both paddled gently, pushing the water away and beginning to move slowly around in a circle, both watching as the stars spun with them. They came closer together and John delicately hooked his leg over hers. He was thinking about the feel of her smooth legs and how tight she would be. Lauren felt like she did as a child; safe and floating gently around in slow moving circles

Lauren made her way back up to her camp to change into some dry clothes. She took off her bathing suit and began to wipe herself down with a towel. Her body felt very alive and the night air made her shiver slightly. She looked at herself in the mirror under the light of the lantern. Her skin looked waxy and the light behind her gave her an unearthly glow. She loved the feeling of getting out of the cold lake then into dry clothes. She pulled on her track pants and an oversized sweater and grabbed a vodka cooler out of the fridge. John was working on the fire and when she stepped out of her camp, she could see the silhouette of his hunched figure as the fire smouldered dimly before him.

"Here let me help you with that" Lauren said walking up behind him. "You were never that good at making fires. The thing is, you don't give it enough air." John had trouble with the sauna fire and Lauren

had to help him. "You have to make it like a little teepee with the paper and the kindling." Lauren knelt beside John and rearranged the thin strips of wood.

They set up the lawn chairs around the fire and John piled the wood on once there was a nice bed of embers. The flames kicked up higher and John looked up at the dark trees contrasted against the sky.

"You know, this is what this place is all about." He didn't want to ruin the moment. The fire was blazing now and its light cast a warm glow on their youthful faces.

"Yea" Lauren replied with a detached acquiescence. "This is the part that I like best, getting warm after." She crossed her arms and began rubbing her shoulders. "Something about being in the water. It makes me feel so free. It got me to thinking about natural births. We were discussing it in one of my classes. You ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Well it's a birthing technique. The women sit in a tub of warm water so that when the baby comes out it's calm and soothed. It sure beats the brightness of the delivery ward. Maybe some people are traumatized from birth, coming out of the warm and dark womb and into the cold and bright hospital. You wonder why everything is so clinical?" She paused and waited to see if John would respond. "Another thing is that newborn babies already know how to swim. Water babies. Just like me and you." She reached out and nudged him with her elbow.

"Yea, water babies."

"Do you remember how crazy they used to be, our parents and even your grandfather? We don't really know what was going on back then, but I'm pretty sure they used to get pretty drunk around the fire at night. Do you remember the night that your grandfather starting talking about the way to get into the canoe and your grandmother challenged him?"

"Huh no."

"Well, there was a big production and your grandfather led everyone down to the dock. 'Now' he said looking at everyone 'I'll show you how to get into a canoe.' Well, he took one step in and the thing flipped faster than I'd ever seen a canoe go over. Everyone was laughing, and even harder when your

grandfather came up out of the water and was spouting like a whale. And all your grandmother kept saying was 'There you go, arse over tea kettle' Lauren was smiling and chuckled warmly to herself.

There were a lot of stories that were retold every year without fail. And every year, they became modified so that the best parts were exaggerated and the truth slipped gracefully into the background. Lauren knew all the stories, and talked about the time that John's brother got all caught up in his sleeping bag and rolled out of the top bunk bed and right onto his head. And there was the day that her father was having trouble with the chain saw, and when he finally got it going he nearly cut the shed in half. She talked and talked, telling one story after another until there were no more to tell. She fell silent, and John took this time to get up and throw another log on the fire

"Yep" he said sitting back down in his chair and grabbing the stick that he was using as a poker. "I'm glad I came to check the place out one last time."

"What do you mean one last time?" Lauren turned in her chair and faced him.

"Don't worry about it." He continued to poke at the fire with his stick. There was an uncomfortable pause. "It's all in the past Lauren. You talk about all this shit that I can barely remember. It's time to start some new memories. Let the old stories die and rest in peace. Did you happen to take a look at our camp? It's all run down, and will probably collapse before too long. I'm just trying to help out my family."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, let's forget it."

They sat in silence for awhile, listening to the crackle of the fire. Every now and again John would lean forward and poke at it with his stick. He started to stare at her. She looked so clean and warm in her big sweater and in the glow of the fire. The memory of her body in the sauna perked him up.

"Lauren" he whispered softly and turned to face her. "I don't know what I was saying earlier. How could I ever think of not having this place. I get these crazy ideas sometimes." John leaned over in his lawn chair and inched closer and closer to her. She moved quickly, and he lost his balance and the chair tumbled over.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lauren said standing up with her hands on her hips. "Everything was going so well. We're having a nice evening and you try to pull something. What's happened to you?"

She heard her voice crack and stopped to compose herself. John remained on the ground and stared blankly and defiantly at her the whole time. He finally got up and straightened his chair.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Listen, why don't you just go back to your own camp, all right little girl."

"I can't believe you're being such an asshole" Lauren responded shaking her head. She stood for a moment and waited anyway. "Well fuck you then" she said before turning and leaving him.

John sat brooding for a while. He yelled a verse of "O Suzanna" so that she could hear it. He was going to call the realtor the moment he got back into town. The wind picked up and started blowing the smoke from the fire in his face. He went down to the lake and filled a bucket to darken the coals. He poured the water in a circular motion, and the hot embers protested with a hissing and snapping sound.

Again he felt his anger rise as he walked back up to the camp. The Coleman lamp was still on low. He could hear the crickets outside, but they did not offer comfort to him as they did when he was a child. He looked around the camp in the faint light. Everything looked more shabby and run down seen through his jaundiced eyes. *This place sucks shit.* He caught sight of the turtle. The plastic jeweled eyes stared dumbly at him.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" John asked loudly. He hated it all: the camp, his life, everything. "Well, Dad never liked your sorry ass and neither do I." He gave it a little kick, and thought for a minute about throwing it in the fire, but remembered it was out. He picked up the turtle and again carried it under his arm.

He went back down to the dock with the intent of throwing it in the lake. He didn't know if it would float or sink, and he didn't care. He wanted to do something, get rid of something. Standing at the end of the dock, he raised the turtle above his head. He then looked up at the bottom and noticed that there was something shoved in between the spaces of the warped wood. John gently placed the turtle upside down on the dock and looked at it for awhile in quiet contemplation. He crouched down and extracted the folded stack of papers. He left the turtle there on the dock, hopelessly on its back. He had a headache, and stopped on the stairs to take a look up at the stars. He felt tired and worn, and he tightened his grip around the papers.

The stack was folded in four. The paper was dry and yellowed and he opened it tenderly. The paper protested with a series of cracks and rips. It looked like it was written in his own hand, and the words were printed neatly in small tight letters. Smoothing out the paper, he began to read.

Everything forbidden is sweet.

May your reward be the happiness which belongs to those who know how to seek and find.

What the fuck is all this? Was it copied out of a book? Placing the first page aside, he began to read the second.

Sometimes I look around at all

The things I left behind

And dream about the outcome if

I had not changed my mind.

I wonder what I would have been

And what I might have done

I might have gathered greater wealth

In much more worthy ways

And lived a life of happiness

For many nights and days

I might have won the highest goal

That one could want on earth

So why should I complain about

The person that I am

For the mistake is my fault

Fault? Mistake? He was never good at poetry, or looking for hidden meaning. He did not like puzzles. *All that time, and this was what he was writing?* He felt like there was a long standing and intricate joke

played on him. Blood flushed his face and he began to rifle through the pages quickly, glancing down and hoping for other words.

Back of tranquillity always lies conquered unhappiness.

Invisible threads are the strongest ties.

There is a destiny that makes us brothers. None goes his way alone,

All that we send into the lives of others comes back into our own.

Forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred and the waste of energy.

lying in bed at night

I plough over many thoughts

Of all the things in sight

Which never seems all right

Not even very bright

But the nights are never long enough

To enlighten all my thoughts

At times I wish I was "Dead" and out of sight

I do not like this morbid mood

And I am always miserable

When the shadows cross my path.

And so I go on dreaming and

Pretending I have fun

Although of course I know that

I am getting nothing done.

There was one poem on the last page. He could not pull his eyes away.

When I am so discouraged and
My heart is really sad
Because I have been bad
God you give me encouragement
You lift my tired head
And make me feel that life again
Is wonderful and sweet.
Sometimes I am so lonely and I
Am prompted to despair
And then your grace reminds me, God
How much You really care,
How loving and forgiving and
How good You are to me
And I just want to do Your will for all eternity.

John looked up. The blank backs of the pages were face up. It was like a door opened in his mind, and now he could see behind all the times he never questioned; the words left unspoken, and stories told in a way to conceal the truth. He got out of his chair and went to the cupboard and poured himself a shot of rye. He winced as it burned down his throat. He went back over to the table and turned off the lamp. The mesh flickered, and slowly faded out. John groped and felt his way in the darkness until he found the bed.

Albert Avery rose out of the water and stood on the third rung of the ladder. Water poured down his legs, and he listened as it dripped into the calm lake. It was dusk, and the sky was a deep golden orange. He thought: Red sky at night, sailor's delight. The wind picked up, and his skin broke out in goose bumps as he climbed up the ladder and stood on the dock.

He walked slowly up the stone steps. Pebbles beneath his bare feet. He did not have much left. Once inside the camp, he took the rope off the table. The other children used to make fun of him in Scouts because he could never get the knots right. He thought that it would be hard to make a good noose, but he found many books with diagrams and all the proper techniques to use.

The old milk crate was in one hand, and the rope was in the other as he walked out to the big red pine tree behind the camp. The crate would work perfect, and give him enough height. He wanted it to work on the first try. This was all two months in the planning and he had thought of everything.

As he slung the rope over the branch, he looked at the trunk of the tree. His and his brother's initials were carved into the bark. They had done this, late one summer, after summer camp. Bob had to leave the camp because his appendix was about to burst. Albert had seen his big brother pale and writhing in pain before they took him away. That night, at the year end talent show, they put on a shadow play, and pretended that it was surgery on Bob. They pulled out rolls of sausage, and used saws and wood for sound. Albert started screaming and crying, and to calm him, they showed him that it was all an act.

He balanced up on the milk crate with the rope around his neck. The only thought in his head was that it was all a lie. He kicked the crate over, and his neck snapped cleanly under his own weight.

Private Business

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon in late summer, and they both knew what that meant. Or at least that was the way it had been the past four weekends. They had met exactly five weeks ago at a cocktail party; one that Richard had not wanted to attend. He had come up with excuses for the last couple by feigning a busy schedule, but to avoid a confrontation with his wife, he agreed to go to this party. He had to give in sometimes, although he never did unless he figured he would get something in return. It turned out to be a prosperous evening for thirty seven year old Richard Collins. As a corporate lawyer, he liked to make new contacts and believed there was always a new game in town waiting for him.

These cocktail parties were usually held under the auspices of good will and friendship, and as a way for a couple to show off some recent renovation or a new art acquisition. This evening was no different, and the gracious hosts made sure everyone came and viewed their newest painting "by an eighteenth century master" soon after they had arrived. Richard, who also had a smooth golf stroke, was well liked in the business world. His wife was five years younger than he, and was a gracefully ally at social functions. They did not have any children because his wife could never carry to the full term. They had seen fertility specialists. At first it was a strain on their marriage, but Richard accepted the fact and soon convinced his wife that this would leave them free to pursue other things. He provided her with a healthy allowance which was more than enough for her to satisfy all her whims.

For the "other woman", every Saturday was the day that her ex-husband "the asshole" came and picked up her three children for his visitation rights. She had been invited to the party because there was an outpouring of sympathy from the group to include her.

"It's so hard on her. Recently divorced and having to take care of the children. So used to doing everything as a couple."

At first, thirty-four year old Mary Larsen, who was back to using her maiden name, had respectfully declined the invitation. But she reconsidered when she was reassured by the hostess that there would be single men there, and they had invited other "new people". She made sure to put on her most alluring black dress and had her hair done.

"Let people talk if they want to" she had told her hair dresser that afternoon.

When Richard came to see her on Saturdays, she always made sure that she put away all of the children's toys. She knew that he and his wife could never have children, and didn't want any distractions. Judy told her about his wife. *Maybe she can't satisfy him in all ways.* Her feelings for him were starting to change, and she thought about him all the time. First it was animal attraction, and she had to grudgingly admit that part of it was about Jack. *If he can do it then so can I* she reasoned. *Nobody would believe this, that it can be so nice for us now.* She imagined people joking that it was wham bam thank you Ma'am. An indiscretion, a weakness, a lack of morals. *They can never know. He is always prompt and cordial in his manner. Very delicate, but forceful too, in control of himself, not like Jack who would cast his fuck me eyes at any teenager that went by in a tight skirt. Richard always knows just what to say, and when to be silent and hold me. There are times when a woman just wants to be held or touched. He's sensitive in his own way and cares more than he would ever let on.* She had relied too heavily on words in the past, and they had failed her. Failed her, and were left like weapons to be picked up and used later on, and always somehow twisted and not how she remembered them sounding. She thought about Richard again, how he was at the party. He did not seem as excited lately and their love making sessions were getting shorter and shorter. *Not like that first time he took me.*

Richard plunged his tongue deeper into her mouth. Eyes closed, tongue and lips both working to take her all in. End to end, a wave, warm beneath him. He pulled away from her, and looked at the wall and focused on one spot. He could think of anything, so focused, so in rhythm, taking what he wanted. Her body yielded beneath him and he lowered his head to kiss her. Her mouth was always waiting. Dance of tongues, bodies fighting and probing for territory. Rough, then soft again, slow, deep strokes, then tongues retracted, soft kiss. Smooth lips on smooth lips. He thought back to how when he was younger he liked to have sex and know that another woman was in the next room listening. In the morning he would smile and act coy when he saw her, thinking how she must want him all the more. He looked at her under him. She had her eyes closed and her head rocked to the rhythm of his body. Her breasts were supple and he closed his mouth around her nipple, sucking, and twirling his tongue in fanciful circles. It was their first time, but he had already found ways to drive her mad. He could hear her breath get heavier, and she

tilted her head back further, gasping deep for air. He slid his arm under her, forcing himself into her roughly. He struggled to fulfill her for his sake.

When they were first introduced, Richard was having a conversation with a long time associate whom he had not seen in some time. They were craftily mixing talk of business with pleasure. Never wanting to come on strong, he liked to entice them into revealing information with the thought of a round or two of golf, or with the suggestion that he might be able to set up a luncheon with some very important people. He felt a gentle tap on his arm and did not respond immediately because he thought it was his wife.

"Richard, Steve, I'd like you to meet Mary." Richard turned and planned on being cordial, polite and dismissive so that he could get back to his conversation.

"Pleased" he stopped. "Pleased to meet you" he said regaining himself. There was something about her. When she reached out and touched him, it was like there was nobody else in the room. Their eyes met and locked; they moved closer together and he grabbed her hand gently. Her hand was soft and delicate, and his large hand easily enfolded hers.

"Hello, Richard" she returned, slightly flushed. Steve stood there unnoticed with his hand extended and then gracefully took a step back, without moving far enough to break up the triangle they had formed in the corner of the room. Richard, remembering where he was, also took a half step back, but kept a hold of her hand. He figured if anyone saw, they would only think he was being friendly and making her feel welcome at the party. Their actions were subtle, but their thoughts were not, and they both smiled and saw their reflection in one another's eyes.

After they were finished, they both lay there with their eyes open staring at the ceiling. It was their fifth time. They were used to each other now, and had a little routine worked out. He was tired, and she was sad. The act was completed with no words, only sheets rustling, springs creaking, and the occasional sound of a motor from the street beyond. But today it was unusually quiet. Sunlight flooded into the room through venetian blinds that were half open, setting just the right balance between exposure and closure. It

was cool in the room because the house had a central air conditioner which kept the temperature constant and comfortable.

Richard liked her big brass bed with its firm mattress. He put his hands behind his head and tried to enjoy the decadence of being in bed in the middle of the afternoon. He had never slept in her bed, likewise, he had never been in her bedroom under the cover of night, although he thought this would have relaxed him more. They had friends in the area, and he knew, like in business, that you could never be too careful. His car was parked a couple of blocks away, and on his walk back, he would think of a story in case he was seen.

He was completely naked except for his socks, which he never took off. His shoes were placed neatly under the chair always toe to heel. He took his time getting undressed, and they both undressed alone. The clothes were placed like a display in a men's store. His shirt was over the back of the chair, and his pants were folded carefully along its crease. His motley silk tie provided a sharp contrast as it lay across his black pants. His underwear, placed under his pants, was hidden from view.

The party took on a different tone after he met Mary. He had to remind himself that his wife was around, and he didn't want to do anything to embarrass himself in front of his colleagues. It was hard for the two of them to hide their passions under the veil of decorum, and it was especially difficult because Mary was very obviously the center of attention. Her story was quietly circulated around the party for those who did not know her. A sentence or two to explain her situation was uttered in the moment that it takes for a piece of finely chopped broccoli to be covered in dip.

"She's recently divorced. Husband cheated on her."

Richard was glad on this night that his wife was such a social butterfly. She was off with her friends, and as usual did not check in or pay much attention to him. She knew him well enough.

There was one point in the evening when Richard took leave of the group to go to the bathroom. Before he left the main room, he stood in plain view of Mary and motioned over to her with his eyes and a slight tilt of his head. There was a long hallway that led around to a secondary washroom. Mary had seen him leave, and carefully checked before she followed to make sure that nobody was paying close attention.

They met in the hallway, and without a word Richard moved and pushed her up against the wall. He slid his hand down her leg, hooked it behind her knee and lifted her leg so that she was straddling him. They kissed passionately. The feeling was so intense for both that for a moment they forgot where they were. They were like school kids, doing something behind the teacher's back. When they went back to the party, his wife asked him why he was all flushed.

"Must be the wine" he answered.

Before he left that night, he slipped her a business card with the words "Call me" written on it and a small and barely visible "xxx" written in the far left hand corner.

"Well" he said looking over at her, "I have to go." He was somewhat taken aback by the smallness of his own voice. It was cracked and dry and barely audible. He cleared his throat, but still kept his eyes on the ceiling which was textured and offered a minute landscape displaying hills and valleys too countless to absorb. Again, he attempted to break the silence.

"I guess I should leave now." This time his voice was clear and strong, and a little too loud in compensating for its previous weakness. He turned to her, but she would not look at him, although he could sense she was seeing him out of the corner of her eye. She knew that he was probably never coming back, and she felt tired and her thighs were sore.

"Richard" she said in a soft voice. "What happens now?"

"Well, what happens now is that I go back to work" he said smiling broadly.

"You know what I mean." She turned on her side and propped herself up on her elbow.

"I'm not sure." He grew solemn and there was no attempt this time to joke. "Listen, I'll call you all right?"

She lay back down. He would get up like he always did, making sure not to disturb her. Once he was dressed, he would fold back the sheets on his side of the bed, pinning her in alone. In the beginning, she would pretend to be resting, wanting to believe she was too satisfied to move, and not wanting idle talk to fill in space. She tried simply to bask in the afterglow and the risk of love-making in the afternoon. So

decadent, the cool satin sheets, and outside the hot summer sun. Sometimes she thought *what if the kids came back or someone stops by on an unexpected visit?*

He did not disappoint today. When she knew that his back was to her, she turned her head to look at him as he dressed. He fumbled while putting one leg in his pants, and swore lightly as he righted himself after nearly falling over. *Comical. He puts his pants on one leg at a time. He's so neat, so deliberate, so thorough. Maybe that's what it is about him. He always takes his time, never rushes, and never tries to make it into something else.*

"Mr. Collins there's a call for you on line two. It's a woman named Mary Johnson. She says that you are expecting her call. Would you like me to tell her that you're gone for the day?" Richard put down his pen and closed the folder in front of him. Pressing the button on the intercom he said:

"No that's fine Jennifer. I'll take it. And would you hold all my calls until I tell you." He picked up the phone and pushed the flashing red button.

"Hello, nice to hear from you again Mrs. Johnson."

"Hello Richard, I feel kind of strange calling you at the office, and I thought that I'd better use my married name."

"Don't worry, it's fine. So when can I see you? That was something else the other night. I never-" He let his voice drop off and decided to speak much softer. "You must believe me when I say that I have never done anything like that before. It's just something about you, something that I have not felt in a long time. I want to feel like that again. I need you."

"Yes" she said, "I feel it too. How about Saturday? You could come to my house—say two in the afternoon for coffee?"

"I usually come in on Saturday to finish up some work, so I'm sure that I could slip out." She gave him the address and he carefully wrote it down. "Listen, I have to tell you that I am married, in the conventional sense. If you want to change your mind I'll—"

"No, no I understand. I met your wife at the party. You're just coming over for coffee. I'll see you at two."

Fully dressed now, he pulled his shoes out from under the chair and placed them in front of him. He smoothed out his tie and adjusted his shirt neatly around his thin waist. All together and finely pressed. Standing there he thought of Mary, and how she might become a problem. He was not planning on calling her. *She's nice, and maybe at another time, but I couldn't risk it now.* Other men he knew had affairs, and he noted what it could do to your business and your reputation. He always tried to keep himself clean. He had just heard about a man he used to do business with. The story was typical: gambling, cocaine, man loses everything. Society may be verbally progressive, but unspoken loyalties were easily severed.

He sat down on the bed to put on his shoes. His back was to her, and he thought about how he could keep her in check. If need be, no one ever got through to Richard, and many a time he rewarded his secretary with a bonus for subtly keeping people at bay. *Everything will be fine and back to normal soon* he assured himself.

She rolled over on her side and pulled the sheets up tightly around her neck. She couldn't hate him, but she wanted to, or at least resent him and to lump him together with her ex-husband. *Why do they call them x's anyway. They should be called why's. Why did I waste my time with you? Why am I so fucked up over it?* She turned over and looked at him. *So neat. Mr. Tidy, fucking another woman, while your wife is at a society party. All his cards are stacked so carefully that if one were removed it would all come tumbling down. I suppose I could blackmail him like the adulteresses always seem to do in those cheap romances, but where would that get me?* She had been willing—they both had, and he had made it clear that they could never exist beyond the confines of her home. She had pressed him to go for lunch one day. He glared at her and said:

"What? Are you crazy!"

She wished it was different. *Maybe if we were younger; if we were both free, then he would take me and the kids.* She had wasted too much time in the past thinking "what if." She looked over at the clock. She would have to get up soon, and she wanted to wait for him to leave first. Then there would be no trace of him. He was careful to leave nothing behind, not even a hair.

He finished grooming himself and placed the black comb into the inside pocket of his suit coat. He looked in the full length mirror that was beside the chair and checked himself over quickly, running his

palm along a troublesome strand of hair that just wouldn't stay in place. He glanced over at the mound under the sheets as he walked by and knew he should say something, but could think of nothing. When this all started, he had to say something after, and would never leave in silence. The first time, he said "thank you" on the way out. As he was leaving, he smiled and winked at her and through the window came the sounds of children playing.

Sarah

It's happening again, but this time it's changed, or at least it's never been this strong before. I don't know if anyone would really believe it, and to try to say it in words. People would probably think that I was having a nervous breakdown, or that the stress of the office was finally getting to me. Who believes? Grandma used to say that people did not have any faith, could not reach beyond what can be seen with their eyes, or felt with their hands. Grandma. I wish that she were here. I know she would help me. It seems like she's been gone so long. I have seen many seasons. Ten years. Mother wouldn't listen. Winking like it was a family joke, and grandma was just a crazy gypsy attracting all kinds of people. But why now? For so long I lived without these visions and dreams and could see nothing. It happens when I have sunk below the horizon of the day. I see into the lives of strangers, places I've never been. I know that I have not lived before.

Sarah Jacobson sat on the sofa with a cup of herbal tea in her hand. It was April, and the land was saturated by the rains that seemed to come almost everyday. It had been almost one year since she moved to the city to get a job as a paralegal. Right now, there was a lot of pressure at the office, and the firm was booked solid with cases. Everyone was under fire, from the secretaries right on up to the top.

The newspaper lay on the arm of the chesterfield and revealed the headline: Fire Destroys House in Jackson County. She had just finished reading over the article. There was an elderly woman killed in the blaze, and there were so many things that Sarah could see hidden between the lines. Something wasn't right. News of death and conflicts between people did not easily leave her; it was as if she knew their pain. Last week while shopping, she saw a man cursing and pulling his son by the arm. The boy dragged his feet in opposition, and his shoes squeaked loudly across the polished floor.

"No daddy no" the boy said through tears.

"You better keep your mouth shut Colin." Sarah stood and watched, and felt the urge to follow.

The cup in her hand soothed her, its heat centered in her palm. With her other hand she twirled the charm that her grandmother had given her. It was an emerald with a large crystal embedded right in the centre. It changed colours, sometimes violet, sometimes amber, but today it was red. Her grandmother

had told her that she was a descendant of gypsies from Spain, and that they carried jewels so that they could easily transport their wealth from place to place.

She shifted slightly and tucked her feet under the corner of the folded blanket that was at the end of the couch. She was twenty seven years old, and lived in a small one bedroom in an old apartment building downtown. Her long and full bodied black hair curled softly at the ends and framed her full face. She had rounded cheeks that flushed rosy innocence in the cold. Her long thin nose was set off by knowing eyes that many men had looked upon curiously.

The landlady had told her that the building was erected during the 1930's as a make work project by a local businessman. She said that her apartment was specially designed for the owner. Sarah felt that it was a special place from the moment she walked in. There were hardwood floors and tile designs in the kitchen. Wooden arches framed the entranceways to the rooms, and a little alcove in the living room sported a small window which the sun shone through in the early mornings. She could see a man with a mustache, derby hat and a pipe reading the evening newspaper in this spot. A bay window overlooked the park and there were still traces of snow mixed with the pulp of wet leaves. She often walked in the park and was at peace beyond the city.

It all started with my period. I was sick and fevered and the dreams came that night. Always somewhere else. Yes, so bright still in my mind, kept hidden for so long. It was in the summer, and I had come in from playing outside. I had been running and it felt like my feet were going to leave the ground. Everything was so bright and beautiful, a flame coloured shroud around me, and my heart fluttered, and then I was elsewhere. It was Mary that found me. I was reaching out like I was blind she said. I got scared and went and told my mother that something was being pulled out of me.

"Why don't you go up stairs and lay down" Mrs. Jacobson said to her daughter. She was in the kitchen baking. Her mother was a very pragmatic woman with a "wait and see" attitude. She never wanted to believe that anything was wrong. Sarah went up to the bathroom, and yelled up to her mother when she saw the blood in her shorts.

"It's the natural course of things dear" she said coming back with a wet face cloth. "You also running a fever. You must have the flu. They say bad things come in threes. Stay quiet and we'll see how you are when your father gets home."

It was that night that I remember falling away, spinning end over end, and then being pulled up or carried over a harrier and then the corners of my mind were stretched infinitely around and through me. First a descent before rising. Blinding and countless points of light in darkness. I couldn't keep count or contain it all, too much for me to see. And then I was above it and flying over an open field, looking down at the grass that was like a sea of swaying gold beneath me. Then I was in the back of our car. Locked inside, and I was pounding on the door for the screams were hurting me. And outside the brightest light, warm and calling and I wanted to go to it. The car was cold, but my mother was there, begging me to stay and not go with them.

Her screams sounded the deepest horror, cutting through the still air in the house. Her father came running into the room. Sarah was pale and looked like she had broken the fever. Sweat covered her milky brow.

"Sarah, Sarah" he said shaking her gently by the shoulders. "Wake up. It was only a dream sweetheart, it was only a dream."

The next morning her father came to her again.

"You feeling any better this morning hot dog? You gave me quite a scare last night. All this talk about flying, I never heard the likes of it. I should have written it down." He chuckled warmly to himself. He was a decent man.

"It was so real Daddy. I thought that I was awake, and I could feel it was real."

"Now, now you were fevered and hallucinating. It won't happen again."

Grandma came the next afternoon. I had been sleeping and dreaming that I was in the back room of her farm house where she used to give her readings. I could hear songs and noises far off. Deep sounds, that

echoed endlessly, but I could not see. It did not scare me at first, but I could hear it approaching, a steady pitch rising and getting closer and closer with every passing second. Then I felt a hand on my face and when I opened my eyes she was there.

"Sarah. Sarah. Wake up child." Her voice was deep but smooth, and Sarah's lids were gently pulled open. "I saw that you were ill, but you will be fine. Now don't fight it dear, let it take you where it will." She smiled and rubbed her hair playfully, then picked up her right hand that was lying on the blanket. She pulled out a piece of red string and tied it around her middle finger.

"This will help with the fever, and I brought you something else." She opened her large bag and brought out a jar which was half full of a cloudy blue mixture. Unscrewing the top she said: "Now sit up and drink this."

"Mother what are you doing?" Sarah's mother rushed over just as she was finishing the last of the drink. It tasted like blueberries. Her mother grabbed the empty jar.

"What did you give her? She's running a fever you know and none of your quack medicines are going to help her. She has seen the doctor."

"Relax Jude, it was only juice. It will settle her nerves. I gave you the same thing when you were her age, but it obviously didn't work." She winked at Sarah and then turned and beamed at her daughter.

"When did you get here? I didn't hear you come in."

"You must have been in the kitchen. I came in through the back door. I thought that you'd be busy and I didn't want to bother you. I came here to see Sarah. I knew she wasn't feeling well."

"And how did you know that pray tell? she asked haughtily. She retreated slightly. "Can I speak to you downstairs mother."

Sarah looked down at the cool and empty coffee cup that was still in her hands. She moved her leg, which had been tucked under her, and realized that it was asleep. It tingled, and her foot felt heavy and wrapped in static. She got up and limped across the room and into the small kitchen. She had been sitting on the couch for an hour now. Her bedroom was right off the kitchen, and when she walked by she saw

the stack of paperwork that waited for her. *I really should get to that* she thought, taking the time to review in her mind the cases she had been assigned. The phone rang three times before she picked it up.

"Hello."

"Hi Sarah. I just called to see how you were doing." It was Bill.

"Yea, I'm fine really. The office has been crazy lately. It should slow down soon, and then things will get back to normal."

"I haven't seen much of you lately." Bill was a worrier. In the beginning Sarah thought that this was sweet.

"Everything is fine Bill. Listen, we will go out this weekend for sure."

"Well, I'm not doing anything now. How about I come over?"

"Uh, actually that's not a good idea." Sarah looked at her desk. "I really do have lots of work to do tonight and it is already after eight. Why don't you call me at the office tomorrow. Maybe we'll have an early dinner."

After preparing herself a another cup of tea, Sarah resumed her position on the couch. For a time she sat there and thought of Bill. A coworker of hers had introduced them. He was at a new job too, and during those first few months his company meant a lot to her. Bill was a life insurance agent. She thought hard, but could not see herself with him. They were too different, and she told him that they should just remain friends. Distracted, she looked out the window at the lights in the park that were shining amid the trees. There was another tree right outside her window, and its dark arms groped empty in the wind. One branch was twisted up towards her window, and if the wind was strong enough, it would tap lightly on the pane.

When did she give me the necklace and tell me all about the gypsies? It must have been three summers after I was sick. I was sixteen, because that was the summer that I ended up working down at the marina. That woman from Michigan offered me money for my charm. Said she had never seen anything like it. Grandma was crafty. She knew.

"Dad?" They were driving along a dirt road on the way out to her grandmother's. When they left, her mother had stood at the door with her arms folded across her chest. "How come Mom doesn't want me to spend time with grandma?"

"You know your mother. They don't exactly see eye to eye." Frank Jacobson knew that sometimes it was better to let his wife win, at least verbally.

"Did you ever meet grandpa?"

"Yes, I remember him well. He was a very soft spoken gentleman. I remember him particularly in the summer, when he used to get all dressed up on Sundays. He was a very proud man. He died just when your mother and I started dating. It was tough on them after that. They had to take care of that big house all by themselves. Some of the people that came around the house scared your mother."

"Did anything bad ever happen?"

"No, no, she wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. Your grandmother was just different." He looked over at his daughter and added: "But harmless. Your mother never approved of in your grandmother's gypsy ways."

When they finally got out to the house, it was just starting to get dark. Her grandmother was lying on the couch with a quilt pulled up to her neck.

"How are you mother" her father asked putting Sarah's small suitcase down in the hallway and walking into the living room.

"Oh better" she said in a small cracked voice. "Hello Sarah." Her face brightened and Sarah walked over to her. One of her hands emerged from under the quilt.

"Is there anything I can do while I'm here" her father asked.

"Well James, the faucet in the kitchen is dripping."

"Say no more" her father said with a smile. "I'll go out and get my tools." He spun around excitedly and headed out to the car.

"Why don't you go and put your things up in your room. You still remember where it is don't you?"

"Yes of course" she said giggling.

"Good. I have some things up there for you."

When Sarah got upstairs, she put her suitcase down and opened up an old photo album that was laying on the bed. The pictures were all in black and white, and the first one showed a man and a woman. The woman had a scarf around her head and beads around her neck. They had dark skin, dark hair and were standing along a dirt road. In the background was a door set right into a mountain. The picture had a certain quality to it, and Sarah thought something looked familiar. In the room, there were boxes of books, dolls, jewelry and clothes piled about, and she picked through them quickly, not knowing what to examine first. She grabbed another book from the top of a pile. Inside were diagrams of the stars.

"Sarah." It was her father calling from downstairs.

"Coming."

As soon as the headlights of her father's car disappeared down the road, her grandmother threw off the quilt and stood up. She was fully dressed, and Sarah was surprised because she expected her to be in a housecoat. Her eyes were now keen and alert, and she stood before her and grinned.

"Grandma" Sarah said in a scolding voice. "Are you even sick?"

"Well, I wasn't feeling well a couple of days ago, but its passed." A new smile broke out over Sarah's face. "Now don't stand their smiling at your grandmother. Can you blame me for wanting to spend some time alone with my granddaughter? Your mother would have never let you come out here without a reason so-" She walked over and put her arm around her. "How about we go into the kitchen and I'll fix you something to drink?"

Once they were in the kitchen, and she had prepared a cup of hot chocolate, her grandmother started to talk.

"Now it's important for you to know these things Sarah, about your family and where you're from. Everyone should know. There will be a time when I won't be here to tell you."

"Grandma, don't talk like that."

"I only tell you the truth child. You must not fear. I see so many things in you. The wide world is about you: you can lock yourself in, but you can't lock it out."

"Now my grandmother was a gypsy from Spain, and she had come over on a boat sometime before the turn of the century."

"Why did they leave Spain?"

"She never told me. They had a good life there as far as I can tell. Gypsies always move, and never stay in one place for too long. They always travelled west, racing against the setting sun. I remember my grandmother from when I was a little girl, but I didn't see her often. My mother met a man from the city and moved there with him. Grandmother still travelled with a band of gypsies in the summer, and in the winter they would return to the city. She had a little shop where she used to read fortunes. My mother was just like yours, scared and embarrassed to admit that we were gypsies. My mother was so anxious for a new life, and did not care for the old ways. Now my grandmother always made sure to tell me stories, to take the time so that I would know and remember. Before she died, she sent me things to keep. She gave me this and now it is yours." Her grandmother's hand came up from under the table. The stone swung to and fro on the end of a gold chain. She placed it around her neck.

"Don't ever forget."

"There she is in Spain." She pointed to the picture that Sarah had been looking at earlier. "It is the only picture from that time. Gitanos, is what they called us in Spain. See, they lived in whitewashed caves to keep cool. She told me that her father was a smith and shod horses, and her mother was a fortune teller."

"I've seen gypsies in movies grandma. They use crystal balls right?"

"That's just for the movies dear. They don't know a lot about the gypsies. I'm no expert myself, and I have never met another since I was a child. When I was married to your grandfather, we ended up moving from place to place. When we finally settled down here, my mother sent me a box that was left to me by my grandmother. It had this album and some cards. That's when I started feeling-" She was cut off by a knock at the door, and she looked at the clock.

"Is it four o'clock already?" she asked half to herself. "I have to do a reading for someone now dear. You just sit here and be quiet." She led Sarah into the living room.

"Can I watch grandma?" Sarah asked hopefully.

"No dear, not now." Her grandmother went to the door and greeted a woman who followed behind her, but paused when she saw Sarah in the room.

"Mrs. Coombs this is my granddaughter Sarah."

"How do you do?" Sarah got up off the couch and shook her hand. They went into the back room off the kitchen. She had only been in there a few times. There was a table in the middle of the room that was covered in a black cloth. Candles were placed on the otherwise empty shelves that lined the walls. The windows were similarly covered with black cloth. Two chairs were placed on either side of the table.

Sarah sat quietly on the couch. Her grandma did not have a television, and she contemplated ways to find out what was going on in the room. She got up and went into the kitchen for a drink of water. While at the counter, she stood silent, but could only hear the muffled whispers of her grandmother, followed by short responses from Mrs. Coombs. This having failed, she went back into the living room and looked through the rest of the photo album. She could not help but hear her mother's voice. She had told her that grandmother was just like old Betty.

"When you have too much time, your imagination runs wild and you make up stories and fantasies." Betty was a widow who lived in a house on their street. Sometimes, the kids in the neighbourhood would call her "Batty Betty" and she would curse at them in a strange language. She didn't scare Sarah like she did the other kids. Sarah closed the album.

A short time later, her grandmother and Mrs. Coombs emerged from the back room. Sarah was still on the couch. Mrs. Coombs had a tissue and was quickly trying to wipe her face. Her grandma put an arm on her shoulder and said:

"Only time will tell."

Mrs. Coombs righted herself, and cleared her throat before saying good-bye. Once she was gone, her grandmother sat beside her on the couch and was silent for a long time. Sarah noticed that her eyes were jumping around behind her closed lids. After a while, she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Now where were we?"

"Grandma, why was that lady crying?"

"Well dear, people come to me and ask me questions. I must give them the answers no matter what they may be."

"Where do gypsies come from grandma?"

"Well, there are a lot of myths about the gypsies, and nobody really seems to know for sure. Grandma told me that before they were in Spain that they had come from the east. I have looked at some books, but many of them say different things. Some of the stories about the gypsies go right back to the Bible. One says that the gypsies are descendants of Cain. Do you know who Cain is?" Sarah shook her head.

"Well, you know Adam and Eve?"

"Yes" she said somewhat insulted.

"Well, Cain and Abel were the children of Adam and Eve. Cain killed his brother and then was sentenced by God and cursed to wander the earth all his days."

"So gypsies have been cursed?"

"No dear. These are just stories to try to explain our ways to others who do not know. Those who are different from the rest have always been persecuted. The gypsies always travelled around from place to place. They were the outsiders, staying on the outskirts of town. And people were scared of their powers of prophecy. They were blamed for people's fears. If something happened, it was easy to blame the ones they didn't understand. It's a brave thing to wander as a stranger."

"Are there other stories about the gypsies?"

"Well, there is another story from the bible. It says that before the crucifixion of Christ, the soldiers went around and looked for a smith to forge the nails. No one else would make them because they knew they were to kill an innocent man. Finally, the soldiers came upon a gypsy, and they did not tell him what they were to be used for. He was making the fourth spike, when someone rushed in and told him. He stopped then, but the soldiers left with the other three. That is why Christ was only crucified with three spikes. The gypsy tried to cool the last spike for it was still hot from the fire. Every time he would pour water on it, it would cool but then grow red hot again. The nail then became a living, bleeding body, and the blood was spurting fire."

"Ugh grandma that's gross."

"The gypsy was forced to flee and wander for the rest of his days. They say that fourth glowing spike follows the gypsy everywhere."

"All the stories about the gypsies sound bad."

"There is a gypsy saint. Saint Sarah."

"Really?"

"Yes, I don't know how your mother managed that one. Your mother never wanted to hear any of it. It scared her, and she couldn't see. But you are open."

"What about Saint Sarah?"

"She had visions. It is said that the three Mary's who were at the crucifixion would come, and she saw them arrive in a boat. The sea was dark and rough and threatened to swallow them. She awoke and went to the shore. There she used her dress as a raft and brought them safely to land. It was her faith and her courage to act that brought her to glory."

Sarah got up off the couch and decided to go to bed. She thought about calling Bill. *I was short with him, and he has been so good to me.* She paused after putting her cup on the counter. *All these thoughts.* There was something else. She went into her room and immediately walked over to the desk. *Two reports tomorrow. I'll have to get up early. Jone's case first thing.* The words on the report blurred a little and she closed her eyes a couple of times to try to get it into focus. *Tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow.*

After she had washed her face and gotten into her pajamas, she slipped under the covers. The nights were cold in the apartment. She picked up the book on the bedside table. It was a romance novel that she had bought when she went out shopping one Saturday. She enjoyed reading light stories, and she laughed out loud reading them many nights. Everything was so dramatic: the cheating husband, the failed marriage, and the hero waiting to enter at the most opportune moment. *Funny life never seems to work like that. Is Bill my prince?* She had to snicker at this, for he was such a clown, and she had seen him fall up stairs and drop a countless number of things. She placed the book back on her night table and nestled into bed and twirled her charm in her fingers.

Strange thoughts today. Some of the things that she told me I can barely remember. All in one, all is one, all for one and one for all. Was I supposed to remember everything she said?

"Mom when are we going to eat?" An eighteen year old Sarah had just gotten off the phone with one of her friends. They were going to try to get into the bars tonight.

"Well, your father may be a little late from work. So say around six." They were both yelling at each other from different rooms. Her mother was in the kitchen cleaning up, and Sarah had just finished watching the late afternoon soap opera. "Why?" her mother asked, sticking her head around the corner.

"I was just talking to Jennifer. Her parents are going away for the night and she asked a couple of us girls to stay over. I was thinking about going over right after dinner. Do you think that Daddy'll let me take the car?"

"You'll have to ask him yourself." She paused and looked at her daughter who was slumped on the living room sofa with her feet up on the stool. "I hope that there's not going to be any party there this evening young lady." She had to hold back her tongue, for she felt like chiding her daughter over the way she was sitting. "Not very ladylike" she thought.

"No, of course not, mother" Sarah replied sarcastically. They stared at each other for awhile, both waiting for the other to speak. Finally her mother re-entered the kitchen and soon Sarah could hear the water running.

"Not that I would tell you anyway" Sarah thought to herself, slumping down even more. There was a game show on the television, but she had turned down the sound while she had been on the phone. It soothed her and set a balance between the noises coming from the kitchen. She swung her feet around and lay down. It had been a hectic day at school, and she wanted to be well rested for tonight. Russell would be there. "He's so tall and handsome" she thought. "And we could dance all around. Spinning and spinning and the light up high."

"Sarah" a voice whispered in her ear. "Sarah it is time." She shifted uncomfortably and said in a groggy voice:

"Mom please let me sleep." She felt something pulling gently on her middle finger, with just enough force to pull her up and away. She could feel a tingling all over, as if a mild current were running through her. She heard the voice again, and knew that it was not her mother's.

"Grandma?" She could hear her own breath behind her, and was scared to turn around. She was standing by her grandmother's bedside and looked upon her with much sadness. She had been ill lately, and Sarah had not seen her for a couple of weeks.

"Grandma, are you all right?"

"Yes child, better now that you are here." Sarah noticed that her grandmother's cheeks were sunken and that she was pale. Her breath was raspy and laboured. She held out her hand to touch hers. It looked like light was shining through her fingers and they glowed a soft red at the edges. Her palms were a bright white.

"You must believe that you are everything and everything is you. Do not fight what you know is true."

"What I don't understand." Sarah started to panic. She was being pulled away again, and the image of her grandmother faded before her and rose in an iridescent vapour that flooded towards the ceiling. She awoke with a start on the couch and frantically looked around the room.

"Mom, Mom!"

"What is it?" She came quickly into the room and noticed that her daughter was pale and shaking.

"Where is grandma? Is she home now?"

"No we had to put her in the hospital for a spell. She was just too weak to-

"When was the last time you spoke to her? Oh she's gone mom. I was there. I just, I should have done something. I just couldn't, I didn't know." Sarah began to sob.

"Sarah, what is all of this about, you're scaring me." The phone rang loudly on the table beside them, and both mother and daughter jumped and then stared at each other in silence.

"Hello" her mother said trying to calm herself. She listened for a moment. "Yes, yes. Oh dear God."

It was late Sunday evening; a day of rest for many, and the last chance for Blain Roberts to get drunk in his chair and get ready to face the new week. He was sitting in his lazy boy, and was pissed off because

there was an awards show that was pre-empting the sports highlights. He crushed an empty beer can in his big hairy hand. His son Colin was sitting behind him on the couch. Colin could see the back of his father's head, and could feel his frustration. He thought that if he just sat there then maybe everything would be all right, and sometimes it was. If he said or did the wrong thing, or even did nothing at all, he would get yelled at or even slapped. He could hear his mother from the kitchen making the lunches for the next day. Wanting to stay up and watch some more television, he hoped that his mother would stay in the kitchen for a while longer and that his father would not notice him.

"Mar is there another beer in the fridge" Blain asked, knowing that there wasn't. He turned his head towards the kitchen and noticed that his son was seated cross legged on the couch behind him.

"What in the hell are you still doing up?" Colin looked down at his stocking feet which had some extra slack and hung over his toes. "I thought that you went to bed. Trying to mess with your father eh?" Colin continued to stare at his socks, wishing that he was invisible or already in bed. Blain struggled to get out of his chair. It had been eight beers since he had been up.

"Blain!" Mary Roberts appeared at the door to the kitchen, and saw her husband advancing towards her son. She was the one that usually stopped anything before it got out of hand. Ignoring his wife's call, he stood above his son and began to unbuckle his belt.

"I'll show you to sneak around on me boy. This will be something that you won't soon forget."

"Blain no." Mary ran over and stood between her husband and her son.

"Get out of my way woman." He tried to push her aside, but he wobbled on his feet. His wife stood her ground.

"Come on, he was just sitting there." She turned quickly and motioned to her son to go upstairs. "Come on sweetheart." She put her arms around her husband's trunk and held him. Pushing his wife aside, he noticed that his son was no longer on the couch. Blain's reddened eyes darted around and he saw his son slinking furtively up the stairs.

"Now you're really gonna get it." Colin immediately started to run up the stairs, but stopped at the top. His father was not after him. From his view point, he saw a strange dance played out. His mother had jumped on his back and was beating him over the head.

"So you want to get into the game too eh?" The back of Blain's hand slapped loudly on his wife's face sending her sprawling on the couch. "Come on bitch, you want to play. You and that little bastard son of yours want to fuck with me? Oh I've been waiting for this."

Colin felt the tears well up in his eyes. He could hear his mother's sobs and cries for him to stop. He had seen this before, or at least had heard it from downstairs when he was in bed at night. He wanted to do something, but he was scared. The cries of his mother were loud and he thought frantically about how he could make it stop. He remembered then what his father kept in the night stand beside the bed. He could still hear the sound of the slap of skin on skin as he made his way down the hall to his parents bedroom.

She was restlessly moving her leg up and down in the bed, the feel of the material keeping her rooted in the present. Her head was moving from side to side, as if trying to choose between two different things. She craved the present, to feel the bed all over her, touching her skin in a million points, the weight of her body holding her down. But she slipped under, the bottom melted into nothingness and she spun end over end into black. Then she was looking down at a body. She felt light, like an astronaut in space, bouncing, and just a slight push would propel her forward in any direction she wanted to go. At first, she did not know that the other body was hers. The breath sounded heavy and distant, but kept her connected to a place that she knew. A thin silk thread joined both bodies. She began to rise higher and higher. She could see nothing yet. The sound of her breath receded and was no more, but the thread remained. Something was cushioned beneath her, and carried her on waves, and she could feel it all around her, flowing through her and then beyond. She was fearful of leaving, and she began to sink and quickly fall back to where she had come from. Something reached out to her and she thought a voice, a touch of energy and warmth was with her. *"Do not fear, and you will not fall"*

When the darkness cleared, she was above the city and under clouds that formed and nestled into clusters. She could see the lights of the city flickering coolly below. There were clouds of smoke that would mingle and scatter the other dark clouds. She could feel the presence of many. Voices rolled and rumbled and surged loud and near, then far away, like distant but eternal echoes. She tried to hear just one

voice, and was drawn to the screams that shook and deafened her. She rose higher, and all was still, yet there was sound and other forms of dim light floating listlessly and without direction. She could now see bright silver lines. They were passing by her and struggling to throb and join and cross to form a fantastic web. Electric sparks pulsed and throbbed through them, mingling and surging stronger and struggling to expand. There was an even greater force beyond, another place. *Yes, yes, this is where you must go. Free yourself. Come come.* But she could not. There was something left; a darkness, a cry from the city lights. She could see black clouds that rumbled and forced waves of distortion which were concentrated and shook the air. Something was calling to her.

She was in a house and looking from above. There was static in the air. It shocked and pained her and she saw a woman crying on the couch, and above her sat an egg of light that was a dim yellow. The light was being pulled upward although it fought to stay down. There was another in the room, and above him it was a smoky black with flashes of red. His laughter sounded deep waves of distortion that pulled her downward. The woman was weakening and she could see her face. Her hair was matted red with the steam and heat of her own blood. Words came to her.

"Blain why, why." She wanted to go, but there was more. The house would be empty soon, vacant and lost, the woman a widow and childless. *It is, it simply is.* She struggled and could see the room at another time, when it glowed white, when the energy of birth and life were still fresh and new. It would happen and another was near, one whose light shone bright, but would be no more. She saw the child standing before the father and their figures overlapped and blended together. There was something in the child's hand. She could feel him clutching steel, cold in his hand, a wind of torment drummed loud against her. A shot threatened to crack her fragile mantle and sorrow and sadness were with her.

Sarah awakened with a start and was sitting up in bed. She could still see the images before her, but they were fading. Goose bumps ran up and down her legs, and she could feel the shot that split the air. Swallowing deeply, she turned the radio on beside her. The music sounded tinny, as if it were coming from the bottom of a well. "It was just a dream" she told herself without believing.

Sarah sat at her desk and looked over at a mound of paper work. She had just come back from the court house, and when she had returned, there was more work waiting for her. It was late afternoon now, and all day she had walked around as if in a daze; the memories and the dreams from last night haunted her.

"You look like you had a rough weekend" was the first comment that she heard when she arrived in the morning. Sarah couldn't muster up the energy to tell Patty anything different. She was a party girl, and liked to go out on the weekend. When someone came in looking a certain way on a Monday, she just assumed that they were doing the same kind of things. The morning had been difficult, but she was starting to feel more like herself. On the phone, voices sounded like distant connections.

Bill phoned at three thirty. She forgot that they were supposed to meet for an early supper.

"So are we still on for tonight?" Bill was clearly excited, and Sarah thought that sometimes his energy blinded him.

"Bill, I don't know, I have a lot of work, and I have to stay late, and these papers have to be filed and sent out, and I'm tired and I just don't know if I can make it today."

"Hey, hey what's wrong? Listen, why don't we meet and we can talk about it." She was trying to compose herself. Everything was threatening to burst from her.

"When and where?" she said trying to be funny and short about it, as if she was giving in.

"Say five at Gillan's?" Bill said not missing a beat. "I'll make sure to get our table."

They had gone there when they first started seeing each other. The memories were good; lots of warm words and laughter. The restaurant was located about four blocks from the law office, and she would be able to walk there after work, then Bill would give her a ride home. He always did, and with Bill not much was left up to the imagination. The thought of routine and of places that she'd already been gave her a snatch of comfort.

He was waiting outside the bar for her, and rushed up once he spotted her. She could see that he was excited. They exchanged a few words, and he led her into the bar. He started talking excitedly, detailing his day. His words were devoid of meaning, and were more like sounds, and she responded to them automatically, nodding, feigning a smile when necessary. The bar was crowded and noisy. She could hear

it all: cutlery hitting plates, conversations, food being pulverized between teeth. She reached out to put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself, but it seemed a great distance, like fingers trying to find a ledge on a smooth cliff.

"Here we are. Sit down Sarah." His initial excitement and chatter had faded, and he could see that something was wrong.

"Are you sick? We could go now. If you want I'll take you home."

"No, no, I'm just very tired. I haven't been sleeping well, and I thought that I might be coming down with something. I'll order some soup. It will probably make me feel better."

Bill looked at her and smiled thinly. He started looking around for a waiter, thinking that she could use a drink of water. Sarah also looked around the room. She felt flushed and brought her hand up to her face. The bar was noisy, and she felt like she was a ghost, the sounds rushing towards and then passing through her.

The waiter brought her some water. Sarah had not even looked at the menu, and Bill ordered for her.

"Can you please tell me what's the matter? You know you don't give me a lot of credit. I think that I know you better than that. Something is bothering you. I can see it in your eyes."

She tried to overtake her mind with words:

"It's all so crazy Bill. I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know where to start."

"Start at the beginning" he said seriously.

"It started a couple of weeks ago. I was having these dreams, but they didn't feel like dreams. Like I was awake and I was seeing and feeling things. You know how in your dreams, even though they may be abstract or disjointed they still are about you, or some situation that you can make some sense out of. These dreams were about other people, and I was drawn to them. Something isn't right. I don't know if I'm losing my mind or am deluded." It was the first time that she had talked about any of this, and she wanted to tell him everything. About her grandmother, everything.

"Take it easy Sarah. I don't think you're crazy. You may be going through a tough time, maybe you're overworked, or coming down with something. Take your time, and tell me all about it."

She looked deep into him and saw that he cared, but did not believe. The words were so close to the surface and betrayed her by spilling from her mouth.

"I have been thinking so much lately, and I can't seem to control it. Last night it was the most powerful. I was out over in the city, high up, and I could see things that I can't even explain. Like I was a part of everything and everything was me. I could feel energy and motion, and there was no time. All the cycles, life and power and the force that we yearn for, and then I was drawn to this house-" She stopped and stifled back a sob that threatened to break and take a hold of her.

"It was horrible, I saw a family, a boy and his father and mother. The father was beating her, and I could see death in their house. The boy had a gun, and there was a struggle. There was nothing that I could do, nothing." Bill was nodding his head and had brought his hand up to his mouth.

"What is it?"

"There was a story in the news today about a boy killed by his father." Sarah felt herself recoiling, and the blackness tried to force its way in. She did not have to listen to the details he was giving, for she knew already.

"He was an abusive husband. Shot them both and then turned the gun on himself. The boy was killed instantly. The woman was shot in the back, and it's a miracle that she wasn't killed." She stood up to leave. She needed to be outside. No sooner was she standing, than she felt something give inside her. Bill had stood up with her, and luckily caught her before she hit the floor.

Bill acted quickly after Sarah fainted. The waiter rushed over immediately and they put her back in her chair while Bill held her head so that it would not fall back. The restaurant was now electrified as the news of her collapse spread. Meals were momentarily forgotten. The waiter asked if he should call an ambulance, but after they got her back in the chair she began to revive. She blinked her eyes a couple of times and stared vacantly at Bill.

"Are you all right? Do you want me to take you to the hospital?" She roused dreamily and looked over at him through half opened eyes.

"Where am I?" She looked around trying to orientate herself.

"You're at the restaurant. You sure that you're fine? We could call an ambulance." She opened her mouth to speak again, and looked around her.

"Please just take me home."

They were silent in the car and Sarah stared out the window. At last the silence was too much for him:

"Maybe you heard the news on the radio before you went to bed. Or saw it on the late news. You wake up to the radio in the morning right, so maybe you heard about it when you were waking up and so you thought that you dreamt it."

Bill went on trying to rationalize the whole thing. She knew now, and there was nothing that he or anyone else could do about it. He kept talking though, and stared straight ahead at the road. He did not want to look at her because she looked so strange, and there was something in her eyes that he had never seen before.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. When they were finally parked in front of her apartment building, he turned to her and said:

"Do you want me to come in for awhile?"

"No, no I'm fine." Her voice was sleepy and her comments did not reassure him. "I think I just need some rest. I'm going to go right to bed and see how I feel in the morning. If I don't feel any better, I'll make an appointment to see the doctor or something." Bill leaned over and put his hand on her shoulder.

"If there is anything I can do." She forced a tired smile. *There is nothing you or anyone can do.* She reached out for the door handle.

"Thank you Bill. Sorry for ruining our dinner."

"Don't say that. I don't care about dinner, I care about you. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"No, don't worry about me."

She did not go right to bed. All the lights in her apartment were turned on to thwart the darkness. She waited for the late news, and watched as her sentence was issued along with the widow's. *Did I bring evil upon the widow? The slaying of the son.*

After the news, she started busying herself. She cleaned the apartment by dusting tables, folding blankets and vacuuming every room. When she was finished all her work, she put on a pot of coffee and sat down and watched the late movie. It was an old black and white comedy and it pacified her and took her into the wee hours of the morning until her eyes and body begged for sleep. At seven, she called the office and said she would not be coming in to work. When she finally did permit herself to lie down, the sun was up and the room was flooded with light. She fell immediately into dark and dreamless sleep.

For the next two days, she did not leave her apartment. For hours she would sit in front of the window and look out over the park. Everyday a group of young mothers would bring their children and let them play on the swings. They would sit on the benches and watch their children playing. She would try to imagine the dialogue. The soap operas on television provided a similar distraction, except that the dialogue was filled in. She listened and hung on to every word. Bill called her at least three times a day to find out how she was doing. He never mentioned the episode at the restaurant, and repeatedly asked if there was anything she needed. Her boss from the office called after the second day and inquired whether if her ailment was serious. Sarah said she thought that she had a virus, and was going to sit it out.

"Maybe you should go and see a doctor" she suggested.

For the first couple of days, she just tried to keep herself in control and not let her mind wander. She was in the present and concentrated so that she could feel everything around her. Every action was weighed and measured. When she did the dishes, she focused on her hands and the feel of the warm water and smooth porcelain, squeaky clean, with the faint smell of lemon. She only needed four or five hours of sleep, and never went to bed unless she could barely keep her heavy lids open.

Thursday afternoon she phoned the office to say she would be in Friday. Bill called and said that she was sounding much better. She put out her clothes for the morning and organized her briefcase. When she finally got into bed, she looked around the room, for now she slept with the lights on. The memories of her dream had faded; just like the television shows and the people in the park.

The birds sang lightly in the trees as Sarah made her way to the bus stop. The sun was shining brightly and she could feel it, warm and inviting, on her skin. There was a light breeze blowing. It gently ruffled

her hair and made her think of times when she was sick and her mother would gently caress and soothe her. She felt particularly alive after three days in the artificial light of her apartment. *Summer will be here soon* she thought and smiled inwardly. She glanced down at her watch and noticed that she was early. *Early bird.*

The bus rolled to a stop beside her and the air brakes swished and the engine groaned. The doors opened and the driver smiled at her. She smiled back, and moved past him and took up her regular seat. The bus was half full because Sarah lived outside the downtown at the beginning of the route. She looked around at the blank morning faces. The whirl of the engine steadied her as she looked out the window. Things passed her by: Open until nine. Last day. Coffee and donut \$1.39. Sale: Goose down duvets.

A man came and sat down in the seat in front of her. She had seen him before. He was retarded, and he had that look about him. He was short and squat, with his eyes close together and a full face. He had spoken to her in the past.

"I petted a dog today before i got on the bus." His eyes were dark, but clear and uncluttered. He did not turn to her, but shifted uncomfortably in his seat. She stared at the back of his head. It was matted, and a spike of hair stuck up from his crown.

The bus began to fill as they got closer and closer to the downtown core. Sarah looked around and noticed that there were only a few seats left, and people were now standing in the aisle. The man in front of her turned sideways so that he could look at the people. He began mumbling to himself and turned to Sarah.

"I'm working now. I'm going to work, that's where I work, downtown at the shop. They say I'm a good worker." Sarah smiled and nodded. It was not right to think of them as children. She guessed that he was in his mid-twenties, and knew that they could tell when they were being patronized. "Are you going to work too?" he asked after he had taken a few more looks around the bus.

"Yes I am" Sarah responded. He stirred something deep within her. He had full lips, but they were chaffed and chapped and his bottom lip was split wide open. She could feel it tight and sore when he talked. She reached out to him. A soft caress, her heart catching up and beating along with his. Her hand came up and took hold of the necklace. It was warm. She closed her eyes. She wanted to catch herself

because she was scared. The sounds of the engine and the people on the bus sounded at the back of her mind. He was walking off the bus, downtown, and it was this day for he was wearing what he was wearing now and his hair stuck up in the back. Startled, she opened her eyes and let go of the crystal. He was still mumbling to himself, unaware.

The bus finally arrived downtown and came to a halt. People started to file off and she waited with him. His hands were held together, as if in prayer. She took deep breaths, steadying herself. *There is time* she thought, but she could not be with him always.

She followed him out onto the busy sidewalk where people were herded along by the flow. He walked out in front of the bus, and she reached out and touched him on the shoulder. He turned, and at that moment another bus sped by, catching the end of his coat and flapping it in its wake. She sighed and felt something click inside her head.

"What is your name?" she asked, trying to control the beating of her heart and her desire to scream.

"My name is Elijah. I have to go now." Before he turned to go, he smiled as big and bright as the first day of summer.

VITA AUCTORIS

Paul David Bellmore was born and raised in Sudbury, Ontario with his parents Leonard and Ann Marie and his brother Robert. He graduated from Lasalle Secondary School in 1990. From there, he went on to Laurentian University where he obtained an Honours B.A. in English. He is currently a candidate for a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in the summer of 1996.