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Inside the Village
A Collection of Stories

By Kimberly Alexander

A Creative Writing Project Submitted to
the College of Graduate Studies and Research
through English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, ON, Canada
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Canada

*To my husband,
Brett Weatherman
and
To my mother,
Carla Alexander*

Acknowledgments

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What May

Mark Beauman's wife sits on the wooden chair in the corner of their partially finished living room nursing the baby. She looks like a chimp, Mark thinks. She looks like a mother chimp breastfeeding its young.

The baby bears a strong resemblance to its mother and it too will grow up to look like a member of the ape family. How unfortunate, he thinks. How unfortunate to have to grow up into those looks. He knows that it is a mean thought and that he should take it back, but he can't. Lately that's all he seems to think. Mean thoughts. Hateful thoughts. He does not care. Besides, he's not completely sure that the baby is his.

He met the baby's mother, Holly, at a party when they should have been in high school. At the time, they were recent dropouts--she to have her first child at seventeen (one that Mark knows for certain does not belong to him because he met its mother after its birth) and Mark, because he just didn't get school. He joined his father's logging company and has been there ever since.

He married Holly because it seemed like the appropriate thing to do--not because he loved her but because it was the only thing left for him to do. It was expected. He adopted her son, let him call him "Dad" and moved them all into the house he had built (on the lakefront property given to him by his father) in the small rural village in Northern Ontario. Mark had lived in these parts all of his life--he grew up here, knew the village and its people, and had decided at a young age that it was the perfect place to eventually settle down and raise a family. Holly was from the nearest town (some fifty kilometres away), and though she hated the village for its lack of excitement, she had accepted Mark's proposal and the offer of a home because she knew that it was the best chance she would ever get--considering she was a young, unwed mother, with no real means of supporting herself to get ahead besides her job at the town library (which she was never

really that fond of because shelving books made her feel as though she were going cross eyed, in addition to making her feet hurt).

The house was not quite finished. It still needed paint, the cupboards sanded and varnished, and tile in the bathroom. Mark will get around to it someday, he just doesn't know when. He will also finish the furnishings very soon because he needs to shut Holly up. She really gets on his nerves. More now than Mark had ever thought possible. It is not Mark's fault. It is not Holly's fault either. It is the fault of Katie, Mark's very first girlfriend; the first girl he ever had sex with; the first girl he ever loved; and most recently, the first girl who ever broke his heart.

Mark thinks of Katie as he watches his wife burp the baby. He lights a cigarette and she gets up from the chair. She gives him a dirty look as she walks over to the bedroom. He knows she is thinking of second hand smoke. She does not know he is thinking about Katie. Mark doesn't think he ever told Holly about her.

Holly slams the bedroom door. Mark exhales the smoke. He hears the baby screech. To Mark, it sounds like a monkey.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

"Can I come?"

"Sure!"

That was their very first conversation. Mark met Katie at the campground up the highway from where he now lives. It had been summer vacation for both of them. He was camping with his older brothers and some friends at the time. Mark was eighteen years old. Katie was a year older.

It was the second night of their stay at the campground that Mark met Katie. She was walking by their campsite with her sister and a friend. The five of them, Mark, his brothers Peter and Joe, and their friends Mike and Ray, had made a bet with one another as to who would be the bravest to approach the three voices in the dark. Mark won. He never could pass up a bet.

He walked in stride with the three girls for a while, making small talk, before Katie shone her camping light in his face. "Look! He's just a baby!" she laughed.

Mark was embarrassed. He laughed too.

"How old did you say you were?"

"I didn't." She wouldn't pull the light away from his face. He would later learn that she liked to embarrass people.

"Well, you look too young for me, baby face!"

"What do you consider too young?"

"Anything younger than seventeen."

"You're pretty close."

"Don't want people to think I'm a cradle robber."

"Is that an invitation?" Always best to resort to the familiar.

"No." She quickened her pace, to what looked like a trot, leaving him behind with the two other girls.

"You're not the only one, don't feel bad," the youngest, her sister, told him.

"I don't!"

"That's good. Dad says she's too fiery to ever get a man. Mummy says she's just too bold. Poor Katie." The speech ended on a note of sympathy. Mark felt none, just the rise of a challenge.

"See you later," he told them, and ran to catch up with the girl.

Holly did not come back from the bedroom. She must have fallen asleep with the baby, Mark thinks as he gets up from his chair to get a beer. He twists the cap off the bottle and throws it in the sink. He decides to switch his position in the room and sit on the couch. This is usually Holly's spot. He is glad she has not come out from the bedroom. They would only sit in silence or bicker. They don't fight, they bicker or give each other dirty looks. It's not too bad when the kids are around. The boys force civility out of each of them. They are different people then, not husband and wife but mother and father. Suitable roles for people of their lifestyle. Many times, Mark tries to picture Katie as the mother of their boys but can't. It makes him sad, but Katie isn't the mothering type; or, maybe it is best that Mark can't picture her that way. Katie always had other things in mind.

"I'm going to see the world," was what she had told him that day. They had just finished having sex for the sixth time (it was the sixth time in *Mark's* life. He didn't know what the number ranked for Katie. She never told him). Mark believed that sex was the clincher. They had only been together seven months.

"I'll be leaving next spring."

At first, Mark hadn't taken her seriously. Katie was full of talk about a lot of things, and they were *"doing it"*. She would never leave him. Looking back, Mark thinks of himself as a naive virgin (though it *was* his sixth time). He is not bitter with Katie because of this; however, he is bitter with himself. Katie always seemed more *"together"* when it came to the sexual aspect of things. This didn't matter to Mark though. Katie could have been the worst lover he ever had (she was the best, by the way; however his only other comparison is Holly). None of this mattered. He loved Katie. Plain and simple.

Katie always seemed to be full of big plans. When he had first met her, she had been studying classical guitar.

"I'm going to be a musician. I want to tour the world. I will study at the most famous conservatories."

That dream ended within the month. She then discovered *Buddhism*.

"I am studying to be a Buddhist."

This ended a few weeks later with, *"I am going to feed starving children in third world countries."*

He always thought she would change her mind, and most times she did. None of these dreams lasted longer than a few months. So, when Katie announced her plans to travel the world, four weeks after they had consummated their relationship, Mark humoured her but didn't pay much attention.

Deep down, he knew that Katie wasn't the type to settle down for long. She had too much fire. Everyone knew it. *"She's out of your league,"* his brother told him. Mark knew that it was true. She was. Maybe, in the back of his mind, he knew that she would never change. *Could* never change. It wasn't in her nature.

They were both stubborn. That was as far as their similarities went. It was true, both liked to have fun, but even *that* was different. Katie's idea of fun was the adventurous kind. The risky kind. She had once tried to convince him to skip work to travel ten hours further north to get a good glimpse of the northern lights that night. She bugged. He refused. She went anyway--alone on a narrow stretch of sparsely populated highway. He hadn't known of her departure until her return. Thought she was just ignoring him, until she showed up at his job site two days later with a postcard and a travel coffee mug. When he got angry, she told him he was a baby. He was boring. .

Mark's idea of fun, on the other hand, involved much less risk and revolved around more practical terms. He went to work, made lots of money. His fun was what he had to look forward to--with the occasional Friday night drinking with the boys. True, he was young at the time. He wasn't really thinking about that. He was thinking about his future, his own world of fun. He was about to begin clearing that piece of land outside

town. He would build a house. He would build Katie a house. A house with lots of rooms, lots of paintings, lots of colour. All things she loved. He would build a room just for her books. Her *library*, they would call it. She would have to do nothing but read all day. Everything would be done for her. She could read and play with their children.

This was what Mark enjoyed the most. Dreaming about them. Even better, he loved to tell her about it--what his plans were, how things would be. She didn't take him seriously. He was unaware of this at the time. She would laugh at all the stories he would tell her about the things they'd do. He would draw her sketches. Tell her about her special room. She laughed hardest at this, "*Do you really think I would enjoy sitting around reading all day and nothing else? No job? No social life? No nothing but wall to wall books? You're nuts.*"

Okay, maybe the library thing was a bit much, but he always thought she wanted it (or would want it) that way too--that they *both* wanted it to be this way. He loved Katie. He would have done anything for her. He would *do* anything for her. Deep down, maybe he knew their lives were heading in opposite directions but he wanted to hold on to it as long as he could. He never thought things would unravel so quickly. He thought they had a year at least...

Mark flicks the cap of his third beer into the sink and resettles himself on the couch. The hum of the TV numbs his brain to the present, leaving only his past. The soft breathing of his wife and baby through the baby monitor are the only reminders of his future.

Eleven months and four days after their relationship began, and two days after she graduated from high school, Katie bought a plane ticket to South America. It was a present from her parents for graduation.

"I want to see what it's like...how other people live. What they do, how they pass the time. I want to see everything. I figure, South America is the best place to start, don't you think?"

"I guess."

She never mentioned their relationship and what would happen to them. At first, Mark assumed that it was because nothing would happen to them. They would keep it alive through correspondence and the occasional long distance phone call. Mark had even considered purchasing a computer so they could talk over e-mail. He assumed they must have computers where she was going. Everyone did, and it would be the closest thing they would get to a real conversation. He even thought about the whole sex issue, and had decided that if he had lived without it for eighteen years before, he could remain celibate until Katie's return. The months passed, but by the time Katie was packing to leave, Mark realized that she had left no room for him. She never addressed the subject. Never offered any hope. Just talked about the plans she had, the people she'd meet.. She did not want any excess baggage.

Mark knew that Katie was aware of the way he had felt. She just didn't *do* anything about it. Why should she, Mark thought, she would be leaving soon. She didn't have to deal with it. He knew she could tell how he felt by the way he watched her pack, their eyes catching one another momentarily before she turned her back to place another item in her bag.

She had asked him to see her off at the airport, and the fool that he was agreed. He didn't say much on the ride out, just listened to her sing along happily with the songs on the radio, occasionally cutting herself off to voice her expectations of the trip.

Mark stood in line with her upon their arrival, waiting for her to check her luggage. Katie chattered the whole time--about the weather, the plane ride, her luggage--anything to ward off that inevitable uncomfortable silence. Mark wasn't listening. They were just a string of words running together. Running from him. It wasn't until then, as she was babbling on and on in that airport avoiding Mark's eyes and pretending she didn't notice his lack of enthusiasm or speech, that Mark confirmed to himself that she wasn't coming back to him. The funny thing was, he wasn't angry with her. Just empty.

The plane was loading. Katie was in the middle of the line with Mark beside her. He knew that he should say something, but all he could get out by the time they neared the front of the line was, "Have a safe trip."

Katie had forced a laugh and put down her bag. "Take care of yourself," she told him, then threw herself into his arms in classic Katie-like style. He held her tight, wanting to remember the way she had felt.

"Bye."

She picked up her bag, and for the first time in days looked him in the eye when she spoke, "We want different things."

Mark was sure he saw a flash of sadness before she turned to board the plane, but he wasn't quite sure.

Mark didn't try to contact Katie like he thought he would. Instead, he made his father schedule him for as many hours of overtime as he could, and filled in his weekends with parties and lots of beer.

It was two years later, at one of these parties, that he met Holly. It was two years later, the very night that he met Holly, that Mark decided that he must *do* something with his life. This realization, due to Mark's high intoxication factor, did not quite hit him until he actually *saw* Holly. There was a slight resemblance between the two girls, Mark

noticed, as he observed Holly slumped against the wall in an almost stupor, her head drooping slightly as she tried desperately to follow a friend's conversation.

Maybe it was because he was so drunk that he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was shorter than Katie, much shorter. Katie had been so tall that he almost had to stand on his toes to kiss her. He towered over Holly. She actually made *him* look tall. Almost everything about Holly was different. Maybe that's what he was looking for. Katie's face was more of an oval shape, whereas Holly's was rounded--kind of like an apple. Katie had high cheekbones that gave her face a cat-like resemblance, and very tiny ears. These same two features on Holly were merely average. Nothing unique or special about them. The only two similarities between the two was the colour of hair (Holly's was almost black like Katie's, but shorter in style) and eyes. It was the first thing he noticed. Holly's eyes lack something--that look Katie got when she was excited, or happy, even angry. It was that quick flash which had exhilarated Mark. That flash had contained *life*--something more than what was just sitting before him. It could make him catch his breath or cringe. Katie was *something*, telling the world that she was ready .

Holly's eyes are the same shape and colour, but different. However, Mark knows that it is as close as he can get. As close as he *wants* to get. At twenty-two, Mark thinks Holly is a *blah* kind of housewife, going through the motions of an older woman's life. She has grown fat in motherhood and is no comparison to the slender, dark beauty of her unknown rival. At least she won't leave, Mark thinks. She is not that type. Mark knows that the only thing Holly ever wanted out of life was to settle down, or find someone to support her and her son. She doesn't need to go anywhere. She doesn't need to see the world. She doesn't need a career. She just needs someone whose bank account she can drain and whose organ will procreate. True, she lacks the spunk which Katie possessed, and she doesn't have that passion for life and everything in it, but she is his. She will always stay, and no matter how miserable she can make him, she will not leave Mark all alone.

Mark would never say he is happy with his wife, or ever was happy with her, but it was how he had wanted to live his life, how he had outlined the plans. Holly fits them just fine. Not perfectly, but enough to fill that missing link. Well, Mark thinks as he swallows his last mouthful of beer and heads towards the fridge for another, it was enough until Katie reappeared.

It happened two days ago. Mark had taken Holly into town so she could get some shopping done. They went every Tuesday, leaving the kids with his mother. What usually happened was Mark would drop Holly off at the mall, or whichever shopping centre she chose, and would pick her up in two to three hours (depending on how much she needed to get done). He would give her money (for groceries and stuff for the kids), making sure to slip in an extra fifty dollars just for her so she wouldn't bitch later on. He prided himself on this. Mark always made sure to cover all of his bases.

For those two or three hours, Mark was on his own. Relief and excitement seared through his body as soon as she slammed shut the door of his pick-up. Freedom--well, sort of. He could go wherever he wanted, do anything he wanted for a whole afternoon--no one complaining or staring at him miserably from across the room. He would play the truck stereo loud and lose himself for a while.

Mark usually didn't do too much on these afternoons. He didn't really have anyplace to go now that he was married. Most of his friends had abandoned him a long time ago for what Holly would "let" and wouldn't "let" him do. So, basically, he was on his own. Not that he minded too much. It allowed him more freedom. Sometimes Mark would head over to *Hot Tomatoes Strip Club* to watch the girls dance. He always sat in the back, in the corner with the most shadows. He was afraid that someone he once knew might see him there. He wasn't really a pervert, just a married man trying to re-live something he had missed out on.

It wasn't as if the dancers were all that great anyhow, with their big hair and fake breasts. He would never have considered doing anything besides watching from his

darkened corner. Whenever one looked as though she might approach, he hung his head close to his beer trying to give the impression he was already too drunk. Mark *did* get a kick out of the old guys who insisted on sitting in the first row, their eyes dangling from their sockets giving away the fact that they had never seen breasts like that, or that it had been a *really* long time. Many times he had to bite his lip to keep himself from laughing at the professionalism of these men as they slipped a twenty or fifty down a girl's g-string for the pleasure of a lap dance. The thought of these women actually touching him made Mark's stomach turn. He only liked to watch.

Holly would never approve of this behaviour. He has never really told her the truth. She thinks he sits at the harbour sipping coffee and watching the boats go by. Mark has never lied to her about his whereabouts. For some reason, she *assumes* this is what he does. Mark just hasn't bothered to correct her. Maybe she thinks he secretly wishes to jump aboard one of those boats and sail away. Far away from her. Who knows? Truth is, he has never really given much thought to leaving her. He has grown almost comfortable in his misery.

Even when Mark picks his wife up reeking of stale beer and cigarettes, she does not say much. The most he's ever got from her as far as a reprimand is, "You stink. Better take a shower when you get home." She has never really had the chance to accuse him of anything. He hopes it stays that way--or *hoped*.

After spending his afternoon enjoying his freedom and killing some time, Mark is almost *ready* to pick up his wife. He finds that after a few hours of solitude he begins to think too much. So, by the time his wife loads her packages into the back of the truck and slides into the seat beside him almost *smiling*, Mark is ready to be married again. This is celebrated by the he two of them picking up two coffees to go from the last donut shop at the edge of town, sealing the fate to another week of silent misery.

On this particular afternoon Mark had decided against *Hot Tomatoes*. He was hungry and there was a good game on. So, Mark was on his way to *Yen's Diner* to watch the game on the overhead TV and sip coffee and eat some of the best chicken balls in the world. He enjoyed the near silence of the place, the only thing which fills the air being the commentators voice coming from the TV and the low chatter of Mr. and Mrs. Yen's broken English. Better than trying to watch a game with a nagging wife and screaming babies, Mark thinks.

Yen's is the only place in the world (Mark presumes) where you can get an entire Chinese entree (chicken balls, egg roll, and rice) for \$3.95. Mrs. Yen had not changed the menu (prices included) for ten years. This was fine by Mark, especially in the early years when it had been his and Katie's "place". They both had had an obsession for chicken balls and frequented the place on a more than regular basis.

Katie had liked the mural of China painted on the wall beside their booth. While they waited for their order, she would point out all of the places she would someday go and fantasize about the things she'd see.

"Maybe I'll get to go to one of those carnivals. You know, the ones where the people dance along the streets in papier mache masks? Where they line up and wave that silk oriental dragon above their heads?"

"How do you know that?"

"I watched their New Year's celebration on TV last year."

"Oh." Mark didn't really care about China and what went on there. He only liked the chicken balls.

By the time Mrs. Yen placed the plates in front of them and refilled their water glasses, Katie would be all talked out. The one time she actually stopped talking was when she was eating. Katie loved good food. Especially Yen's.

Mark had taken Holly to Yen's a few times when they first started dating. He had stopped thinking of it as his and Katie's place after Katie had left. It was just his place now. the place that served the best (and cheapest) chicken balls in town. Holly wasn't as crazy about the chicken balls as Katie had been. She preferred the beef chop suey (which cost a dollar more). He never asked her why she didn't try the chicken balls. Eventually, he started leaving her behind. It bothered him not to be able to talk about the art of the chicken ball with his eating partner and how they had lucked out with the place. So, whenever he could (usually when Holly was doing her shopping) he'd stop by the place and eat alone. He often wondered if Katie ever thought about those chicken balls at Yen's. He wondered if she ever made it to China.

The oriental door chimes of Yen's Diner signaled Mark's entrance. The place had been kept the same by the Yens over the past five years. It never changed. Mark liked that. The only difference was that the map of China had begun to fade and peel in spots, leaving jagged patches of yellowed wall where the Himalayas and Beijing had once been.

Mark nodded his hellos to Mrs. Yen as he slid into his booth. He was happy to find that it was vacant. It usually was. There weren't too many who now frequented the place besides the regulars and the odd woman sipping coffee as she waited for her appointment at the salon next door. Sometimes, in the summer, you would come across a few tourists sampling the chicken sui guy or sweet and sour pork for \$4.95. The diner was in the centre of the town's small downtown area. The shopping (according to Katie) was fairly decent considering the town's size, and there weren't a lot of options for a quick lunch besides the food court at the mall. The food court was most popular with the town's local citizens, especially those hurriedly doing their Saturday shopping.

Mark used to wonder how the Yens stayed in business with such a small clientele; however, he had since learned that they were almost ready to retire.

“Something to pass the time,” he had overheard Mr. Yen tell a retired officer as he refilled his coffee. The officer had agreed.

Mark took off his coat and settled himself comfortably in his booth. He was situated perfectly in front of the television. The game was nearing the end of the first period. Mark smiled. The perfect way to spend an afternoon.

Mr. Yen had come out from the back room, switching places with his wife, and was headed towards him with a pot of coffee. Mark turned his empty cup over, taking his eyes away from the TV. It was a commercial anyhow.

“Hello,” he filled Mark’s cup.

“Hello.”

“Nice day.” Mr. Yen had given up asking about Katie long ago. Actually, he had stopped the day Mark entered the diner with Holly for the first time.

“Not bad. At least it’s not snowing.”

“Yes. Maybe we’ll get no more snow. Tomorrow is April first.”

“Maybe. You never know. It *is* April Fool’s Day. Anything’s possible.”

“Yes. Chicken ball dinner?”

“Yep, drowned in sauce.”

“Okay,” the old man smiled and left the table.

The game was again in progress. Mark sipped his coffee, squinting at the screen. The set was almost too small for the diner. Mark could barely see the puck from where he was sitting--the price he had to pay for growing so attached to the cracked naugahyde of the booth, but he would never consider switching his seat. It was the closest thing he had to home--or what he wanted to feel like home.

Mark had grown so absorbed in his squinting that he was unaware of what was going on around him. He did not notice the comings and goings of the diner, nor the

appearance and reappearance of the delivery driver. He did not notice Mrs. Yen emerge from the back room now crawling along the floor beside the counter trying to coax a grandson out of a “secret hiding place”. He did not notice the girl enter the diner with the medium sized green back-pack that he had bought her slung over her right shoulder, tugging at a somewhat fitted white T-shirt. He did not notice this girl (who was also squinting) standing in the entrance of Yen’s Diner checking out the atmosphere, and he certainly did not notice her slight, kind smile rest upon his profile as she paced her steps across the faded tiles towards him.

It was the beginning of the second period. Mark’s team was up by one goal. It was getting too intense. The forward (Mark’s favourite) had just been replaced with someone who Mark considered to possess only half the talent as that of the first line. The puck was in their corner.

“Get it out,” he muttered, jaw clenched. *Shit*. The other team had taken control.

“Hi.” Someone had slid into the opposite side of the booth.

He knew the voice.

“Long time no see, eh?” She ran a hand through her now short hair.

Katie. Mark could feel his eyes growing in their sockets. He wanted to throw up. No, he wanted to throw his arms around her and kiss her. He wanted to slap her. He felt paralyzed, unable to move or speak, just stare mutely--stupidly--across the table at the lost love of his life. The commentator’s voice blared from the TV. *Shit*. They scored.

Mrs. Yen was at the table before Mark could think of something to say. She placed his chicken balls in front of him. The sight of the lumpy round batter smothered with orange sticky sauce made his stomach turn. He couldn’t stand the sight of them.

“I have not seen you in a while,” Mrs. Yen told Katie.

Katie smiled, “I’ve been away.”

“Oh.”

“...but I’m back.”

Mark thought he saw her sneak a look at him, but he wasn’t quite sure. How could she sit there so calmly?

“Coffee?”

“Just ice water, please.”

“Okay.”

“And a chicken ball platter. I’m starving.”

Mrs. Yen nodded and left the table. Mark’s eyes pleaded with her back not to leave them alone.

Katie sat smiling at him, “Aren’t you going to say something, Mark?”

“Oh, yeah. You just surprised me is all.” *What the hell are you doing here? How did you find me? Do you still love me? Do you know I think about you daily? That I’m obsessed with you?*

She laughed and leaned forward on her elbows, “Did ya miss me?”

“Huh?” *For Christ’s sake. What kind of question was that?* His eyes had nervously squinted towards the game. A commercial.

“So, whatchya been doing? Tell me everything?” She leaned in closer. Mark could smell something that resembled perfume hovering around her. It reminded him of incense.

“Oh, you know. Same old stuff.” Mark tried to casually sip from his mug. He pondered his answer after he had given it, wishing he could have taken it back. What was he supposed to say? *Well, since you fucking abandoned me at the airport four years ago I found someone to keep my mind off you, married her, had some kids, mourned you daily...* Not much else had changed in his life. Right then, the thought of telling her the whole truth made him sick. He decided to switch the conversation back to her, “When did you get back?”

“From South America?”

“Well, yeah.” What else would he have been talking about? Mark tried not to look at her. Instead, he attempted to concentrate on the third period of the game. He wanted her to believe that he was only half interested in her life, but couldn’t resist stealing the occasional peek at her from the corner of his eye. *Dammit*. She *did* look good. Unchanged except for the large hoop earrings that swung from her lobes, and that strange perfume/incense. He wondered if she looked the same naked now as she had then, if she still possessed that sly, lean body that had driven him wild, or if that had changed as well (though if his memory served him correctly, improvement to this was impossible). Her hair was shorter, and ironically, cut in a style similar to Holly’s. But her eyes were the same--still flashing, edging him towards the challenge, then defeat.

“...never actually came *back* from South America,” she was saying.

Okay. Who Am I fooling? He turned to face her, half genuinely smiling. He really *did* want to hear about her--where she’d been, the places she’d seen. He didn’t know if it was out of curiosity or for the sake of self torture.

“I met up with some people over in Mexico about two years ago. They were going to Brazil to hook up with *Amnesty International* and I went along with them,” Katie paused as Mrs. Yen placed her lunch on the table, “Thank you.” She waited for the woman to leave before she continued, “Anyhow, there are these women (in Brazil) who work in commercial greenhouses, and the pesticides used on the plants are killing them. They are not allowed to leave the building when the plants are being sprayed. They have to keep right on working, their lungs filling with toxins the whole time.” Her voice was shaking by then, the old fire flashing in her eyes.

Katie took a deep breath and picked up her fork. Mark didn’t know how to respond, but it didn’t matter, after her first bite, she continued, “Holy shit! I forgot how good these things were!...Anyway,” she continued, cutting up the rest of the chicken balls, “I stayed there for a while and joined the protest. Things were going pretty well. We were starting to get recognition, but it wasn’t enough for me, ya know?”

She looked at Mark for a reaction. He nodded on cue.

“So, I decided to come back here and go to school so I could help out even more. I’m going to double major in environmental studies and political science at the university. I start part-time in the summer.”

By now, Mark had pushed his plate aside. He couldn’t stand to look at it any longer. Katie was *back*. She was back *to stay*--at least for a while.

“Enough on that,” she sipped her water, “What’s new with you?--and don’t say nothing, Mark. I haven’t seen you in four years.”

Mark knew that this was his chance. He could tell her about Holly, about the house he built her, about the kids. He *should* tell her. “Well, I built the house.”

“You did?” she seemed surprised. It bothered Mark. Didn’t she think he’d go on with his plans? Was she so full of herself that *everyone’s* life had to revolve around her?

“Yeah.” His eyes found their way to the TV screen. The game was just as intense.

“C’mon, Mark. That’s it?”

He felt small. He wanted to yell, *Actually no, that’s not it. I’m fucking married and miserable!* No. It was probably what she wanted to hear--that his life plan had failed without her. That he was stuck with what he had once thought to be second best but had turned into complete horror.

“Yep. That’s about it.” His eyes darted towards the TV again, trying not to make direct contact with hers, “Same old Mark,” he told her, laughing almost sarcastically and covering his wedding ring over with his thumb. He knew that Katie, being Katie, had probably noticed the plain gold band on his finger. It was unmistakable. Katie, being Katie, would generally comment on such an item. He had been waiting, holding his breath for her to reveal his lie. She didn’t. She just let him sit there in silent misery, waiting for his life to unravel.

“What about the adventure?” She interrupted his thoughts. The phrase hung in the air, each word clinging to something from a long time ago. He took a sip of his cooling coffee before he answered, half thinking, half not.

“That was you.” He didn’t look at her again, just threw his money down on the table to cover their meals (enough for hers too, but he didn’t know why) and slid out of the booth. “See ya, Katie.”

“You better believe it,” she told him, the old challenge present in her voice.

Mark almost stopped to turn around. He could feel his guard being stripped away by the old feelings. He couldn’t help it. He wanted to run back to her and slide into the booth beside her. He wanted to tell her everything. He wanted to beg her for another chance. Maybe it was what she was waiting for. His stomach had that falling off the cliff feeling again--the same feeling he got the day he met her, the same feeling he had the day she left. He almost turned around, but didn’t. He walked out of Yen’s Diner as casually as he had entered. Behind him, the commentator’s voice announced the final score. His team had lost.

Now, two days later, Mark comes to a realization--a moment of epiphany. He thinks about Katie--about the relationship they had together, the calmness about her after they had sex, about their encounter at Yen’s, about the future they could have possibly had. He thinks about Holly and how, after seeing Katie, he wanted to leave her at the mall, standing outside the glass doors with seven bags of groceries and a new pair of sunglasses. He didn’t speak to her all the way home, just listened to her complain about this and that, about the kids, the house, the furniture she had looked at in the department store of the mall that he had promised to by her two years ago. He passed right by the donut shop that day, not wanting to seal the fate of another week of torture with their

customary leaving-town coffee. They had nothing to seal. The revelation that was hidden in the back of his mind was brought out by the sight of Katie, as most things were. He does not have a relationship with Holly. The only thing that keeps them together is the marriage license she has stashed in her sock drawer for safe keeping. Like a thief hiding stolen goods, though she doesn't even know it. He does not belong to her. He never has. She only occupies an empty life--one that he had once so perfectly planned. If he hadn't grown to despise her presence, he would almost feel sorry for her.

Mark's head swims as he places the sixth empty beer bottle on the coffee table. Holly will probably be angry with him in the morning when she emerges from the bedroom to find her living room littered with empty bottles, the ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. Not the husband she had wanted. Not the husband he had wanted to be either.

He stares at the rainbow of parallel lines on the television, the high pitched hum sends him the encoded message.

This is not the way things were supposed to be.

We are offering you a second chance.

Mark fumbles in his pockets for his truck keys. Their appearance in his callused hand offers him his last hope.

Katie.

He will find her. He will explain everything--the hurt, the betrayal, the constant nagging in the back of his brain that this was not how things were meant to be. She will listen. She is Katie. She will have already known. She will enfold him into her awaiting arms and they will have the life he always wanted. Holly will survive without him. She will find that husband with the never-ending pocket full of cash and live in suburban bliss with the children who were once his.

"You better believe it". Katie's last words to him at the diner that day block out everything else. His team had lost but they would make it to the play-offs. He has not lost hope.

Mark stumbles to the front door of the house. It wasn't the house he had wanted. Above the hum of the television, Mark hears the baby fussing over the monitor. Holly mumbles something to it softly in her sleep and the silence returns. His thoughts blurred, Mark wonders how things got to be the way they did--how he got to this place, created this life. Not bothering to take a last look, he opens the front door and silently, closes it behind him.

Sweetness

On his way home from school that day, Jacob was thinking about Sue Ann Martineau and the Valentine card she had slipped inside his desk after recess that afternoon. It was nearing the end of April and Valentine's Day had passed some two months before, but Sue Ann didn't seem to notice or care to notice, or even consider these factors.

As he rummaged through his desk for his math workbook, the Valentine slid out onto the floor. Unfortunately, before Jacob had the chance to examine the curious, yet exciting surprise (both curious and exciting because Jacob had always considered himself to be what one would call average, not the type of kid who normally received such attention, and he felt a kind of joy in seeing the tiny envelope sliding past, with *his* name printed neatly in loopy swirls surrounded by hearts) it landed beside the dirty sneakered foot of Henry Tarris.

Jacob's joy quickly turned to fear and embarrassment. He would have been embarrassed not matter *whose* foot it landed beside, but the fact that it was Henry's foot had made it that much worse.

Henry, upon spying the envelope, gave one of his hateful, toothy smiles to Jacob as he bent over to pick up the envelope. "Dropped something, *Jerkob*."

Jacob stupidly, almost gratefully, reached his arm across the aisle to the envelope Henry had outstretched in his hand.

Henry quickly pulled it back from Jacob's reach, prompting giggles from the few onlookers.

Jacob should have known better.

"Hmmm...what do have we here?" Henry held the small rectangle up so his growing audience could get a better view. "Looks like somebody lost a *love letter*," Henry's voice feigned concern, "Better open it and see who it belongs to."

Jacob, as usual, did nothing. He always did nothing.

"Ignore them...turn the other cheek." is what his mother had told him of bullies such as Henry Tarris. Jacob opened his workbook and pretended to write down the exercises that the oblivious (and obviously deaf) Mrs. Healy was printing out on the chalkboard.

A boy collected seven pop cans...

Jacob heard the rip of the envelope and Henry clearing his throat. He ignored the sound of the chair scraping back against the worn linoleum of the classroom floor.

"Ahem," Henry stood up from his desk,

"Roses are red

Violets are too

I'll be your Valentine

If you'll be mine too.

Love Sue Ann

Henry read the card in a mocking tone. The class roared with laughter. Jacob felt tears in his eyes. He refused to look up from his desk.

"Henry Tarris!" Mrs. Healy, recovering from her bout of deafness, was clicking her way briskly over to Henry's desk. "I've had just about all I can take from you today!" She tore the Valentine card out from Henry's grubby eleven-year-old hand, "Go stand in the hall," she pointed viciously to the door. Henry, still smiling, obeyed.

"That's enough, class," Mrs. Healy said, breaking up the laughter and forcing them into the silent retreat of math equations.

From her desk at the front of the room, the blond haired Sue Ann Martineau was blushing furiously. This Jacob noticed when she turned around, catching his eye. Jacob smiled weakly at her and went back to the boy and his pop cans.

It wasn't until later that afternoon that Jacob knew for certain that he would not die of embarrassment. Hiding on the seat second closest to the front of the bus, pushed as far against the window as he could possibly get, Jacob pretended to be invisible. No one could see him--at least that's what he had hoped. It seemed to be working, as far as Jacob could tell. None of the other kids on the bus paid much attention to him squeezed up against the bus window; everyone (besides Jacob) was in high spirits because school had been let out an hour early due to a teachers meeting. The bus was empty enough for those who did not possess a number of buddies on the route to have seats of their own. Today, Jacob considered himself lucky to be one of those kids. He tried to forget the particulars of the afternoon's incident and think "good thoughts"--as his mother had always told him to do when a frustrating situation occurred. Jacob was sure this was one of those situations. So instead, Jacob focused on the building of the model plane his dad had sent him for his birthday. He had been working on the plane after school for some time, and found its careful concentration of assembly enjoyable. Now more than ever, he was happy to have his plane to look forward to.

Being so absorbed in his "good thought," Jacob barely noticed the kids rushing past him at the second-to-last-stop; however, he *did* notice (or rather he *heard*) the sweet sounds of the voice of Sue Ann Martineau approaching down the aisle. He was conscious enough not to look her way as she passed, briefly pausing beside Jacob's seat, and he was careful not to turn his eyes away from the window until he was positively sure she was gone.

Turning from the window, Jacob had just enough time to see the blond curls of the back of Sue Ann's head departing the bus, and a handful of butterscotch taffy on the seat beside him.

Getting off the bus at his own stop, Jacob popped one of the butterscotch candies into his mouth. He was already forgetting about the afternoon's incident and looking forward to working on his good thought when he got home. He thought about the Valentine Card Sue Ann had given him and, even though it was in the fifth grade trash can and not safely tucked into his jacket pocket where it rightfully should have been, he couldn't help but smile. Sue Ann Martineau was sweet. She had risked the embarrassment of being humiliated by the whole fifth grade class, and by Jacob, himself, if he chose to sway from her advances. Sue Ann Martineau was not only sweet, Jacob decided, but she was *brave* as well--something Jacob would never have considered himself to be. Drawing these conclusions, Jacob decided he really did like Sue Ann Martineau. She was sweet, and she was brave, and she liked *him*--plain, old mediumly popular Jacob Reynolds. He had somehow earned her love--or at least admiration. If he wasn't ten years old, Jacob would be skipping as he happily sucked away on his butterscotch taffy. He would--

"Freeze!"

Jacob knew his life was looking too good. From the path between the spruce trees lining the side of the road sprang none other than Henry Tarris, posed and aiming his second-hand Daisy b-b gun at Jacob's head. His equally bratty younger sister, Annabelle, trotting close behind.

Jacob sighed, "Come off it. Leave me alone, Henry."

"Put 'em up," Henry made the deliberate action of pointing the gun at Jacob's head. Annabelle stood beside him, pushing up her nose with her index finger and sticking her tongue out at Jacob, while mimicking her older brother's words.

"Knock it off," Jacob made to walk away.

"I *said*, put 'em up, *loverboy*." Henry walked towards Jacob, still aiming for his head, "Put 'em up and I won't shoot ya."

“Yah!” Annabelle piped up from behind her brother.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“*Why can’t you just leave me alone...*” Henry mimicked, getting closer. They stopped a few metres from where Jacob stood.

Jacob raised his arms above his head. He felt tears forming behind his eyes. He didn’t want to cry. Henry already thought he was a wimp, and crying was only going to make the whole thing worse. Blinking, he tried to hold the tears back. *It’s only a b-b gun. It’s only a b-b.* Jacob repeated the phrase over and over in his mind. He didn’t want to get shot by Henry Tarris. It would hurt, then he really would cry—he might even bleed, maybe even have to go to the hospital. His mother would call Henry’s mother, Henry and Annabelle would run off and tell everyone from school. Jacob felt himself begin to panic.

He tried to calm himself, but couldn’t find a suitable “good thought”. A b-b couldn’t hurt *that* much. His cousin had one and he would shoot empty tin cans with it. It only *dented* the cans. Jacob had never seen a b-b pellet break through anything. It couldn’t hurt a *person* that much.

Blink.

It’s only a b-b.

Blink Blink.

...only a b-b.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

It’s only a--

Shit! Normally, Jacob wasn’t allowed to swear and wouldn’t have thought to do it, but the tears wouldn’t hold anymore, it was too late. The first began to fall from his left eye, then his right. He squeezed his eyes shut in hopes to stop them. It didn’t help.

Henry laughed, “Aw, look at the big baby, Annabelle.”

“Yah, look at the big baby!”

“Shut up, Henry,” Jacob sniffed, and brought down his left hand from above his head to wipe his eyes.

“I *said*, put em’ up.”

He could tell Henry was losing his patience. Fearfully, Jacob obeyed, “Please, leave me alone.”

“I’m warning you.” Henry re-aimed the gun.

Jacob put his hands back up in the air. *Shit*. He was crying in front of Henry Tarris. Everyone would know. At least he could be glad that no one else was around. They were on one of the side roads—a shortcut Jacob took to get home from school. No houses were on this road, for it was mainly used by the loggers who would not be getting off work for a while. He was glad no one was around, but wished that maybe, just *maybe* one of the loggers would get off work early and rescue him from his fate.

“I think we gotta toughen you up, *baby*. Don’t you think, Annabelle?”

“Yeah!”

Shut up, Henry. Shut up Annabelle. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?” the last half of Jacob’s question ended in an almost hysterical sob.

“What a baby!” Henry kept the gun focused on Jacob’s face, his eyes squinting behind its barrel.

Jacob was no longer able to control the tears, they began to flow freely, dripping off his chin, accompanied by (though he tried desperately to control himself) the occasional sob.

“This is gonna hurt me more than it hurts you. Ha ha ha!” Henry squeezed the trigger.

Bang! The gun thundered (or what Jacob later remembered as a thunder) in the afternoon air.

“Ahhhhh!” the b-b hit him. It hit him in the eye. He was blind--*blind!* It hurt! It hurt so bad!

Jacob rolled around in the dirt on the side of the road, his hand clutching at his eye. He could feel the sticky liquid oozing from its socket. It hurt more than anything. His mother was going to be very upset.

Jacob began to rub the sting, hoping to ease the pain. He didn't want to be blind. He didn't want to be known as the blind kid.

From the tall grasses beside the road, Jacob could hear Henry and Annabelle Tarris' laughter. He rubbed at his eye and frightfully pulled his hand away. He *needed* to see the damage.

Jacob focused his good eye on the hand he was holding before his face; though blurred slightly from the tears, he could see well enough to assess the damage. He took a deep breath and focused.

Smearred across the palm and knuckles of his hand was brown dirt; dusty in some spots and wet from tears in others, but *dirt* nonetheless. Henry had removed the centre tube and filled the gun with *dirt*. The spring had triggered *dirt* to shoot forth and nearly blind him. Jacob's hand was covered in *dirt*. He reached his other hand to his eye and rubbed the now dulling sting. Again, the same thing--*dirt*. There was no b-b. The gun wasn't even *loaded*. Jacob felt rage rise from inside him.

"A-ha!" the echo of Henry's laughter traveled to Jacob's ears. "You're so *stupid*, Jacob. Did you really think I was gonna shoot you?"

Jacob looked up at Henry from his position in the dirt. His face was contorted into a sickening, hovering smile as he moved closer, leaning forward to spat his taunting words down at Jacob. "You're such a baby. Wait 'til I tell everyone at school! Jacob Reynolds is a big baby! He's a big chicken!" Henry proceeded to do a little dance of triumph in front of Jacob's face. Jacob wanted to reach out and trip him, but his hand was still rubbing his eye.

"Wait 'til I tell everybody!" Henry bent over to laugh in Jacob's face. "Wait 'til I tell your *girlfriend* what a big *sucky* you are!"

“Ya, wait!”

No! Not Sue Ann Martineau! Not after what had happened this afternoon! Not after the Valentine Card disaster! Not after the butterscotch taffy!

Henry Tarris backed away from Jacob, “C’mon, Annabelle. Let’s get outa here.” Henry turned, leaving Jacob lying in the dirt.

All he could think about as he watched Henry disappear out of his good eye through the trees onto the road on the other side, was Sue Ann. How could he face her? He sat up in the dirt, giving his near-blinded eye one last swipe with the back of his hand, and brushed the dirt off his hands onto his shirt. It was his *school* shirt that he was wearing and his mother would probably be mad at him for dirtying it. Jacob didn’t care. He just wanted to get home.

His eye was still watering and he knew, from the wisdom of his mother, that rubbing it with his fists would *only make it worse*. Jacob’s mother always gave her son a fresh supply of Kleenex each morning which he wadded up in his jacket pocket and used mostly for parachuting races at recess. Jacob reached for a clean unused tissue in his pocket, happy for once that his mother was the way she was.

He pulled what was left of his daily wad out from his jacket, jerking free a single sheet. In doing so, the wrapper from the butterscotch taffy (that he was so enjoying before the Henry Tarris encounter) slipped out, falling to the ground beside him. Jacob stared at it, humiliated. Then, from where Jacob did not know or care, the idea struck him.

Searching in the grasses beside his emotionally battered body, Jacob found a rock. Not too large, not too small; the same size (if not a bit larger and heavier) than a piece of butterscotch taffy. Picking up the candy wrapper in one hand and grabbing the rock with the other, Jacob jumped to his feet and made his way through the path in the trees and down the road in search of Henry Tarris.

Jacob's eye had stopped watering. The sting had turned to a dull throb. As he ran, Jacob folded the rock clumsily in the candy wrapper. It was not wrapped perfectly; but it was good enough to be observably believable from a distance.

Jacob's eye was irritated, the white now red, the socket reduced to a small slit; still, he could make out Henry Tarris' frame and that of his sister walking carelessly down the road towards the lake where most of the other kids from school would be. Jacob felt the rage again as he pictured Henry going down to the shore and telling the kids of the incident which had just taken place. By the next morning, *everyone* would know.

"Hey! Hey, Henry!" Jacob hollered, jogging towards his now sworn enemy. "Henry!"

Henry and Annabelle stopped and turned to face Jacob. As Jacob approached, Henry pointed and laughed forcedly. Annabelle mimicked her brother's actions.

"Look, Annabelle, it's the big *baby*. What's wrong *baby*? What do you want now?" The two laughed again.

Jacob stopped about two metres from the Tarrises. He raised the candy wrapper above his head.

"What are you *doing*?"

The foil wrapper glinted in the late afternoon sun.

"What are you doing, *baby*? You gonna throw a candy at me? Oooo, I'm scared. I'm *so scared*! I'm so--"

Jacob couldn't stand it any longer. *Do unto others*, he could hear his mother's voice in his mind. Well, he *would* do unto others alright. It all happened so quickly. With all the accumulated anger of the day--of the Valentine, of the b-b, of the mean things Henry had said to him, of the way he made him feel--Jacob swung his right hand

gripping the candy wrapper back over his head, blindly aimed, and let it fly in Henry's direction full force.

A dull crack could be heard. The rock had lost its cover as it whizzed through the air, and before Henry could notice what had happened, before he realized what was going on, it hit him full of Jacob's anger, smack on the forehead above his right eye. *An eye for an eye.*

For what seemed like hours, all stood still. The wind did not blow. The trees and grass did not whisper. No cars could be heard in the distance. Nothing could be heard except the eery silence of Jacob's triumph.

Jacob stared at Henry's head. A thin line of red liquid trickled its way down Henry's forehead. Henry's hand instinctively rose to where the rock had hit. He wiped at the mark with the back of his hand, bringing it down to see the damage for himself. Seeing the bright red blood, Henry Tarris began to cry. It started out low, almost animal-like, rising into a high pitched scream. He did not move, just stood there howling, his mouth shaped into a mid-sized "O". Jacob watched in awe. He knew it was nothing that soap and a bandage couldn't fix. It wasn't even a *big* cut, it was just bleeding.

Annabelle was quick to join in Henry's cries. Tears began to flow freely down her cheeks. Jacob was dumbfounded watching the event unfold. Here they were, the nastiest kids at his school--*crying* over a tiny cut on Henry's forehead. Henry Tarris, the biggest bully at Sir John A. Macdonald Elementary School was *crying*. He was *wailing*. He was crying harder than Jacob had earlier that afternoon.

Jacob snapped out of his stupor when Annabelle began to yell that they were going to call his mother. Not knowing what else to do, having nothing left to say, and having enough of the scene before him, Jacob began to run.

He ran down the road as fast as his legs would carry him. Coming to the edge of the road, he turned onto the main street of the Village. He refused to look back. As he ran, he thought about Sue Ann Martineau, about Henry, about his mother. He knew his

mother was going to be upset with him, he did not *turn the other cheek* as she had constantly preached at him; but he did *do unto others*. Jacob had taken as much as he could from Henry Tarris. But Henry Tarris was not so tough after all. Jacob had made him cry. He knew that Henry would not tell the kids at school what had happened with the b-b gun when he had gotten off the bus. He *couldn't*. He had the mark on his forehead to worry about.

When Henry showed up at school the next morning, he would probably have a bandage over the spot where the rock hit. Jacob knew for a fact that Henry was not brave enough to tell the other kids what *really* happened--and Jacob also knew that he himself wouldn't. There wasn't a reason to.

Henry Tarris had got what was coming to him, and he got it from Jacob. Sue Ann Martineau would still like him. She had given him butterscotch taffy. Tomorrow, she would smile at Jacob as she was getting on the bus and Jacob could look her in the eye without feeling like a coward (or *big baby* as Henry had called him) and smile back.

Jacob slowed his run down to a jog, and eventually to a walk. Life was good, he thought, even though he knew he still had his mother to answer to when he got home. It didn't matter all that much to him anymore. As Jacob turned onto the top of his street he began to skip and, this time, he didn't care who saw.

Lady Slippers

"Alright, let's go."

"One second." Cindy gave her flowers one last spray before dropping the hose and hopping into the car.

"You have mud on your shoe," Al, her husband, told her as they pulled out of the driveway .

Cindy pulled a tissue from the box on the dashboard, spit on it as she removed her shoe with her free hand, and began to polish. She didn't care about the mud, really, but she knew Allan would be horrified if the two of them walked into the Reception Hall without looking well groomed. She didn't understand his airs. What did people expect from those who lived so far out in the country?

They rode in silence the twenty-five minute drive into town, Cindy singing softly along with the radio, Al keeping his eyes fixed on the roads. The air conditioning was turned up to its max. Al didn't want to sweat. Cindy shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. She stared absently at the trees passing her window, and thought about her flowers.

She had loved Lady Slippers since she was a small child. She and her grandfather would go for long walks in the bush, he pointing out all the different names of the flowers and trees. To this day, she knew them all by heart. Fire red--Devils' Paintbrush. Small patches of white--Trillium. Tall, thin, evergreen--White Pine.

Her favourite had always been the Lady Slippers. She would squeal with delight upon finding a patch along their trail.

"Fairy Slippers," her grandfather had told her. "Fairies are the tiny little people who look after the forest. They make their clothes from maple leaves and wear Lady Slippers on their feet. Each spring, a new batch of Lady Slippers sprout, just in time for the Fairy wedding."

Cindy would imagine the little fairies, dancing to cricket music, with the tiny Lady Slippers on their feet. She would picture them celebrating the wedding of the most beautiful golden haired fairy, voices tinkling with laughter in the festivities. She pictured the groom fairy, whisking his bride off to their new home hidden in the trunk of a great oak tree which would look like a castle with the sun's rays making a spotlight upon it among the dozens of wild flowers which grew at its trunk.

Cindy would wander the trails for hours in the springtime in search of the Fairy Bride, each time coming away sad and frustrated that she did not spot her. She knew that they were magic and that only the animals and trees could see them, but she never gave up hoping.

The flowers from her garden had been transplanted from the bush behind her grandparents' cabin. Her mother had decided to sell the place when her grandparents grew older, thinking that the upkeep would be too much for them. Angry, Cindy hiked through the bush one last time, shovel in one hand and shoe box under the opposite arm, following the trails from her childhood until she came upon the patch of Lady Slippers. Carefully, she removed them from their home and placed them in the box. She hurried back to the cabin to sprinkle them with the watering can, before making the journey home to transplant them in her garden. Each year she maintained them, agonized over them, and worried for them as they blossomed into a small trail across the bed. She often thought of the fairies, and at times, caught herself searching the patches of flowers for proof of their existence.

Al pulled into the parking lot of the reception hall. The only spaces left were those in the far corner of the lot. Cursing, he drove through the long, scattered rows of vehicles and backed into one of the free spaces. "We're late," he told Cindy, adjusting his tie in the rearview mirror.

"No we're not." She checked her watch, "The reception starts at six-thirty, it's only ten after."

Al slid from the driver's seat and waited for her to open her door so he could secure the automatic locks. Cindy slowly emerged from the passenger's side, adjusting the skirt of her borrowed blue crepe dress as she stood. She didn't have anything of her own that was fit to wear to a wedding. Her usual attire consisted mostly of men's oversized T-shirts, a few sweaters, and numerous pairs of blue jeans. She liked the way she looked in these clothes, liked the way they felt next to her skin. She did *own* a dress. It was a bridesmaid dress that was left over from a wedding twelve years earlier. She hadn't had much of a chance to dress up since, and buying something new would have been a waste of money, seeing as it would spend most of its time sitting in her closet. The old bridesmaid dress was too outdated to even consider altering for any present occasion. She had meant to get rid of it a number of times, but never got around to it.

"Do I look okay?" She asked, smoothing her hair.

"Fine. Coulda worn some makeup if you were that concerned."

"It makes my face itch."

They walked into the hall without speaking. Al a few paces in front of his wife. Cindy tried not to walk too fast. It had been a long time since she had worn heels and was afraid that she might trip and fall. Her feet felt funny in the shoes. Her toes squished together and the heels rubbed against the back of her feet with each step, prompting a blister to appear by the end of the night. She promised herself to remove them as soon as her feet were safely under the table. At least *the shoes* belonged to her, Cindy thought as she gripped the hand-me-down purse that had once belonged to her mother. The shoes were a remnant of the wedding which she had worn the bridesmaid dress. Lucky for her, however, that black pumps never went out of style.

Cindy and Allan climbed the stairs inside the hall to the banquet room, shoes rubbing Cindy's feet with each step. She wished she had decided to wear nylons. They would have helped, but she thought it would be too warm. They made her butt sweat. However, she would have preferred a sweaty butt to a blister. The air conditioning in the

car and hall would probably have kept her cool most of the night, anyhow. She never thought of these things beforehand. She was always too stressed out about the events to think logically as she got ready. Oh well, the sandals that she wore every day would help the blister heal quickly. She reminded herself to pop it after they got home and then apply tea tree oil. That always helped.

Al was picking his way through the crowd with Cindy following two people behind. He stopped at a small table to get their place card. "Table number twenty four," he was saying as she caught up.

They paused to scan the room. Over two hundred guests were milling around. Cindy squinted across the pink tooling draped throughout the hall, hanging from the walls and ceiling and wrapped around the numerous flower arrangements in various patterns. The patterns stood out like miniature flamingoes on top of each of the tables. Table twenty-four, she observed, was in the far back corner of the hall. She squinted to note its location. It was a table smaller than the rest, almost hidden by the magnitude of pink tooling. From where she stood, Cindy could see that the other two couples seated at the table were strangers to her. Most of the people from her small, rural community were seated midway across the room, grouped together at three large tables. Some gave Al and herself a small wave upon their entrance. The others merely didn't notice their entrance.

Cindy didn't understand the people from the small community. When they were there, everyone was friendly, always stopping to greet one another at the side of the road, popping in unannounced to one another's houses for coffee. They were like one big extended family. But things changed as soon as they crossed the community's border. They lost that "down home" goodness which had attracted Cindy to them. They became stiff and cold trying to blend in to the expectations of urban society--especially at weddings. As much as she tried, Cindy couldn't be like them. It made her too sad.

At home in the village, weddings were held at the fire hall. The floors were hosed down and trucks cleared out, replaced by collapsible tables with plastic covers and crepe paper streamers--the colour being the bride's choice. The men wore clean shirts with their blue jeans, the women wore simple cotton dresses, dress pants, or blue jeans as well--whatever they felt like wearing. Dress code didn't matter. Decor didn't matter. Everyone looked and acted like themselves--the same way they did every day.

However, as soon as a wedding was moved from the country to town, things changed. Out came the sports jackets, the ties, the taffeta, and long dresses. Up went the hair and out came the red lipstick. Gone was the "down home" goodness, the slaps on the back, the cheerful country demeanor. It was all replaced by what they expected urbanites to be--high class and untouchable. Everyone changed. Everyone but Cindy. True, she changed her way of dress, but that was mostly out of force than compromise. Everything else stayed the same. She was comfortable this way. She was herself.

"C'mon," Al said over his shoulder as he began to make his way through the crowd. Cindy followed silently, passing their friends' tables without much acknowledgement. Al nodded, giving them a brief smile as he passed.

The groom was a local of their community. Al and the boy's father had done many business transactions together. Joe Beaman, the groom's father, sold Al the lumber he had used to build their home. He'd also supplied them with their firewood in the winter. Al and Cindy had known his son since he was a small boy sitting in the front of his dad's pickup carving childish figures out of leftover scraps of wood. They, as well as most of their friends present, were good customers to the Beaumans. The groom knew this, and Cindy wondered why they had been seated so far away from the rest of them. She mentioned this to Al as they approached their table.

"There's no room over there, that's why, We just got here and you're complaining already. Better not keep this up all night. I would like to *try* to have a good time."

Cindy knew what he was saying was true, but she needed to complain about something. She didn't want to be there. Covering for herself, she replied, "I'm not complaining, Allan. They could have at least seated us *closer* to our friends. We look like outcasts."

"Stop imagining things! Maybe they weren't thinking when they made out the seating plan. I don't know. And we're not outcasts. They smiled and waved to us when we came in. What more do you want? Things'll be getting started soon, anyhow."

Cindy gave up. She was feeling sorry for herself. She imagined they were separated because she refused to conform. That was why they were seated off in a corner where no one else would notice them. She assumed the other couples at their table were some kind of misfits as well. She pulled out a chair from the table of strangers and sat down.

"Hello," the woman beside Cindy turned to greet her, "I'm Georgette. This is my husband Frank." She indicated to the man sitting next to her.

"I'm Al," Allan said as he leaned over Cindy to shake Frank's hand.

"Cindy," Cindy said smiling into her empty plate.

"This is my sister Korah, and her husband Joe," Georgette continued, gesturing to the other middle aged couple at the table.

Al shook their hands while Cindy smiled on.

"Are you friends of the bride or groom?"

"The groom," Al replied. "Been doing business with his father for years." He sat up straighter in his chair.

"Oh. Are you from the village?"

"Yep. Born and raised."

"Well, Korah and I are the bride's second cousins. Our mother and her grandmother were sisters. Lived right on the same block their *whole entire lives*."

Oh, Cindy thought, that explained it. Korah and Georgette were *have to*'s. The bride *had to* invite them, they were family--distant, but family just the same.

"Really?" Al pretended to be interested. "Don't see much of that anymore."

"Sure don't." Korah's husband pitched in, "They're a real close family."

"Excuse me a moment," Al said to the strangers, "I'm going to get something from the bar. Would you like anything, Dear?" He turned to Cindy.

"Water will be fine."

"Soda water it is," he said and left the table before Cindy had a chance to stop him. She hated soda water. She had wanted plain, simple ice water.

The strangers at the table stared at Cindy a while before Georgette piped up again, "What do *you* do, Cindy?"

Cindy was caught off guard with the question. She wanted to say "nothing", but knew she shouldn't. "I garden," she told them. It wasn't a lie. She *did* spend most of her days tending her flowers.

"A gardener! That sounds like so much *fun*, doesn't it, Korah?"

"What?" Korah had been busy watching the door.

"Cindy *gardens*!"

"Oh. You know, Georgette," she said, brushing off Cindy's existence, "they should be starting soon."

Georgette looked at her watch, "We have a few minutes."

"I'm *starving*," her sister whined. "Such a long wait between the church and the reception. They should have had the reception right away, not two hours later."

"Well, Korah, they *did* have to take pictures. The church was *so* beautiful! I'm sure they took some there before they went to the park.

Al and Cindy did not go to the ceremony. Al hated churches. Even though Cindy tried to explain to him that it wouldn't be a regular service, but a twenty minute ceremony, he still refused to go. It would have been better if they had gone. At least they

could have sat with their friends. Then she wouldn't have felt so awkward being separated from them now.

Oh well, she thought, at least she got to spend a few extra hours tending her Lady Slippers. They were coming along so nicely, and she *did* love to gaze at them in the sunlight.

Al returned with the drinks just as the bride and groom made their entrance.

"Ladies and Gentleman," the Master of Ceremonies bellowed, "I would like to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Mark Beauman!" The guests rose, applauding the newlyweds as Al placed the glass in front of his wife.

They resumed their seats. Cindy slid her glass towards her and leaned over to sip from the straw. She noticed the tiny bubbles floating up towards the surface. Soda water. She made a face. Al sat sipping on his rye and water, making small talk with Georgette's husband. Cindy removed the lemon from the side of the glass and squeezed it hard into the liquid, pulp squishing out from beneath the rind. She tossed what was left into the glass, stirred it thoroughly with her straw, and attempted to take another sip. Cool, staunch tasting liquid flooded her mouth. Cindy made a face and pushed the glass away.

Platters of food began to arrive at the table--soup, then salad, followed by chicken, potatoes, pasta and meat sauce. Cindy picked away half-heartedly at the food. She refused the chicken for she had a problem eating it with utensils and knew Al would be horrified if she attempted to eat it with her hands--though she noticed John, Georgette's husband, did so without any reprimanding from his wife. This left the pasta and sauce which she ate carefully, not wanting to spill any on her borrowed dress. She managed rather well with it, thankful it was penne and not spaghetti. She finished with only one small red dot beneath her breast. This didn't bother Cindy much. She wet her napkin in her soda water and dabbed at the spot trying to be discreet, but realizing it was impossible. Al gave her a sideways look and she felt her face darken, comforting herself with the thought that the soda wasn't a total waste.

Cindy finished her meal before everyone else. She gazed across the room to see if any of their friends were finished too. They were all talking and laughing, forgetting that she and Al were even there. She felt awkward approaching them, and looked to Georgette and Korah for comfort. They too were absorbed in conversation and had also seemed to have forgotten her presence.

Cindy's eyes wandered over to the newlyweds as the servers began to clear the tables. They were standing among friends at separate ends of the table. Cindy stared at the bride. She looked so tiny standing there laughing and talking with her guests. Her gown flowed dreamily, chiffon puffing out at her waist. Her hair was swept up on top of her head, decorated by a wreath of flowers. The way she fluttered amongst the guests reminded Cindy of one of the make believe fairies from her childhood. She would have been the Fairy Bride dancing in the flowers, Lady Slippers on her feet. Her laughter would sound like tiny bells following her like chimes throughout the forest, and everyone would have loved and admired her. Cindy had always wished *she* could be the fairy bride, yet she was realistic in the sense that she knew fairies were tiny and graceful, not clumsy and chunky. The fairies never changed. They were always *fairies*--never trying to be anything else. And they were happy this way. They didn't want--or need--to change.

She watched the bride float from table to table giving personal greetings to each of her guests. She would smile and laugh her Tinkerbell laugh making Cindy smile and feel more at ease. She was an enchanted fairy who Cindy would love and admire, become friends with, dance in the flowers with. She would use her magic fairy dust on Cindy and make her a pretty and graceful little fairy just like herself. Then, Cindy too could wear the Lady Slippers.

Yes, the bride would be the perfect fairy, Cindy decided, watching her flutter about from table to table. She turned her attention to Al who was sipping on his fourth rye and chatting with one of the neighbours who had found his way over to their table.

The two of them laughed and joked for a few minutes. He pushed back his chair and half turned to Cindy, "I'm going to get another drink."

The neighbour smiled at her, and Cindy watched the two of them swagger across the room. People like Al could never fit in with fairies, Cindy thought, watching his back disappear into the crowd at the bar.

Cindy looked up to note the bride's location. She and the groom had met up two tables in front of her. As they talked and laughed with their guests, Cindy half expected to hear the sound of little bells.

She wondered what it would be like if it had actually been a fairy wedding. People like Georgette and Korah wouldn't be there. They were too absorbed in themselves. They probably wouldn't even be able to see a fairy if one was standing right in front of them. Most of these people wouldn't be there, Cindy thought, watching the guests talk amongst themselves in their new fashion plait dresses and bulging suits. They sounded plastic and out of place in the bride's enchanted decor. Cindy herself was glad she hadn't gone too much out of her way to transform herself.

Her neighbours sat huddled together across the hall, separate from the rest. Yet somehow, they too could not be included in the enchanted wedding. They weren't the people they were yesterday. The drive to town had transformed them. No one was the same.

In the forest live the fairies. You can not see them, but they are always there.

Cindy thought of her grandfather's stories and how the fairies were in hiding, only revealing themselves when no one else was there to see. From the village to town it was the same, the transformation between the everyday and what they truly wished to be--or at least what Cindy perceived as their wishes. The people of the village could be themselves as long as they were alone. They were not fairies because fairies didn't *try* to change. It was the humans who did. It was the humans who scared the fairies and made them go into hiding. Cindy knew she was more like them.

The bride and groom were getting closer to her table. Al was nowhere to be seen. He had probably met up with someone else in line at the bar. Probably talking about fishing or baseball. He might have even forgotten that Cindy was there. She became irritated thinking of the bride and groom making their rounds and Al's absence.

The newlyweds floated over to table number twenty-four. The bride's gown swept the floor, swooshing behind her tiny frame. She really did seem fairy-like. From the front, it seemed as though she was carried across the room by little wings, her feet being invisible.

"Hello, Georgette, Frank," the bride said reaching their table. "Thank you so much for coming."

"You look beautiful, dear," Georgette said, lightly touching the bride's arm.

"Thank you."

"Oh, yes," Korah chimed, "such a beautiful dress! And I *love* the way you decorated the place!"

The bride smiled widely, exposing two neat rows of pearl-like teeth. "I hope you're having fun. The band will start soon."

"We're looking forward to hearing them."

The bride leaned down and kissed each of them on the cheek. Cindy smiled at her, but she didn't seem to notice. She waved at Korah and Georgette with her bouquet as she departed the table. Cindy saw that the flowers were plastic.

"...she copied it all from a bridal magazine." Cindy overheard Korah informing her sister, "I saw the exact same decor in *Bridal Weekly* a few months ago at my hair dresser's."

Georgette laughed, which sounded more like a cackle to Cindy.

Cindy fumbled under the table trying to find her shoes. Locating them, she shoved them under her left arm and pushed her chair back from the table. Georgette and

Korah stared at her. She acknowledged them with a stare of her own, grabbed her purse, and left the table.

Pushing her way through the crowd, she caught sight of the bride one last time. Her back was to Cindy. There were no wings at all but two rows of hard plastic buttons. She imagined the white vinyl shoes on her feet, clicking against the tiles of the dance floor. They were probably some designer brand name, not slippers.

Al was stationed between the tables of their neighbours. One of them caught sight of Cindy stumbling through the crowd. She waved, but Cindy chose to ignore her.

Al turned from his conversation, confronting her as she passed, "Where you going?" His speech was beginning to slur.

Cindy didn't look at him. "I can't see her feet," she mumbled passing him by.

He waved her off and turned back to his conversation.

Cindy stepped outside the Reception Hall and put on her shoes. The night air was chilly but she didn't mind. She was hot. Her face was flushed as though she had been running. She worried about her flowers. The crisp air would not be good for them.

There were others in the parking lot, milling around in small groups. Cindy walked around them, finding her way in the dim light to the car. She fumbled for the spare keys in her purse and finding them, unlocked the door and got in the passenger's side, kicking her shoes off as she entered. She knew Al could be hours. It didn't matter. Her toes would probably turn numb by then. Propping her head on her hand, and leaning on the arm rest of the door, she stared at the hall. Through the windows she could see the pink tooling and hear the band warming up. Soon the lights would go out. She would be all alone.

The sobs came slowly at first, gurgling their way up her throat. Cindy didn't bother to stop them. She hoped that the frost wouldn't kill her flowers.

Rescuing Einstein

From the wall facing the cracked vinyl booths of the restaurant stared the infamous Albert Einstein. He clutched the mast of a large wooden sailboat as it rocked violently in what seemed to be one of the century's worst storms. From under his bushy, graying eyebrows, his brown canvas eyes pleaded, "Help me...Someone, anyone, please help me..."

Underneath the painting, Jack poured half-morning old coffee into two porcelain mugs. "You and me both, buddy," he communicated telepathically to Mr. Einstein, before pasting on his "I Am Your Happy Waiter" smile and carrying the coffee to his awaiting customers.

"Anything else?" he asked them, backing away slightly from the stench that arose from the patrons' clothing.

"That'll do it, *Waitress*. Thanks."

"Ya, thanks, *sweetheart*." The two men laughed at their mindless jokes and, forgetting about their server, resumed their conversation.

They were talking about *fish*, as they did every morning. Jack was glad it was his last day of work. He didn't know how much more he could take of the place and its customers and their stimulating conversation. The two men--Roy and John--who Jack had known his whole life (or at least as far back as he could remember) were fishermen, employed by Jack's father's business, J.B. Huffman Enterprises. Jack used to be employed by J.B. Huffman as well--up until two months ago when he decided that college (Visual Arts in particular) was the path he was going to follow in life, and not that of the fisherman, not that of J.B. Huffman *and Son*.

Three new customers had entered the restaurant and Jack quickly counted out the placemats and menus and set them a place at a table far from John and Roy. Jack did not know the three newcomers, assuming they were just passing through the village on their

way to somewhere important. Anywhere, according to Jack, besides the village was important.

“Coffee?”

“Yes.” the woman, presumably the mother, answered for all three. Jack couldn’t help but think how unlike his own mother she was. Jack’s own mother was (and Jack hated to admit it) spineless. She always had been, but it was only in the last three months that Jack had seen how spineless his mother actually was.

It was Jack’s mother who handed him the university envelope when he came in from school that day. It was she who watched him tear it open, eagerly waiting for him to read its reply. It was also she who cried with happiness upon hearing that he was accepted to the visual arts department, laughing in her excitement and hugging him, the whole while gushing over the “exceptional talent” she had always known her son to have. When Jack was growing up, she would post his sketches and paintings on the fridge and kitchen walls for all to admire, praising his talent. When he had grown older and showed more of a serious interest in the subject, she had encouraged him to apply to the university, waiting silently and nervously for the reply. Jack had been talking about the program for over a year, and all she offered him was encouragement and support--never anything less.

So, when Jack sprung the news on *his father* after dinner that evening, knowing what the response would be (which was why he had hid the application from him in the first place) he expected his mother do something, say something in his defense. Instead, what she did was get up and clear the table.

“You’re not going,” were his father’s words which forced his mom to begin clearing mid-meal.

John and Roy had finished their coffee. “Money’s on the table, *waitress*,” they slapped Jack hard on the back on their way to the door. The coffee he had been pouring slapped over the sides of the cup in his hand, barely touching his index finger, but touching it enough for him to quickly put the cup down on the counter top and silently curse the sting.

Cleaning the spill, Jack carefully balanced the three coffees on his small tray, and walked across the room to the matriarch and her attendants. As he was placing the third cup in front of her youngest son, he noticed his father pulling into the parking lot of the restaurant. J.B. Huffman did not turn his head after swinging the truck into the lot; he kept his eyes averted, focused on the road as John and Roy hopped into the cab.

From his post on the wall, Albert Einstein hung on for dear life.

“You know the plan, son. We’ve discussed it too many times.” Jack’s mother had vanished into the kitchen, abandoning her son to the dining room table with her husband, leaving him to fend for himself and defend his hopeful, yet nearly hopeless situation.

The plan was, as far as J.B. Huffman was concerned, that Jack would finish high school and begin training as the next president (owner and *manager*) of J.B. Huffman Enterprises; or, if he wanted, Jack could go to the university to study business first (something that would benefit the family company) before learning to run J.B. Huffman’s enterprises.

Jack had worked part time for his father during the school year since he was eleven years old, and full time during the months he had off school in the summer. While his friends were playing baseball and swimming and playing volley ball on the beach, Jack was working on his dad’s boat, fishing and learning how to set and haul nets.

By the time he was fourteen, Jack had learned to drive his dad's tug; and two summers ago, the summer Jack turned seventeen, J.B. bought a second, older tug from one of the retired fisherman in the village, and made Jack its captain. He was put in charge of its whole catch and crew. J.B. Huffman was proud of his son's work ethic and had big dreams for his--*their*--future.

J.B. had thought Jack's "art thing" was a phase. What kind of a life could art possibly give him? He would be impoverished, maybe even destitute. It didn't make any sense. Business--*business* made sense. It secured a future, provided an income for a family--as it did for him and every other businessman he knew. Art was okay for a hobby and nothing more. J.B. didn't know *where* Jack got his foolishness from.

This is what Jack had been hearing for the past two years. He had always liked to draw, but it wasn't until his tenth grade art teacher kept him after class to discuss a possible future in his drawings, that Jack had started to think about it seriously. What Jack *did* always know, however, was that he did not want to be the businessman his father wanted him to be. Jack *liked* working the boats and didn't *mind* fishing; and it was true that he loved the feeling of the wind rising off the lake hitting his face as the boat made its way to or away from shore, but it was not something he loved in a "do for the rest of your life" kind of way. Art was that something else. It would take him places, not leave him stranded in a place he did not want to be. The village was the place he grew up, a place which framed his childhood memories; and he *liked* the village as he did fishing, but did not want to dedicate his life to either. Jack knew he wanted--he *needed*--more, and art was the way he was going to find it.

Einstein peered after Jack as he moved from table to table, refilling coffee cups, clearing tables, setting placemats. Once and a while, Jack would catch his eye. It was

funny how the man's acrylic eyes seemed to follow him across the room. It was as if he knew something about Jack, an unrevealed secret that no one else could sense or know.

The conversation between father and son had not gone over well that evening. J.B. Huffman did not want to hear the speech his son had been rehearsing in his head for the past two hours. He did not want to hear what an honour it was to be accepted into such a program, or how his high school art teacher thought he had a chance. What could an *art* teacher know about his own kid--about his future and what kind of life he should lead?

J.B. Huffman had already designed the new *J.B. Huffman and Son* logo for the side of the company pickup and *both* sides of *both* fishing tugs. He was proud of the way he had built up his own father's small business. It was a *family* business, something to share and take pride in; something to carry on the family name; and something that had earned and was continuing to earn respect from the community.

Jack had heard it all before. For years it had loomed after him, "*family business...family pride*". Jack had never been asked if he had wanted to take on this responsibility, this *chore*. It was just expected that he would. But he *wouldn't*--which was exactly what he ended up yelling in frustration across the dinner table at J.B. Huffman that night.

"Oh yes you will!" J.B. had fired back, ending with his fist slamming on the thick wooden table, shaking the remaining cups and plates, and knocking over his wife's favourite daisy vase.

Having nothing else to say and feeling quite helpless, Jack pushed back his chair, knocking it over in his own process, and calmly walked down the hall to his

bedroom--*almost* slamming the door. He turned on his stereo, instead, and put on his headphones, trying to drown out his thoughts with the bass of heavy metal.

"Order's up, handsome," the cook placed the matriarch's breakfast specials on the window ledge that divided the kitchen and dining room.

"Thanks," Jack placed the specials on his tray.

"Anytime," She smiled and hit the order bell with the back of her spatula.

Jack shook his head smiling and rolling his eyes at Einstein, then turned, balancing the tray on his fingertips high above his head, moving towards his waiting customers.

Her name was Marlene, and besides being the head cook at the restaurant, she was also the owner's daughter. She was also Jack's girlfriend--or she liked to *think* she was. Jack humoured her in this thought. She was a nice enough girl and he *did* like her, but not enough to settle down with her, and definitely not enough to stay in the village for the rest of his life. Marlene knew this because Jack had told her; but it didn't stop her advances, nor did Jack.

If it wasn't for Marlene Jack wouldn't even have a job. After the blowout with his father, he had found himself unemployed. The next morning (Saturday morning, the day he usually dedicated to J.B. Huffman enterprises while school was still in), Jack arose early as he usually did and got dressed and ready for the day's work on the boat. He assumed that his father would still be angry, maybe give him a verbal jab or two about his plans or say absolutely nothing to him at all; but he never imagined he would be out a *job*.

Jack emerged from his bedroom ready for the day's work. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee, his back to J.B. Huffman, when the punishment kicked in.

"Where you off to?" J.B. asked in a flat, disinterested tone.

Jack was startled by the question, "Work." Where did he think? He turned around, coffee cup balanced in one hand, one of his mother's homemade donuts in the other.

"Not with me."

"Oh," Jack took a bite out of his donut, "Well, I'll get a ride with one of the other guys." If his dad didn't want to be around him, Jack could try and understand that. He figured the whole art thing was a big blow to his dad's plans for the future. He would try to be mature and reasonable about it. He wasn't going to get mad or question his reason.

"You're not working."

"Oh," Jack didn't figure this to be a *forever* type of thing. He assumed his dad just wanted to teach him a lesson. He was getting upset; but he decided to look at it as a day off, instead of a punishment for wanting his own life.

It was only as J.B. Huffman was leaving the house that the truth was revealed to his son. As he was doing up his bootlaces, J.B. Huffman (concentrating on the lace and not looking up at Jack) firmly, yet casually, stated, "You won't be working on the boats anymore,"

The only thing left for Jack to say was, "Why?" But he didn't. There was no need.

"I'm putting Roy in charge of the second rig." J.B. gave his bootlace one last tug, pushed himself up from his crouched position in the front entrance, and headed out the front door without so much as a good-bye.

Any other time, Jack would have welcomed the break. He had always wanted freedom--especially in the summers--to hang out with his friends and do all the things that the other kids his age did. Summers in the village were fun--there was the lake to

swim in, bonfires on the beach, camping in the bush--always something to do and somewhere to go. Jack had missed out on all of these things with only one day off a week and eleven hour shifts. The other six remaining weekdays in the summer, and after school and Saturdays during the school year, he had found himself too tired to do much with the little spare time he had.

The summer before he was to go away to school, however, was not the best time to have lost his job.

"Don't worry, Jackie. He'll come around," was his mother's way of dealing with this situation. After two weeks had passed, and school had officially let out for the summer, Jack could not longer wait for his dad to make up his mind. He needed to add to his savings. Thankfully, since he had been working for so long, Jack had managed to save up quite a bit of money which he was, of course, going to put towards his schooling.

There were only two and a half months left for him to save, and even though he had a fair share set aside, Jack wanted to be *sure* his university career was secured. He had tuition, books, and living expenses to pay, not to mention gas and repairs for his car (which had once belonged to his dad's youngest brother and was almost as old as he was).

Jack couldn't sit back and wait for his dad to come around. He tried, and it seemed to be going nowhere. Even with his mother's attempts to draw them both into conversation, the most J.B. Huffman would come around was to ask his son to "please pass the salt". The conversation ended there, and though Jack could hear his mother loudly discussing the situation of himself with J.B. behind the thin plaster walls that separated their bedroom from his, Jack knew it was to no avail. He was now on his own.

After two weeks of unemployment, two weeks of trying to have fun with his friends, Jack drew his last straw. Marlene.

Knowing Marlene had a crush on him his whole life helped Jack considerably. As humbling and embarrassing as it was, Jack approached her about a job at her dad's restaurant. It was the beginning of tourist season, and the village (being off one of the

country's main highways) attracted many tourists, sightseers, and foreigners. Marlene's dad always had a problem getting staff in the summertime. Most kids would rather be hanging out at the lake or goofing around with their friends. This left Marlene with lots of money, but overworked and exhausted--not to mention a tad bitter with her father because he couldn't find serious staff to help her out and give her a much needed lift in her workload. No one her father hired ever lasted more than a few weeks, leaving him stranded with only Marlene to depend on.

It was at a bonfire nearing the end of his two weeks of employment that Jack decided to subtly approach Marlene about the prospect of being hired at the restaurant. They were all sitting around the fire roasting marshmallows which Marlene had promised to transform into smores. She had taken the chocolate and graham wafers from the restaurant as a form of "overtime pay".

"Smores, get your smores," Marlene called to those gathered around the fire, walking around the circle and offering the plate to each person.

Jack wasn't hungry, nor in the mood for something sweet, but he took one anyhow. Marlene stood close, smiling as he bit into it, the marshmallow and chocolate oozing out its sides. He tried to push it back in between the graham wafers with his fingers, but all that was accomplished was a transferal of thick goo, which he had no choice but to wipe on his shirt. "Good," he told Marlene, smiling through his mouthful.

"Yeah, I figure you guys are good practice for me. Busy season's starting and I'm kind of rusty. Haven't been in the kitchen since *last* summer."

Jack laughed halfheartedly. He knew this was his opportunity. "Busy already?"

"You know it. And, once again, you're looking at the chief cook, server, and bottlewasher of Joe's Diner."

"Can't find anyone *again*?"

“Like who? You offering, Jack?” She batted her eyes and smiled jokingly yet invitingly at him.

Jack smiled his most coy smile, “*You offering*, Marlene?”

Marlene laughed, “Nice try, Jack. I always knew you wanted to get in my pants, but really, you can think of something better than that.”

“Come on, Marlene. I’m serious. If you need help, I’m not doing anything. I won’t be working on the boat this summer, in case you haven’t heard.”

“Um, yeah. I heard.” She turned her head from him, not wanting to reveal that she knew (as did everyone in the village) more than she let on.

Jack ignored this gesture. “Me and you working together...might be fun, Mar.” He tried to give her one of those *knowing* smiles. Judging by the look on her face, it seemed to be working.

“Well,” she paused, her expression serious, digesting the offer, “I’ll have to run it by dad and see what he says...You sure you’re serious about this, Jack? It really is *work*, you know.”

“You know what they say, Mar, all play and no work...”

“Something like that.” She stopped talking, staring at him, sizing up his motives. It was a lot to take in.

Jack waited impatiently, trying to create the right look of lust and seriousness on his face.

Finally, she responded, “Okay, Jack. I’ll talk to Dad. If he says it’s okay, I’ll track you down.”

“Alright, Mar.”

“Thanks,” she said, though unsure of what she was thanking him for.

“Anytime.” He winked at Marlene, securing his fate, then watched her make her way through the sand, offering the crowd her plate of smores. He felt like such a rat.

He started working at the restaurant two days later. Big Joe had been thrilled to have “such a hard worker offer the restaurant his services”. Jack imagined that Marlene ran a close second to Joe’s excitement. When she called the house to notify him of his employment the day after the bonfire, Jack had barely gotten the receiver to his ear and said, “hello,” before being bombarded with the rush of, “Youcanstarttomorrow!”. Marlene was never that great at disguising her feelings.

“Marlene?”

“Ya, it’s me, Jack. Dad said you can start tomorrow. You’ll be serving--waiting tables and I’ll be cooking and looking after the kitchen.”

“Cool.” He hadn’t thought he would be waiting on the tables. He assumed the work would be in the kitchen, but he’d take what he could get. He was almost free.

“What time you want me there?”

“Six a.m. I need you here an hour early for training.”

“An hour?”

“What, you can’t handle it?”

“No, just didn’t think it’d take that long.”

“We’ll see.” There was a mocking tone to her voice that Jack wasn’t sure he appreciated.

“Okay then, Mar, see you at six.” Jack hung up the phone unsure of how he felt. Yes, he felt triumphant. He also felt relieved. But there was this feeling in his stomach that hadn’t gone away since the night before, when he first spoke to Marlene about the job. He had never done any kind of restaurant work before besides making fish deliveries to the back door of the kitchen. He had never waited on tables. He didn’t even know if he *wanted* to wait on tables; but it wasn’t about wanting anymore.

“You’ll be where at six, Jackie?” His mother had emerged from her sewing room, coming towards him with he new pin striped dress shirt she had made him--just because. She had been doing a lot of little things like that for him lately--more than usual.

“Arms up,” she mumbled at him, straight pins sticking out at him between her sealed lips.

Jack hadn’t thought about what he would tell his parents. No, actually, he had *thought* about it, but hadn’t actually imagined himself saying anything. He was sure his dad wouldn’t say anything to him about the new job, as he hadn’t said much to him in the past few weeks. His mother, on the other hand, would want to know, maybe even have something to say about the whole situation. Jack wasn’t sure. “Um, work. I start work tomorrow,” Keep it short and to the point, he thought.

“Oh?” she said through her clenched teeth and glanced up from the spot she was pinning underneath his armpit.

“Where?” She stopped pinning, not moving from her position, waiting for his reply.

“Big Joe’s. I’m gonna help Marlene out for a while.”

“Oh,” She went back to her pinning, moving to Jack’s other armpit. She concentrated on her work for a few more seconds before stepping back to give the shirt a final inspection, “All done. Be careful taking it off so you don’t get stuck with a pin,” She moved to make her way into the kitchen, “Just drape it over the chair in the sewing room when you’re done.”

Walking through the kitchen doorway, she called to him over her shoulder, “Want some lunch?”

“No.” He didn’t feel much like eating. The conversation had ended with no further questions, no prompting--nothing--leaving Jack alone to untangle himself from the new shirt.

“Ow!”

His mother reappeared in the doorway, "I told you to be careful."

Jack didn't respond, he was too busy trying to find the damned pin and pull it out of his arm.

The next morning, Jack was up at five. He was used to getting up at this early hour, since he had been doing so for almost as long as he could remember. He heard his father moving quietly about the house, trying not to wake his mother. This never worked. She always got up to pour his coffee and see him off.

J.B. Huffman didn't say a word as Jack walked past him sitting at the dining room table. Jack wondered if his mother had mentioned the job at Big Joe's to him. If she had, he gave no indication, just kept his eyes focused on his *Fisherman Magazine*, while sipping his coffee.

As Jack moved down the hall from his bedroom, J.B. got up from the table. Jack had no intention of sitting down, he just wanted to get away from the house. His mother came out of the kitchen, hair tousled from sleep, wearing her terrycloth bathrobe and carrying a near full pot of coffee.

"Coffee, Jack?"

"No thanks."

She placed the pot on the potholder in the centre of the table as Jack walked past.

J.B. Huffman was already at the front door lacing up his boots.

"Excuse me," Jack reached around him, fumbling to get his running shoes.

J.B. moved, but only an inch or two, forcing Jack to grovel around at his feet to reach his second shoe. Retrieving the shoe, Jack moved quickly, not bothering to untie and retie the laces, just thrusting his feet into them, breaking the back support in doing so. He grabbed his jacket off its peg beside the door.

“Bye,” he said to no one in particular, not wanting to see if there’d be a reply. J.B. had finished lacing his boots and was directly behind his son as he opened the front door.

“Bye,” Jack’s mother called after them. Jack was unsure if her voice sounded strained or just tired.

Without saying a word to one another, pretending not to notice the other’s existence, Jack and J.B. parted at the bottom of the front stairs, and split off in opposite directions towards their vehicles parked in the parking-lot-sized driveway. Jack slid behind the wheel of his car and fastened his seatbelt. He could hear the roar of the pickup’s engine at the other side of the driveway. J.B. pulled up to the edge of the drive, Jack following close behind. The pickup pulled out onto the highway; Jack steered his own car in the opposite direction. As he rounded the bend, Jack could see the tail-lights of his dad’s truck fading in the distance.

There was a single light on in the front of the restaurant and the signs still signified that the place was closed. Jack let himself in the restaurant through he unlocked front door and went into the dining area.

Marlene was seated at one of the tables, looking barely awake as she puffed on her morning cigarette. Einstein peered down from the wall above her.

“Morning,” he tried to sound cheerful and easygoing.

“Hey, Jack,” she slid the chair opposite her out from the table with her foot, “have a seat.”

“You awake yet?”

“Always,” she stretched her arms, reaching them towards the ceiling as high as they would go, and shook her head. “Smoke?” she offered Jack her pack.

“You know I don’t.”

“Good,” she smiled, “the less breaks you’ll be taking.” Seeming to have woken up, Marlene went on to explain what Jack’s new job entailed.

“The most important thing to remember, is to be *nice* to the customers. That way, if you screw up their order or take too long to wait on them, they won’t bitch.” She paused, “Well, they won’t bitch *as much*. Always remember to apologize for *everything*--if you reach over them, don’t say *excuse me*, say *I’m sorry*. If they change their mind and you have to change their whole order, always be sympathetic--*Oh, I understand, no problem!*” Marlene mimicked. “Any questions?”

“Customer’s always right?”

“Exactly.”

“So, what you’re saying is I’m a *food whore*.”

“Jack!” she laughed, “I guess.”

“Great.”

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. You’re the one who offered.”

She was toying with him and Jack knew this. “Hey, I said I’d help you out, didn’t I?”

“Okay then. Now, just a few more things to go over.” She rose from the chair and proceeded to show him around the restaurant, how to load up the food trays so he could carry most of an order without making too many trips, and how to balance the tray on his fingertips so his arm wouldn’t ache and the food wouldn’t spill.

“Got it?” She asked when she was through.

“Piece of cake,” he balanced one of the practice trays loaded with salt and pepper shakers high above his head.

“Show off. I just need to go over the short hand for the order slips with you--it makes it easier for *me*, rather than trying to decipher your handwriting.”

As Marlene fumbled around the countertop searching for a pen and paper, Jack resumed his seat at the table and stared up at the portrait of Einstein. The man looked almost angry beneath his heavy brows. Jack would have rather expected *fear*.

Marlene had flicked the lights on in her search, enabling the artist in Jack to study the painting closer. It was strange, really. Einstein had been hanging from the same spot on the wall for as long as he could remember, but he had never paid that much attention to him.

It was a less than mediocre piece of art--the lines too definite that separated the boat from the sea, the clouds not quite blended enough into the sky; but the artist had captured Einstein just the same. The poor definition and technique of stroke made Einstein stand out even more than he should have. He was out of place, looking as though he could pop right out of the painting if he had wanted to do so, but the canvas held him steady in his place.

Marlene, having retrieved her pen and pad, reclaimed a seat at the table--this time *beside* Jack.

“Where’d your dad get the painting?”

Marlene carelessly looked up at Einstein before going back to creating the figures on her pad, “Oh, I don’t know. It’s been there as long as I can remember...probably at some yard sale or something in town--he’s pretty big on those things. You should see what’s in the garage.”

“You never asked him where he came from?”

“The painting? No. I never really thought about it.”

“Oh.” The mystery remained. Still, Jack felt a new-found connection with the painting.

“Okay,” Marlene draped one arm around Jack’s chair and leaned in close beside him, “I wrote out some short-hand that you’ll need to learn for orders.”

Jack squinted at the six sets of squiggles on the page.

"I wrote out what they mean on the right-hand side. See?" She pointed with her pen.

"Thanks." It wasn't anything that needed studying. Jack tore the paper from the pad and put it in his shirt pocket.

"I expect you to use them on all of your orders, Jack."

"Stop *worrying*, Mar. Why'd'ya think I put them in such a safe place," he patted his shirt.

Marlene looked at her watch and moved her chair even closer to Jack's, "We still got twenty minutes 'til open."

Jack raised his eyebrows as Marlene leaned across him, her lips finding his, pushing them open with her tongue. The remainder of the twenty minutes (or seventeen due to the fact that they had to put on a fresh pot of coffee and turn the signs) they spent making out.

The restaurant had slowed down a bit and Marlene emerged from the kitchen to sit down at one of the half-cleared tables and smoke a cigarette. She put her feet up on the chair opposite her as she always did, "Busy morning," she remarked as Jack passed her with a cart full of dirtied dishes.

"It wasn't that bad."

"Well," she took a long drag on her cigarette, "busy since it's the end of summer," she finished saying as she exhaled the smoke.

"You'd know better than I would," he called from the kitchen.

"Guess you'll be glad to get outta here."

"I guess," he didn't want to seem too eager. He didn't want to hurt her feelings.

“You can come and sit down if you want. You won’t get fired or anything,” she laughed.

“I know.” Jack emerged from the kitchen. He didn’t really feel like sitting with her. He had been trying to distance himself over the past few weeks. He was leaving the village the next day and didn’t want to give her the wrong impression.

Marlene had always been really good about the kind of relationship they had. He had been honest with her from the very beginning; but that didn’t stop her from hoping that he might be lying or change his mind. She was a nice girl, and Jack owed her a lot for getting him the job, but he figured he didn’t own her *that* much. Sure, sometimes after work, after they cleaned the place up and turned off the lights, she’d let him feel around under her uniform. And sometimes, when they had no place to go and nowhere to be, and especially if they had the following day off, Marlene didn’t mind if Jack got even more carried away than that. It was *she* who initiated these moments; and if Jack had allowed their relationship to be more than casual, he knew she would let him do a lot more. But it had been quite clear that their relationship would go no further, and Marlene wasn’t *stupid*; so, their late night encounters went as far as they would go.

Jack reluctantly sat himself in the chair across from Marlene. It *did* feel good to sit.

“Don’t worry, Jack, I won’t bite.”

He smiled. She sure *wasn’t* stupid.

The two of them sat across from each other for a few seconds, not saying much. Marlene lit another cigarette, blowing the smoke in Jack’s direction and staring at him almost wickedly, sizing him up and down. She didn’t need to say anything. Her eyes were speaking for her. She was angry with him for the way he’d been acting towards her for the past few weeks and Jack couldn’t blame her. When they were working, it wasn’t that way at all. Marlene was her old self—easy-going, hardworking. It was what Jack had come to call her “professional” face. It was only the moments such as these, when the

two of them were sitting alone at one of the empty tables on opposite chairs, or after they finished their shift, that Marlene got that look in her eyes--that taunting, angry, hurtful look.

Jack knew it was his own fault. He had been avoiding her for the past few weeks. When they closed the restaurant and had no place to go, Jack simply did his clean up and left. He wasn't rude to Marlene, he just wasn't as friendly. He did not linger, waiting for the lights to go out so the two of them could fool around. He had decided it wasn't fair to either of them. He didn't want to leave Marlene with the wrong impression and he didn't want a relationship back home in the village waiting for him while he was away. Marlene had never voiced her feelings to Jack on his behaviour. There was no need. She talked around the matter, poking jabs at his aloofness from time to time--reminding him of the way things had been in case he had forgotten.

This being Jack's last day of work, his last day in the village, Jack was sure Marlene would say something to him about what was (or wasn't) going on. To his surprise, however, she didn't.

Jack tried not to look at her, for her eyes told him more than he wanted to know. Instead, he stared up at Einstein clutching the mast, faithfully hanging on.

"Going to Jody's tonight?" She interrupted his thoughts.

"I donno," he stared at her forehead instead of her eyes, "I got lots to do. Maybe," he added, "we'll see."

"You don't know?" She raised her eyebrows and blew a smoke ring, "Everyone goes to Jody's end-of-summer bash."

"I know. It's not that I don't want to," he made sure to chose the right words, "I got so much packing and stuff left to do before tomorrow."

"Not packed yet?" her eyes took on that look again.

Jack looked away, out the restaurant window, "Not quite. There's still some last-minute stuff I gotta find room for."

“Oh,” Marlene too looked out towards the parking lot. “Your dad still on your case?”

“Not really.” This much *was* true. His dad basically wasn’t on his *case* about anything. He just left Jack alone.

Marlene could have said more, could have asked more, but didn’t. The first of the lunch crowd had pulled into the parking lot and she went back into the kitchen to prepare.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” Jack set the paper place mats in front of the two middle-aged women who had seated themselves at one of the less cracked vinyl booths.

“Hi, Jack.”

“Jack! I haven’t seen you in so long! What are *you* doing here?”

Ruth O’Neil Pembroke and Betty Beauman had been lifelong friends. Betty had moved to Southern Ontario some years ago but everyone knew she came back for a few weeks each summer to visit her mother.

“I’ve been working here all summer,” was Jack’s casual reply.

“Really?” Betty sounded a bit too interested in this bit of conversation.

“Oh, yes,” Ruth interrupted. Betty, not having been to the village for a whole year, was not up on the latest gossip. Apparently, Ruth had forgotten to fill her in. “Jack has been accepted to an art program at one of the better universities in Southern Ontario. Toronto, I believe, right Jack?”

“Just outside.” Jack was ready for this particular conversation to end. “Do you ladies need menus?”

“Um, I don’t,” Ruth eyed Betty.

“Yes, please, Jack.”

“I’ll be right back,” he smiled at them, feeling slightly flustered.

Retrieving the menus, Jack could see Ruth frantically relaying the story of Jack’s employment to Betty. He could not hear a thing they said. Ruth’s voice had been

lowered a few notches so that all Jack could hear was a low hum coming from the table; but he knew by the changing expressions on Betty Beauman's face--first shock, then surprise, followed by pity--that the story Ruth told was his. Jack was used to people talking about it by now, but this was the first time anyone (besides John and Roy) had actually *discussed* his own life in front of him. He was used to the talk and rumors of the village, but it had always been done *behind his back*.

Jack returned to the table, with his waiter smile painted on his face, carrying a fresh pot of coffee and one menu.

"Menu," he said, still smiling, as he placed it in front of Betty, ignoring their obvious cut-off of conversation. "Coffee," he said next, his face beginning to hurt as he filled the two upturned porcelain mugs.

"And we didn't even have to ask!" Betty gave him a pitifully encouraging smile.

"I'll give you a few minutes before I come back for your order."

"Thanks, Jack."

Jack turned and made his way to the next waiting table. He was grateful that these customers weren't locals. This realization made his smile almost real. As he passed, Einstein scowled at the two women as they resumed their conversation.

Jack returned to the ladies' table a while later with their lunch order of hot beef sandwiches. As he did so, J.B. Huffman's truck pulled into the lot. Jack pretended not to notice the pickup as he set the plates in front of Betty and Ruth. Ruth shifted awkwardly in her seat, trying to pry Betty's eyes away from the truck by striking up whatever small talk she could think of.

"Wow! This looks great, doesn't it Betty?"

"Oh... yes, it certainly does." Betty's face turned colour realizing Jack had caught her curious eyeballs bobbing back and forth between father and son.

Jack kept his smile. It was her own fault. "Anything else here?"

“Maybe some ice water, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.”

John and Roy got out of the cab. Being the last Friday of the month, J.B. Huffman knocked off early in the afternoon to go to town and get his banking done, taking his wife along with him to get the house’s supply of groceries. Jack was glad that he was working a double shift. He had worked it out with Big Joe to do a double today instead of having to come in Saturday. This way, he could get a head start on his journey. He wouldn’t be getting home until close to ten that night, and he knew his parents would still be in town visiting their friends or having a late dinner. They almost never got home before midnight. Jack was glad of this

Betty waved out the large picture window beside the booth, trying to get J.B.’s attention. J.B. looked up in time to see Jack placing the sweating water glasses on the table. He did not acknowledge his son, instead nodded curtly at the two women. The women, embarrassed again for they hadn’t seen Jack approaching, smiled and gave J.B. a half-hearted wave. Jack did not smile and turned from the table before he could hear any more of their excuses or ignorant small talk.

Thinking he had made a temporary escape, Jack moved to the newest table of customers. As he was retrieving their menus, John and Roy came through the dining room entrance.

“Hey, *Waitress*,” Roy bellowed. Jack did not acknowledge them or Ruth and Betty’s shocked expressions. Instead, he called to a very busy Marlene through the divider window that he’d be taking a break, and went out to the store room to escape.

Marlene flipped the signs to CLOSED. She was still angry with Jack. He had left her to run the whole restaurant during its busiest time, and, not only that, was leaving town the next day without so much as an *"I'll miss you,"* or *"I'll be back at Christmas."* Fine with me, she thought. "I don't know how I'd put up with a moody artist anyways." She almost had herself convinced.

Jack swept the floor of the dining room, his back to Marlene. He didn't want to look at her, and hoped she didn't want to stay late with him or bring up anything that had to do with him and her and his leaving and the way he had been acting. He really did feel bad about the way things turned out, especially today, but decided it would be best if she was still mad at him when he left. The party at Jody's should be enough of a distraction for her, allowing her not to concentrate too much on him.

To make sure, and as a sort of peace offering and because there was still one more thing he needed to do alone, Jack stopped his sweeping to call to her (she had returned to the kitchen to clean the grill), "Hey, Marlene, why don't you take off to Jody's party a bit early? I'll finish up here."

"Is that kinda like a going-away present, Jack?" she hollered back, not bothering to hide the sarcasm behind her words

He ignored her tone, "Kind of."

"Okay," she popped her head through the divider window, "See ya around."

Marlene did not hesitate. She draped her apron through the window and grabbed her purse and keys from under the counter, making her way to the door. She stopped before exiting the restaurant and turned to Jack who had resumed his sweeping, hoping she would just walk out and end the night--or their "chapter" together--on an aloof note. She was going to, but changed her mind.

"So, will I see you there later?" One last attempt.

"Probably not. I've already said most of my good-byes, anyhow. Too much else to do."

“Yeah...I figured,” she swung open the door.

“Bye, Jack.”

“See ya.”

She replied, but was already out the door. Jack wasn't sure, but he thought he heard her reply angrily with a “*Whatever*”. Marlene always needed to have the last word.

Jack shook his head, sadly, and went back to his after-hours restaurant duties.

The next morning, hungover from Jody's end of summer bash, Marlene shuffled her way through the opening of the restaurant. It was her first day on her own since Jack had come to work earlier in the summer and she felt kind of strange without him being there--of course the hangover did not help.

As she flipped the sign to OPEN, J.B. Huffman pulled into the parking lot. Marlene had flicked on a fresh pot of coffee, knowing that his crew was almost always likely to finish at least one pot themselves.

She turned from the coffee maker to set the crew's usual table. Things were getting back to their normal routine, she thought, pretty soon no one would even remember Jack was even here. Lost in her thoughts, she was surprised to look up and see J.B. Huffman himself entering the restaurant. She hurried to place a third cup on the table.

J.B. seated himself in his old spot at the edge of the booth beside Roy.

“Hey,” Roy said loudly, laughing, “you're not our usual waitress.”

John joined in his laughter.

Marlene smiled through her pounding head, taking it all in stride and not looking at J.B.. “I thought you guys could use a change.”

"Hey, Marlene, where's Einstein today?" one of them, Roy or John, Marlene wasn't sure, asked.

"Huh?" her head was making it hard to focus.

"Einstein," J.B. Huffman spoke in his low, gruff voice, pointing past her.

"Einstein?" Confused, Marlene turned, following J.B.'s finger. She lost her smile.

On the wall facing the cracked, vinyl booths was a blank white square space, surrounded by nicotine stained walls. Einstein was gone.

Hooligans

Jesselyn Morris hates the feeling of the cold tiles of her bedroom floor under her feet. When her alarm goes off each morning, she makes sure to hit the snooze button and spend the nine minutes before it will go off again dreaming of soft pink plush carpets. Sometimes, if she hits the snooze button twice, she dreams of lying in a canopy bed that matches her dream carpets. The dream never gets past this, because Jesselyn never hits the snooze button three times. There is too much to do at her house and too many people depending on her--even though she is barely thirteen.

By the time Jesselyn drags herself from bed and across the cold floor of her bedroom, it is usually six-forty-eight a.m. Without allowing her much a chance to wake up, Jesselyn's day begins.

Jesselyn's mother has usually gone to work by the time she exits her bedroom. Her mother, Vicki Morris, works for J.B. Huffman Fishing Enterprises and has been doing so for the past three months. Jesselyn's father is absent from the Morris household and has been for some time. No one is quite sure where Randall Morris has gone. He left in the battered family station wagon early one Sunday afternoon and never came back.

"At least he didn't take the truck," Vicki Morris had said as she rearranged her children's shoes in the front hall closet. She was in the process of analyzing her children's footwear--weeding out the too ragged and too small, setting aside those that could be handed down to the next child and those whose soles were wholly intact. Vicki had planned on doing this for months, but had not gotten around to it until the day her husband left. She was not going to let his departure ruin her plans.

Vicki Morris had been working part time as the secretary at St. Anne's parish in the village, up until her husband left. She worked Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, and was always home when her kids got out of school. Randall's departure

was almost a blessing in disguise. Things hadn't been the same at the church since Father O'Reilly's passing, and she was relieved that she had an excuse to find work elsewhere.

Jesselyn was old enough to look after the children after school until she got home, so Vicki decided to look upon her new situation as a *fortune* instead of a *misfortune*, and seek work elsewhere. Unfortunately, the only full time work Vicki could find was at a small clothing store in town. It wasn't the greatest job (Vicki had enjoyed the challenge of helping run the church and found selling clothing to middle aged women rather dull), and the commute was bothersome, and it didn't pay much more than minimum wage--but it *was* full time, and Vicki took what she could get. This job lasted only six weeks--until the job with J.B. Huffman became available. Though Vicki did not have much experience with labour work, she applied because of the pay (which was much more than minimum wage) and for the hours (start early, end early, allowing her to spend time with her kids) and for the fact that there was no commute. J.B. Huffman, being an equal opportunity employer, hired Vicki without much thought. She turned out to be a hard worker; and though it was rough work and made her back ache and hands callused Vicki Morris was more than grateful for the job.

The children do not seem as affected by Randall's departure as they are about Vicki's working so much. They are not used to her being gone. They are used to her being home to see them off, or walk them to school before continuing on her way to the church, or drive them there when the weather is bad. Her children are not used to their routine being altered. They are still too young to adapt to change. Randall's leaving was a change, but not a much noticeable one. He did not communicate much with the kids; they were usually in his way. Vicki often wonders if he ever fully realized that they were there.

Jesselyn is Vicki's oldest child and has always been what Vicki considers to be her assistant. She has always helped out with the three younger children--watching after them, playing with them, keeping them out from under foot--so this change in their life

does not seem to affect Jesselyn. Vicki *does* feel bad for putting so much responsibility on Jesselyn, but there is not much else she can do. Jesselyn is one of the few people who has not been a disappointment in her life. She just seems to take everything in stride.

There are a lot of things that Vicki does not know about her daughter; that she worries they will not have enough money to support them; that she will not be able to wear her winter boots much longer because her feet have gotten so big--and if her mom finds out she will stress out about having to buy new ones; and lately, Jesselyn has been worrying about Christmas.

She is not sure if her mother has remembered about Christmas this year. She knows her mom is busy working and trying to make sure they look respectable and are well fed. She is afraid to mention that Christmas is coming soon. They have already started the countdown on the calendar on her grade eight classroom wall; however, there are still three and a half weeks left, so Jesselyn is *trying* not to worry. She must focus on the other things in her life. Like, right now, Jesselyn must focus on waking her brothers and sister and helping them get dressed and ready for school.

The first thing Jesselyn does after tiptoeing across the cold tiles of her room and out onto the carpeted hallway, is head for the kitchen to pour herself a cup of coffee. Her mother leaves the coffee maker on for her, and has instructed Jesselyn that she is only allowed half a cup with plenty of milk. Usually, there is enough in the pot for one full cup, which Jesselyn pours into her Happy Face mug, disregarding her mother's rule. If she does not hit the snooze button on her alarm and makes it to the kitchen before six forty-five, Jesselyn has time to drink two one-half cups. She enjoys this part of the day. It makes her feel more grown up. Even though she has to act older, Jesselyn usually doesn't feel much older than her thirteen years--but this she keeps to herself.

Jesselyn fixes her coffee with less milk than her mother suggests and much more sugar, rinses out the pot and settles herself at the kitchen table to go over the list her mother has left her. The list is almost always the same, telling her what clothes to put on

the children, what to feed them for breakfast, and to make sure all of them (including Jesse) brush their teeth before leaving for school. Once or twice a week the list asks her kindly to put in a load of laundry--usually towels or underwear and socks--and to make sure to put them in the dryer after school if Vicki is not yet home. Jesselyn almost always follows the list perfectly, and on days that she doesn't, she feels plain awful.

After finishing her coffee and rinsing out her cup, Jesselyn puts each of the children's lunches in their schoolbags, pours four bowls of cereal, puts spoons beside each bowl, and milk and sugar on the table. She double checks to make sure she has all of her homework finished from the night before, and heads back down the hallway to wake the twins and Charlie.

Jesselyn wakes the twins first. They are usually easier to handle. Since their mom got the new job with J.B. Huffman, and has had to leave extra early in the mornings, the twins, aged nine, have decided that they--especially Ashley--are to be Jesselyn's assistants as Jesselyn is to their mom. Jesselyn doesn't mind this. In fact, she is almost grateful--though the two *do* sometimes get in her way.

Charlie, aged five, is the hardest to rouse. She has learned, over the past few months, that if you sit on the edge of his bed and talk to him softly until he wakes, he is much easier to handle and does not cry so much for their mother. With the twins, all Jesselyn has to do is stand in the doorway of their room and say fairly loudly, "time to wake up," and the two spring right out of bed--Andrew flying from the top bunk. Whenever he does this, Jesselyn winces, and she has asked him not to do so in case he mistakenly falls one morning and breaks something--mainly one of his bones. This would worry their mother even more, but Andrew refuses, telling Jesselyn that he *knows* he won't fall and that he *likes* to get up this way--it makes him more awake.

Jesselyn is glad her mom makes the kids take their baths at night. She doesn't know how she'd manage *that* fight. It's bad enough trying to get Charlie dressed, and even worse, to brush his teeth. She has learned to make them all brush their teeth *before*

they get dressed, that way, she doesn't have to worry about them getting toothpaste on their clothes.

Charlie is good this morning and so are the twins. They are all hyper, as usual, but still do as they are told. Jesselyn is glad because she is tired and feels kind of grumpy. She couldn't sleep the night before because she was thinking of Christmas again, even though she promised herself she'd try not to. Her promises to herself almost never work.

As the children dutifully eat their cereal, spilling as little milk as possible, Jesselyn's thoughts float towards the holidays again. When their dad had been there, Jesse's mom had been at home all the time. Jesselyn misses her being around. She didn't have to get up so early before her mom started working so much, and there had been no lists for her to follow. Jesselyn's mom took care of everything. There wasn't anything she forgot. Her dad hadn't been home much when he *was* there. He had worked all day and went off hunting and fishing with his friends when he had time off; but this didn't matter to her mom. She had never worried then. Now, Vicki worries all the time and she doesn't have time for lots of things--like driving them to the library in town, or taking them for breakfast on the weekends.

Christmas is now coming fast, and Jesselyn knows her mom doesn't have time for that either. She thinks maybe her mom will give her the money to go Christmas shopping. She can probably get a ride to town to the mall with one of her friend's moms, or maybe one morning her mom will leave a list of decorations that the kids can put up. Ashley will like helping with that. Then, there is the matter of getting the Christmas tree. Her dad always brought one in from the bush that he chopped himself, and he let Jesselyn and the rest of them decorate it. This was Jesselyn's favourite part of Christmas. Last year, her dad actually took her with him and showed her what kind of tree to look for and how to cut it down. He always brought home a *small* tree. Not too small--taller than Jesselyn--but small enough, he said, to cut pretty easy with a handsaw.

Jesselyn was proud of the tree she had helped pick, and her mom had been proud of her too. This year, she didn't know what they'd do.

After breakfast, the kids brush their teeth and get dressed and bundled for school. The twins let Charlie brush his teeth first because he needed more time to get dressed. Dressing Charlie is a struggle for Jesselyn because he still thinks he's a baby. He doesn't understand that he's *the* baby, not *a* baby; and no matter how many times they try to tell him he's a big boy (because "only big boys get to go to school") Charlie does not believe them. It does not help that the older kids at school call him and his classmates "kindergarten babies". Charlie uses this to his advantage.

"C'mon, Charlie, *help* me," Jesselyn tells him as she struggles to get his feet into the wool socks her mom has instructed him to wear.

"No."

"Please, Charlie? Do you want to be late for school?"

"My teacher don't get mad. I'm a Kindergarten Baby," he replies, trying to kick her away.

Jesselyn is beginning to lose her patience. If she wasn't so tired, she knows it wouldn't seem so impossible. She calls to the twins, "Hey, are you guys almost ready?"

"I'm fixing my hair."

"Hurry up, Ash. I need help with Charlie."

"I'm trying. It's sticking up again."

Jesselyn can hear her sister wetting her hairbrush under the faucet and feels a twinge of guilt. Vicki had made Ashley cut her hair short because Jesselyn wasn't very good at helping her style it, and the kids at school had started to make fun of the lopsided braids Jesselyn created. So, one Saturday afternoon, Vicki drove Ashley to town and had the lady at the hair salon cut it into a short pixie. Ashley cried the whole hour's ride home, and no matter how many times her mom and Jesselyn told her how cute she looked, she refused to stop.

Now, though weeks had passed, Jesselyn still hears her sister whining about her new haircut every morning as she gets ready for school.

"You look good, Ash," Jesselyn tells her, as she makes sure to tell her every morning since her haircut.

Ashley has just entered Charlie's room, pouting, "I look stupid."

"No you don't...at least the kids aren't making fun of it anymore," she passes Ashley a sock.

Ashley doesn't say anything in return. She begins to tickle her brother in hopes that he will eventually lose his sucky mood and let them finish getting ready.

Relieved, Jesselyn heads to her own room to get dressed.

At eight twenty-five, the children leave the house. Jesselyn makes sure to lock the door, twice checking to make sure the key her mom had made for her is fastened securely around her neck on her dad's old boot lace. Vicki makes her take the key in case she is not yet home when the children get back from school. The kids race ahead, jumping in the snowbank at the end of the drive, laughing and shrieking as they dodge each other's snowballs. Vicki is strict about snowball throwing. She is afraid that it may cause one of her children to lose an eye. Vicki once knew a kid who was blinded by a snowball. Jesselyn has never believed this story and thinks it's funny her mom would try to fool them with it. What is even funnier, is that Vicki has never been one to make up motherly lies. Jesselyn has decided that the story must be something her grandma told her mom when *she* was a kid. Her grandma is full of these kinds of tales. Jesselyn is forced to listen to them long distance every Sunday morning.

After securely locking the door, Jesselyn bounds down the driveway after her brothers and sister, hollering at them to get out of the bank. Next door, Jerry Walters is

standing on his front steps dressed in an unzipped parka, smoking a cigarette. His wife hates him to smoke in the house, so when she's around, instead of listening to her complaints, he smokes outside--no matter what the temperature.

Jerry has been retired for two years. He spends a lot of time out in the yard. From his front steps he sees much of what goes on in the village in the mornings, as his house is in the middle of the main strip. He has been watching the Morris children from the time they moved in, shortly after his retirement. In Jerry's opinion, Randall Morris was smart to leave. His children are *hooligans*. They never *shut up*, their words carry across their yard into his own. Even when they are inside the house, he can still hear them when they have the windows open. They are always hollering or cursing or doing things they're not supposed to. This is why he makes sure to watch them with a close eye. You could never be too sure as to what children may be up to these days.

Mr. Walters watches the four children approaching. The two middle kids are throwing snowballs, laughing obnoxiously. The youngest is crying as he usually is. Jerry Walters can not stand the sound of a child's whine. His own children knew how to act when they were that age. He made sure that his kids knew how to *behave*.

Jerry knows that the Morris kids are nothing but trouble; but his *wife* feels *sorry* for them. Jerry has no sympathy. Maybe, if their mother was home once and a while, they would not be so out of hand.

He watches the oldest girl as she stops at the end of his driveway to tie her boot.

"Wait for me, Charlie!" She yells at the crying youngest who keeps walking ahead of her. Standing upright, she sees Jerry staring at her. She stares back.

Jesselyn does not like Mr. Walters. Once, when she had gone to the store to pick up some things for her mom, Jesselyn overheard Mr. Walters telling Karen, the store owner, how her dad had left and how, in his opinion, he didn't blame Randall, for the kids were a bunch of screaming hooligans. He had then said that he didn't feel sorry for them one bit.

Jesselyn didn't expect anyone to feel sorry for them, and didn't know why anyone would want to. When she had gotten home, she told her mom what Mr. Walters had said. Vicki laughed and said that he was just a nosey old man who had nothing better to do. "Ignore him, Jess. Most people do, anyhow."

Jesselyn tries to ignore him, but it bothers her to know he thinks these things about her family. She gives Mr. Walters a big red-mittened wave as she stands at the edge of his driveway--one that extends her whole arm. "Morning, Mr. Walters," she yells to him. Andrew and Ashley are now balancing single file across the Walters' snowbank. She decides not to tell them to get down, as her mother might.

Jerry Walters just keeps staring at Jesselyn. He never talks to the Morris children.

Where she is stopped at the end of his drive, Jesselyn reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a half empty pack of cigarettes. She stole them from her mother and has been carrying them around in her pocket for the past month. Vicki didn't say anything to her about the missing pack, and to be honest, Jesselyn doesn't even know *why* she took it. She hardly ever smokes them, only when she feels stressed. Earlier this week, she smoked two because she was worrying about Christmas, and needed to relax. Smoking is not helping. She is still worrying, so she thinks she is probably smoking wrong. Still, she does not stop. She likes the *idea* of smoking, and it's not like she does it all the time.

Jesselyn is not really going to smoke a cigarette at this particular moment. She has pulled one out of its pack for Mr. Walters' benefit. He has not stopped staring, so she decides to give him something to stare at. The children are up ahead, and have finally stopped to wait for her. They see her put the cigarette to her lips.

"*Smoking causes cancer!*" Ashley hollers. She tells their mother this all the time, as well, and had once even taken it upon herself to force her mom to quit by flushing her cigarettes down the toilet. Vicki always has a carton in the house, so one pack really didn't make much of a difference. Ashley was punished accordingly (dish duty for two weeks) and not tempted to do this again.

Jesselyn is not worried about the kids telling her mom about the cigarettes. She has told them that they are not to do anything to worry or upset her. The incident with Ashley's hair was enough to teach them their lesson.

Jesselyn holds the cigarette between her lips and gives Mr. Walters another wave before hurrying to catch up with her family. Jerry Walters stands on his front steps shaking his head. "Hooligans," he mutters under his breath, before dropping his cigarette and crushing it with his boot. He returns inside to his wife.

Vicki Morris has not yet mentioned Christmas to her children. Jesselyn has waited another whole week, and there still has been no mention. It's not that Vicki doesn't realize that Christmas is coming, but she knows she still has a few weeks. Her kids are used to her having an early start on things and these days she does not have the time. She wonders if Randall realizes that Christmas is coming, and if he'll attempt to contact his children. She doubts this. He has only attempted to contact them once, and that was to inform them he would be calling again when he got himself settled in somewhere.

Last Christmas, he actually took Jesselyn to cut the tree with him. Vicki had been surprised with this attempt, and Jesselyn was elated with it. She had been so proud, dragging their little tree up the driveway. Vicki smiles at the memory and makes a mental note, when her schedule settles down a bit, to take them all out to pick out the perfect tree.

It is getting late, and the kids have been in bed for about an hour. She feels bad that she doesn't spend as much time with them as she had before. Vicki notices that Jesselyn's light is still on. She can see it illuminating under the crack between the door and tiles, and decides to go in and talk with her, and find out how things are going.

Vicki knocks on Jesselyn's bedroom door, not wanting to barge in, respecting her daughter's privacy. She can hear the rustling of paper and figures Jesselyn must be reading. She has been getting into Teen Romances lately. Vicki smiles, remembering her own Teen Romance phase. Jesselyn is growing up, she thinks, knocking a second time.

Jesselyn is surprised to hear the knock at her door. Sometimes Ashley or Charlie will knock late at night if they have woken up and can't get back to sleep, or if they've had a bad dream. When this happens, Jesselyn lets them crawl into bed with her. They usually fall asleep quickly. Jesselyn is glad of this because their interruption does not keep her awake for long and her own sleep isn't disturbed. She has instructed them that they are to *never*, under any circumstance, waken their mother. She needs her sleep more than anyone.

The kids haven't been in bed for very long, so Jesselyn knows that it must be her mother knocking. If her brother or sister were to come to her room at all, it would be much later. Jesselyn is disturbed with her mother's intrusion. She is busy writing--making list of things that need to be done before Christmas, and slotting things in their appropriate category. Andrew, Ashley, and Charlie have already made out their Christmas wish lists and given them to her. They have been bugging her to give them to their mom and she said she would--when she thought the time was right. The kids have been really good about not mentioning presents to Vicki. Jesselyn has had a chat with them, putting into their heads that *maybe* Mom was working on a surprise and that's why she was so tired, and *maybe* if they mentioned Christmas to her they'd ruin it. They seem to buy this excuse, and for all Jesselyn knows, it is *true*. She doesn't know *what* her mom's plans are. She really *could* be planning some kind of surprise.

Jesselyn quickly puts her notes in order and slides them under her bed. "Come in," she calls from under her covers

"Hey," Vicki sits down on the edge of her daughter's bed, "Whatcha doin'?"

"Nothin'. Just thinkin'."

Vicki feels guilty. She realizes Jesselyn must have been working on homework and feels bad that she hasn't had time to do it. Her daughter's homework should not have to suffer. "How's school?"

"Fine," Jesselyn thinks of the lists under her bed. She wants to show them to her mother, but knows this probably isn't the right time. "How's work?"

"Oh," Vicki plays with a string poking out from Jesselyn's comforter, "work's, work--I guess." The comforter is old. She should get her a new one. Maybe a pink one. Jesselyn's always liked pink.

They sit in silence, Vicki playing with the comforter string, Jesselyn finding a string of her own. She stares curiously at Vicki, "Maybe she wants to talk about Christmas," she thinks. She waits.

Vicki doesn't know what she is doing sitting on Jesselyn's bed, or what she wants to tell her. She knows she should tell her "thank you," and that she's grateful and proud of all her help, but she doesn't. Jesselyn already knows all that stuff and Vicki doesn't want to embarrass her. Thirteen-year-old girls embarrass easy, she remembers.

Jesselyn can't think of anything to say, either. She wants to start a conversation, but all the things she can think of telling her mother are things that might make her worry.

"I'm tired," Vicki finally says.

"Me too," Jesselyn sympathizes, then feels bad about admitting this.

"I'll let you get to sleep. Night, kiddo," she leans over and kisses Jesselyn's forehead. She doesn't look so much like a little girl anymore, Vicki thinks, eyeing Jesselyn in her plaid pajamas.

"See you after school, Mom."

"Yep," she flicks off Jesselyn's light and heads down the hall to her own room.

Jesselyn lies awake staring at the darkened ceiling of her bedroom. Here mom has turned off her light so she can not work on her list. She drifts off, thinking about her mother playing with the string on her comforter and worrying about Christmas.

Jesselyn watches Jerry Walters stringing lights on the tree in his front yard. He balances himself on an unsteady step-ladder, with two connecting, tangled strings of Christmas lights draped across his shoulders. He can hear the snow crunch under the ladder's legs as he shifts his weight. The tree isn't even all that tall, but his wife insists that he make sure the lights curve around it evenly to the very peak at the top.

Jerry hates putting up lights. It is too much work and it's so damned cold. He can hear the Morris hooligans leaving their house. He wishes he would have waited for them to have gone to school before he began his chore. It is bad enough having to put the lights up, but having those kids around while he is doing it makes Jerry wish he hadn't even gotten out of bed. The Morris crunch past Jerry Walters house along the snow packed road, with Jesselyn taking up the rear as usual. It has snowed a lot in the past few weeks, and Jesselyn thinks that perhaps this will cue her mother to begin preparing for Christmas. It is their last week of school before the break, and Jesselyn is now worrying constantly. She has placed the kids' Christmas lists, along with her own, in an old envelope that one of her grandma's letters came in; and one of these days she is going to pass this envelope along to her mom. One of these days--she just has to decide which one.

Jesselyn notices that Mr. Walters has a lot of lights and they are getting tangled with each pull. He has too many for such a small tree. He should have strung them one string at a time, Jesselyn thinks, like her dad used to.

Mr. Walters has caught her standing at the edge of his driveway watching him. He ignores her, turning his back. The ladder sways because of the quick movement of his turn.

“Um, be careful, Mr. Walters,” Jesselyn offers. She really didn’t want to see him fall. Jerry Walters turns and gives Jesselyn a hard stare. Jesselyn begins to run, yelling at the kids in front of her to do the same. She catches up with Charlie and grabs his hand, dragging him behind her as he cries, “Ow, Jess, stop it!”

He knows he does not have the stamina to chase the hooligans, and had not even considered doing so. He shakes his head and continues to hang the lights.

Vicki picks at one of the thick calluses that has formed on the palm of her hand. Hauling the nets in this weather have left her hands to resemble more and more those of a man--regardless of the thick gloves she wears. The last time she was in town, Vicki bought a pumice stone and has been trying to rub it on the calluses while taking her shower each evening. She has been faithful to the task, but to no avail. Her hands are rough and coarse--like those of the men she works with.

Vicki has just told Jesselyn that *she* will have to look after the kids on the break because J.B. can not allow her the time off. Vicki has to work every day until Christmas Eve, then back on the twenty-seventh. The lake is not close to being frozen, and though she is tired and her back is almost always aching, and she could use a longer break, she is thankful that she will be able to work until at least mid January. If the lake does freeze, it’ll give her at least a month-- maybe closer to two--off. If not, she knows J.B. will give them all a week off in February like he has promised. But February is a long way off, and Vicki will worry about it later.

Right now, all she can see is the look on Jesselyn’s face when she told her how she needed her to watch the kids for almost the whole Christmas break. Vicki can not quite place the look that had crossed her daughter’s face. She is certain it is one she’s never seen before. There was something more to it than disappointment, something she

just can't place. "I'm tired," is what she concludes. She decides to take a hot bath to soothe her back, and give her calluses some effort with the pumice stone, before turning in for the night.

It is dark behind the shed, but not so dark that Jesselyn can't see what's around her. Or, maybe it is. Maybe it's just that she knows her way around the yard so well that she doesn't need light. She can walk anywhere, not knowing where she's going, but knowing where she is--as long as she's in her own yard.

Jesselyn crouches down in the snow and lights her cigarette. Her mom's taking a bath and doesn't know she's out here. She would be upset if she knew, but Jesselyn needs time to think--about what, she's not exactly sure.

A little while ago, her mom told her that she'd be depending on her to stay with the kids over the break. Jesselyn wasn't really all that surprised. Her mom *needs* to work, and besides, Jesselyn *is* thirteen. She's taken care of the kids before. It's not really a big deal.

She puffs on the cigarette, wondering if she is inhaling properly. Smoking is something she has taught herself. She exhales the smoke, creating a cloud against the dark sky. Through the fence she can see the Walterses' tree, shining from the other side of the driveway. Jesselyn likes the way the green and white lights sparkle in the night. She smiles. The lights are so pretty that they make her sad.

Jesselyn's cigarette sizzles as she puts it out in the snow. She makes sure to bury the butt deep, before heading back to the house. Walking back, she notices the lights from the Walterses' tree are lighting up her old footprints in front of her.

It is the fourth day of Christmas break. Vicki left for work a while ago. Jesselyn has been sitting in the living room chair for what seems like hours. She is keeping the children busy by letting them go through the Christmas decorations she brought out from the storage closet earlier. They are having fun pulling out the old decorations, finding their stockings, and detangling garland. Jesselyn is glad to keep them busy.

Jesselyn has been thinking about her plan. She thinks that maybe she is stalling. She knows that she should just go ahead and do it, get it over with--as Vicki would say when she is faced with a problem that needs to be solved. After a while, Jesselyn rises from her chair. She knows what she has to do.

"I'll be back in a while," she tells the kids, "I have to run an errand for Mom. Andrew, you're in charge."

"Alright!"

Jesselyn pulls on her boots, finds a pair of old gloves, and heads out to the shed in search of the proper tools for her project.

Jerry Walters has come out of the front door of his house and is standing on his front steps when he notices, on the other side of the fence, Jesselyn emerge from Randall's old tool shed. She is carrying a handsaw in her red mittened hand. Jerry doesn't say anything, but watches the girl as she climbs over the snowbank which separates the driveway from backyard, and walks down to the road. She turns right at the driveway's end, heading in the opposite direction from Jerry's house. Jerry swears she is trying to conceal the handsaw between her armpit and torso. He knows she is up to something, and with a saw involved, knows that she can't be up to anything good. Before he can stop himself, and without knowing why, Jerry Walters finds himself following the girl.

Jesselyn is lost in her own thoughts. She did not see Jerry Walters watching her from his front steps, nor does she notice that he is following her now. She briskly walks past the last three houses on her street, trying to be careful with the saw so none of the neighbours will see it and get suspicious. She is afraid that its sharp teeth might cut through the nylon material of her parka. She can feel them rubbing up against her side. She does not have time to worry about this now. She will worry about it after she gets back. Right now, she has more important things to consider.

Jesselyn climbs the snowbank at the street's dead end. Jerry is not so far behind her. There is a path there, one that the snowmobilers use, so Jerry can keep a safe distance without fearing he may lose her. His legs feel stiff as he climbs the bank. "You are an old fool," Jerry tells himself, though he walks on. His curiosity has been sparked. Jerry believes this to be the most adventure he's had since he retired. He feels excited and anxious as to what the girl may be up to, and can't wait to reveal her true nature to everyone, after he finds out.

Jerry rounds the curve of the snowmobilers' path. His glasses have begun to fog and he has lost track of her. He stops to wipe them with his glove. Replacing them, he realizes that he has lost her. Holding his breath to hear better and keeping perfectly still, Jerry perks up his ears. He feels like a dog lost in the bush. He squints his eyes, slowly moving his head; there, not too deep in the trees to his left, he spots her. She is crouching on a slight path, one that looks like it has only been used once or twice before--probably by people gathering sticks for kindling when they have run out of the regular stock in their homes.

Jerry does not attempt to follow the Morris girl down the path. She would see him, or at least hear him coming. He stays close to the largest tree at the side of the snowmobiler's path and watches from a distance. She is slowly moving in small circles.

He thinks maybe she is performing some kind of witchcraft, then chuckles to himself for paying too much attention to the shows on television.

Jesselyn knows this path. It is where she and her father found their tree last year. She has found the stump of last year's tree; it is barely visible in the snow. Sometimes, in the summer, she takes the kids this way to pick berries. Blueberries grow well in this part of the bush. She is not afraid of animals because she knows that she is too close to the houses on the street for any to stray this far, and most of them are hibernating right now anyhow. She has learned in school that if a bear does happen to wake from its hibernation, and if it does happen to find her, she is to roll in a ball and play dead until it leaves her alone.

Jesselyn finds what she is looking for a few feet from last year's tree stump, and she is pleased. The tree is slightly larger than that of the year before, but Jesselyn believes that she can manage it. It will look nice in their living room, especially once it is decorated. Jesselyn falls to her knees, positioning herself under the tree, and with the handsaw, begins cutting.

Jerry Walters, realizing what the girl is up to, makes his way towards her along the small foot path. He can not believe what he sees. She could kill herself. If he wasn't here to stop her, who knows what would happen?

Jesselyn hears steps coming towards her. She stops, slowly crawling out from the tree. She keeps the saw gripped tightly in her right fist for her protection. Her heart races, her breath coming in short gasps. Something grabs her elbow. Before she has a chance to swing the saw, or roll herself into a ball and play dead, a voice stops her.

"What are you *doing*?"

Jesselyn finds herself face to face with Jerry Walters. It is the first time the man has spoken to her. This, along with the fear of being caught, has made Jesselyn totally speechless. She stands there blinking at him, her arms caught in his grip.

Jerry Walters faces the girl, holding her shoulders, waiting for her reply. She stares back, blinking at him, then suddenly begins to cry.

“We--we don’t have a tree...and my mom is busy...and...” she sobs.

Jerry Walters grits his teeth and shakes his head. He wants to be angry with her and yell at her. He wants to be right; but he can’t. He feels his heart melting as he takes the saw from her hand and moves towards the tree.

It is two-thirty that same afternoon and Jerry Walters is purposely stationed on his front steps smoking a cigarette. Vicki Morris pulls her truck into her driveway next door. Jerry pretends not to notice her, staring at the street ahead. When he is sure her back is turned, Jerry follows her with his gaze.

Vicki reaches out to turn the doorknob, but before her hand even gets to it, the door surprisingly bursts open.

“Surprise!” Jerry hears from his post next door.

Vicki Morris’ hands fly up, covering her mouth in shock. Jerry swears he can see the lights from the tree lighting her path as she steps over the threshold.

This time Jerry is smiling, as he butts out his cigarette and goes back inside.

Preparations for Dying

Fran O'Neil knew that she was going to die. She could feel it in her bones and in the warm musty air that hung in her room and clung to its draperies. She saw it in her children's faces and in the way they huddled in corners and spoke in fast whispers. Most of all, Fran O'Neil knew she was going to die because she was old. Very old. And dying is what old people did.

No one knew exactly how old Fran O'Neil was. In fact, sometimes, Fran O'Neil herself forgot her age. The only thing that knew Fran O'Neill's true age, and the secrets behind its long, near ending life, was the boot box under layers of old blankets and dust on the shelf of her bedroom closet.

Fran O'Neil lived in a large two-story house that her son Russell had built her when he was still a very young man. Now, Russell's hair was streaked gray and tiny lines had appeared around the corners of his mouth; and Fran had moved from her large spacious bedroom in the upstairs of the house to the room between the kitchen and parlor that had once been the dining room. The long dining room table and six good chairs had been taken by Fran's daughter and placed in her own dining room as an early inheritance. She did not, of course, ask Fran's permission to take the set, just whisked it away thinking it to be rightfully hers. It was in a way, Fran supposed, and it didn't really matter much now, for Fran O'Neil would soon be dead.

Most of Fran's belongings were still in her upstairs bedroom with the exception of her queen-size bed which Russell and her son-in-law had dismantled and dragged down the stairs earlier in the year. They put it back together and set it up in the centre of the dining room, without asking Fran's permission. Fran would have preferred the bed to be pushed against the wall so she could look out the window at the hummingbirds at the feeder. Fran didn't bother mentioning this to her family. They wouldn't have listened or they would have tried to convince her that the middle of the room was best.

Everyone in her family treated Fran as though she were an invalid. Just because she was old, and just because she was going to die soon did not mean she was an invalid. In fact, all of Fran's faculties worked fine and she could move about from one room to the next without much assistance. It was true that she was slow--Fran O'Neil would admit that; and it was true that she couldn't see too well without her glasses--but who could at that age? Fran O'Neil was fine in body and mind, and just wanted people to leave her alone for a while and let her contemplate her death and rest in peace.

Lately, Fran O'Neil found her mind wandering to the boot box safely hidden on her bedroom shelf. No one but Fran knew that it was there, or even of its existence. She had collected its contents carefully, keeping them hidden from everyone most of the years of her adult life. From time to time, in her younger days, Fran would lock herself in her room, take the box from its hiding place, and go over its contents. When Hal was living, its hiding place had been the middle drawer of her bureau. She had always kept the drawer locked, its key hidden in the antique cigarette case her Great-aunt Jean had given her for her twenty-first birthday. Fran never smoked and the case had always remained empty. She probably wouldn't have even had to lock the drawer where the box was hidden, seeing as Hal didn't even know of its existence. Besides, he never would have thought about looking in her bureau for anything; that was just the type of person Hal had been.

Because Fran and everyone around her believed the end to be near, Fran felt it was of great importance to go through the box one last time. This would prove to be a difficult task seeing as Fran was rarely allowed to be alone. She wasn't even allowed to lock the bathroom door in case she had a stroke on the toilet or had a dizzy spell and knocked herself out on the bathtub. Fran believed that this was all a bunch of crap and that sometimes people just didn't know when to back off.

Fran's biggest obstacle was her daughter, Ruth, who had taken it upon herself to care for Fran in her last days. It wasn't as though she really wanted to do so, but Ruth

believed it was her duty as eldest daughter to take care of her mother when the end drew near. Ruth didn't know, at the time of her mother's first signs of decline, that the end would be drawn out over two-and-a-half years. Her mother *looked* like she could go at any time with her frail form and prune-like appearance--she was just so incredibly stubborn! Ruth believed that this trait of her mother's was what kept her lingering near the brink of death, allowing her to pull herself back and make everyone's life hell. Ruth's plan was to soften her mother until the last traces of stubbornness had disappeared and she could rest (and die) in peace. The plan had proved to be a failure, but she refused to give up. The old lady had to come around sooner or later.

Ruth made Fran sick. She was always so disgustingly nice. Fran knew that this was abnormal. No one, *no one* could be that nice for two years without once getting the slightest bit angry. Not even when Fran insulted her, or purposely refused to eat the soft (*but nutritious*) mush she tried to force on Fran at breakfast, did she get mad.

Ruth (*thank the Lord*) did not live with Fran. She had been trying to get Fran to move in with her for some time, but Fran refused. Ruth lived down the street from Fran, and had for the past twenty-five years. Fran believed this to be somewhat pathetic. Her daughter had never ventured much further than the outskirts of the village (and even then, it was only to the larger department stores of the nearest town, for they had better selection). She had married one of the village locals, Bob Pembroke, who was a truck driver and away from home a lot. Bob was away far too much for Fran's liking. Since the two had no children, his absence allowed Ruth to be nosing around Fran's place even more.

Fran supposed that the only adventure her daughter ever had was the constant complaint that Fran should move in with her and not be alone in such a large house. When she and Russell sat on the edge of Fran's bed and tried to persuade her to do so during her bout with the winter flu, Fran laughed at them.

“Don’t you think I know what you’re up to? Your not getting your mitts on my house--not ‘til I’m dead, anyhow.”

“Oh, Mother, we don’t want your money. It just worries us having you here all by yourself. Isn’t that right, Russell?”

“Yes, I agree with Ruth, Mother,” was Russell’s line. He’d rather agree with his sister than have to worry about making any of the decisions on his own. He did not like complications in his life. He had built his mother a house. He had done his job.

“I don’t care what you think,” Fran sat up to glare at her children, “What’s the worst that could happen? I could *die*. Doesn’t bother me, it’s gonna happen sooner or later!” Here, Fran lapsed into a series of coughs. She hated the sound of her coughing--a phlegmy back racking grotesque call, signifying her weakness. She sat back on the pillows.

“Oh, Mother, see what happens when you get yourself worked up like that? Wouldn’t it be better just to give in?” Ruth’s logic was if the old woman was going to take so long to die, she could do it in Ruth’s house so her own life wouldn’t have to be put on hold. Might as well inconvenience them both. She shouldn’t be the only one forced to suffer.

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’m not a child, Ruth.”

“No one said you were, Mother, did we, Russell?”

“No, Ruth, no one did.”

“Well shut up then! I’m not going anywhere ‘til I’m dead, end of discussion. I’m gonna die in this house, just like I been livin’ in it--*alone*!” You ain’t got nothin’ to worry about anyhow, Ruth. You’re here all day and you just live down the street. I’m fine. Be better if you just left me alone.”

“Mother, please be reasonable.”

“I *said* I’m not talking about this anymore.” With that, the discussion ended and Fran leaned over the side of the bed and threw up on her daughter’s shoe.

So, Fran had gone on living in her house and Ruth went on taking care of her mother by day and sleeping in her own house at night. No matter how many times her mother told her to *get out, fuck off, or go away*, Ruth stayed. She attributed her mother's attitude to old age and nothing more. It wasn't as though her mother didn't really *like* her, she was just miserable at having lived so long and needed to take it out on someone--that someone being Ruth since she was usually the only one around.

Fran, however, really *did* want Ruth to go away. She hated being doted on and knew she could get along alright without her daughter's constant supervision. She missed her free space. She missed being able to do what she wanted when she wanted. She missed choosing what she wanted to wear each morning, eating what she liked, and keeping the t.v. on all day.

It wasn't as if she actually *watched* the t.v., in fact, she hadn't actually watched a program since MAUDE went off the air in the late seventies. She loved Bea Arthur as MAUDE. Maude never listened to anyone and always said and did what she wanted. Everything since had paled in comparison, but Fran still had to have the set on. She had become addicted to the television's hum, and its absence contributed to Fran's irritability.

Ruth didn't want her mother staring idly at the television all day. She wanted her to keep her mind active. Fran believed she was just trying to move the whole dying process along more quickly.

Ruth arrived each morning around eight a.m. She would let herself in the back door, with the key she had made for herself (much to Fran's disapproval), and proceed to fix Fran's breakfast. The kitchen was off Fran's newly constructed bedroom. Ruth would try to keep the noise down, but no matter how quiet she was, she always seemed to waken her mother. Upon hearing Fran stir, Ruth would rush through the open doorway to the old dining room and help her mother into her robe and slippers. This act began the first of the day's quarrels.

"I can do it myself!" Fran would begin.

"Mother, I never said you couldn't, did I?"

"Well, why won't you let me then?"

"You just woke up, everyone gets disoriented when they first wake up."

"I didn't just wake up! I heard you come in. You make more noise than a rhinoceros in that kitchen."

"Mother, why must you be so disagreeable? I do so much for you, can't you even try to be grateful?" Ruth would then attempt to guide her mother by the elbow into the kitchen.

"I never asked for your help!" Fran would then try to snatch her arm away, almost always losing her balance. Ruth would reach out to steady her, forcing Fran to keep quiet.

Fran hated Ruth's schedule. Each morning, she would start her mother out with a medium sized bowl of oatmeal (*mush*) with only half a teaspoon of brown sugar and skim milk. Fran had actually *liked* oatmeal before Ruth took charge. She would heap on brown sugar, use real cream, and have it in the dining room with her coffee while watching the hummingbirds in their feeder out the window.

Now, Ruth made her eat her flavourless mush in the kitchen with a glass of cranberry juice to wash it down (*good for the kidneys*) while she read her mother the newspaper she had picked up earlier that morning. Fran hated the way Ruth read, enunciating each syllable of the words slowly; however, no matter how much Fran complained, her daughter would not give up. Even though her mother was old, she should still be aware of the events in the outside world.

Eventually, Fran gave up on her complaining and learned to tune her daughter out. She noticed that Ruth's enunciation could be taken as a chant if one ignored the words and focused solely on tone. This provided Fran with the opportunity to lapse into a

meditative state, transporting her from one experience to the next--past present and future.

It was during one of these trances that Fran, almost unintentionally, developed her plan.

Ruth's chanting allowed Fran the opportunity to float easily in and out of scenes of her life. Its ominous rhythm planted her in a variety of situations. Though the scenarios varied, Fran could watch and adapt to each, floating in and out like a ghost observing its past life. There was never any sound--no music, no conversation--nothing besides the monotonous tone underneath Ruth's words. Fran, inside herself, watched scenes of her life pass before her. She was never a participant, just a mere observer, learning to become contented with watching herself and her family enjoying the pleasures of her never-ending life. It was the only time, of late, when Fran felt at peace with herself and the world around her. Ruth's chanting temporarily melted her bitterness and soothed her aging.

Fran often wondered, during these observations, what the beautiful young girl of her past would think of the shriveled and miserable soul of the present. She would probably laugh at herself, Fran thought, or pity her, maybe even be impatient with her drawn out life. Fran could see the expression on her face clearly, shaking her head and wondering, "What are you doing?", or, "Why do you put up with it?" (the latter referring to Ruth). Fran had tried to send her daughter away on several occasions, but Ruth would just pat her shoulder, displaying one of those looks of pity, "You don't really mean that, Mother. Sit down and I'll make you a nice cup of tea before you make yourself sick." She would then gently push on Fran's shoulder, forcing her to sit in the rocker she had bought her for one of her birthdays, and proceed into the kitchen to put on the kettle. Tea

was Ruth's answer to everything. Whenever Fran scolded or was just downright miserable with her daughter, Ruth always replied with a cup of tea. Fran didn't even like tea, and had despised the rocking chair since the day Ruth brought it into her house decorated with that stupid pink bow. Fran knew that Ruth was trying to break her by bringing that thing into her house. It was as if she was pushing weakness on her with it.

Fran would admit that Ruth could force her to sit in the chair, seeing as Fran was old and small and a gentle shove was all she needed; however, Ruth could not make her rock. Fran would concentrate on sitting as still as possible and, though it was hard not to rock even a tiny bit with tea cup and saucer in hand, in two years she had learned to perfect the art. Yes, Fran could see how Ruth would stand in her way of her preparations for dying as she had everything else, and it was up to Fran alone, and a carefully thought out plan to allow these preparations to follow through.

This was how Fran's morning meditations came to be useful. At first, they had only been a pleasant escape from Ruth, but now, they had become the most important part of her day. Fran would concentrate hard, allowing her daughter's monotonous voice to drown out the words and create a transport to clearer thoughts. She began by imagining a scene in which Ruth found the cherished box, and let her mind drift from there. Ruth would have that sickeningly pleasant look on her face, probably humming, as she poked around Fran's bedroom shelf, pretending to clean it out but really hungrily groping for what would be hers. A look of puzzled joy would cross her face when her hand first touched the box, turning into elation as she pulled it closer to see what it was. She would then shake it, her smile broadening as its contents bounced from one side of the box to the other.

The most important part of the plan, of course, was the elimination of the last part of the scene, making it so all Ruth would find on the shelf was a bundle of old quilts and blankets. This is where Fran got stuck, cursing her aged mind for not being as quick or as sharp as it once was. For months she tried to push past the image of Ruth finding the

box, but always came up empty handed; however, in the end, it was Ruth herself that gave Fran the idea and solution as to how to carry out the plan.

Fran's frustrations led her back and forth from the reality of Ruth's reading the paper, to the chant which led her into meditation. Once and a while, Fran would catch a word or phrase of what her daughter was actually saying and linger on it for a while before drifting off again. The particular instance which came to Fran's rescue was an article Ruth was reading about a family of four who had escaped from a hostage situation in Cuba by having the youngest child distract the guard by feigning sickness and sending for help.

"...it was while the guard was off finding another to seek emergency aid for the youngster that the family managed their escape..." Ruth read.

The word "escape" echoed clearly in Fran's head, allowing her plan to free itself from the constraints of her mind and take shape. She needed an escape--not for herself, but for *Ruth*. Fran would turn the situation around and beat Ruth at her own game! Ruth would never know the difference.

Fran was angry at herself for not figuring this out sooner. After all, she was Ruth's *mother*, for Christ's sake. She knew everything about the woman. How could she have overlooked what had been staring her in the face?

Fran decided to work her plan slowly, easing her daughter into it as not to raise suspicion. It would probably take a few weeks until the heart of the plan could be carried out. She could afford a few weeks, she figured -- since her life had lingered this far, a few more weeks wouldn't kill her. She decided to start with niceness, easing into it without throwing Ruth into shock.

The first morning in which the plan was to be put into play, Fran awoke nervous, having to force herself to stage the usual bathrobe and slippers argument with her daughter. She complained about the oatmeal and lack of coffee, biting her lower lip at Ruth's sickening reason. It was during the reading of the newspaper on that first morning

that Fran decided to begin. Ruth always started out by reading the first section of the paper, starting with the headline and working her way through.

“Why don’t we start with the advice column today, Ruth? That’s always been my favourite.” Fran knew that it was *Ruth* who enjoyed the gossip spat out in the black and white lettering of the various advice columns of the paper. This decision displayed not only an interest in Ruth’s reading, but also a fondness for similar writing.

Ruth raised an eyebrow, staring inquisitively at her mother and, for a moment, Fran felt the fear of a series of questions. But Ruth replied with a surprise of her own and, breaking into a smile, said, “*Sure*, Mother, which would you like to begin with? Health, home, or general advice?” She didn’t want to question her mother’s interest. It seemed to be a slight breakthrough to the woman’s cold heart and she did not want to miss the opportunity provided to her.

“Don’t matter,” Fran snapped.

The next day proceeded along the same lines, with Fran being sure to throw in a question or comment on various articles for good measure. She thought Ruth’s tone alone might kill her before she had time to work out her plan; but she forced herself to carry on. She was making the headway she needed.

By midweek, Fran decided to give Ruth another shock by rocking in her chair. “I’m glad you’re finally enjoying the rocker, Mother,” Ruth beamed, “I knew you’d eventually come around.”

Fran replied with a grunt and complaint that her tea was too cold.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mother, I’ll warm it right away.” She removed Fran’s cup with a satisfied smile. As her back turned, Fran smiled too.

There were no more surprises for Ruth that first week. Fran did not want to overdo it. Ruth was overjoyed that her Mother seemed to be coming around. “I think she’s mellowing, Russell,” Fran overheard her saying during one of Russell’s weekly visits.

“Ruth! Get me a blanket! It’s freezing in here!” she hollered from her chair in the parlor. Fran didn’t need Ruth ruining her plan. Russell might catch on that something was going on.

“Whatever you say, Ruth,” Russell gave his usual reply as Ruth fluttered into the dining/bedroom to answer her mother’s demand. Fran happily accepted his response, settling back into her chair, able to rest her mind and think more of her plan.

Russell had built the house with an old-fashioned fireplace that Fran secretly loved. They had always had a fireplace in their homes, and Fran enjoyed sitting by it on winter nights reading from one of the many magazines she kept on the table beside her chair, or, in the later years, as she watched television. Ruth never allowed it to be lit anymore. Her paranoia envisioned the house going up in flames at night as her mother lay sleeping. The fireplace was the next step in Fran’s plan. She needed it to be lit in order to complete her preparations. She knew that it was vital to approach the subject just right-- not too harshly, yet not too sweetly. Somewhere in the middle would suffice. Things were going well thus far and she was sure to die if things started to unravel now. As much as she hated the thought, Fran knew that she must rely on her feebleness for the next step. She found it amusing that her age had actually come in handy.

Fran knew (now that Ruth believed her to be coming around) that she could convince her daughter a fire would be good for her. It was the second Friday into the evolution of Fran’s plan that she decided to voice her request. The two were having their tea, Fran rocking occasionally to appease her daughter, Ruth yammering on about this and that nonsense. Fran smiled and nodded in the appropriate places, waiting for the momentary pause of Ruth’s lips in which she could snatch the opportunity to speak. She watched Ruth’s mouth carefully, hoping she would take a deep breath or gulp a wad of saliva, giving Fran the chance to speak. Neither happened, but she did shut herself up long enough to sip her tea. It was mid-conversation and Fran was forced to cut her daughter off to get in her own words.

Smiling sweetly, she mustered up a gaze of affection, "Remember how you used to love to sit by me at the fire, Ruthie? Remember? I'd wrap that old quilt--the one on my bed--around your shoulders and we'd sit and read together?" Fran was making the whole thing up, but she hoped Ruth would believe her to be a pathetic, decaying soul and take some kind of pity on her and play along.

Fran fought the urge to gag, instead created a dreamy, faraway look in her eyes. "Oh, *you* remember, Ruthie. You would sit right here," she pointed to the space on the floor beside her, "and read those girlish novels and I would read my magazines above you in the chair. Sometimes we wouldn't even read at all, you would just rest your head in my lap and I'd pet your beautiful black hair. It was so long then...you always did have such nice hair..." Fran let her words trail as she gazed into the empty fireplace. She snuck a quick peek at Ruth whose eyes appeared teary and trance-like as she stared at her mother. "Yes, such a long time ago..." she hoped Ruth would snap out of it and respond. She turned her head to face her daughter, the pathetic look lingering on her face, "Remember, Ruth?"

"Oh, um, yes, Mother. I remember." The pity in Ruth's eyes was more than obvious. She actually believed Fran was losing her mind.

Fran saw her chance to act, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a fire now, Ruth? Just like before?"

"Oh, yes, Mother. It sure would," she nodded with sympathy.

"Good," Fran pounced, trying to cover the sharpness in her voice, "we can ask Russell to get the wood in the morning." Before Ruth could protest, she added, "It will be so much fun, Ruthie, just like old times."

Ruth did not want to upset her mother. She had been doing so well the past few weeks. She supposed she could comply with this one request. After all, she *was* old and wouldn't be around much longer. "Alright, Mother, we'll ask Russell in the morning."

The two women faced each other. Both were smiling.

Ruth knew she should have questioned her mother's change of attitude. She just didn't. She had read somewhere (in one of the many coping books she had crammed on her bookshelf) that when the end draws near you would observe drastic changes in the victim--physical, mental, and emotional. Once, Ruth had seen a movie of the week that confirmed this newfound knowledge. It was a true story about a man (played by some famous Hollywood actor) with TB who had been suffering from the disease for quite some time. Just as you thought he was getting better, he died. Maybe Mother's afflictions are similar, Ruth thought.

Yes, the end was near. How much time was left, Ruth could not tell. She felt, however, that she could tough it out a bit longer--comply with the old woman's wishes, go along with her distorted thoughts. For two years, nine months, and eleven days, the charade had gone on (she had at one time considered counting the hours, but figured it would seem so much more depressing). Ruth pictured the end, as she had so many times, replaying the scene over and over in her mind. A small service (most of Fran's friends and family were long dead), a few modest flower arrangements (cost split by Russell and herself) and a lovely eulogy delivered by a tearful daughter (Ruth). She would stand at the podium, facing the few handfuls of people, and tell of how she cared for her mother in her old age, giving up her own life to do so, how she held the old woman's hand in the very end giving her the strength to face death. They would all cry and pity her, encouraging her to take over her mother's house and live amongst her things. Ruth deserved it. Her husband would agree she deserved it too. He wouldn't mind if she moved them in, he was rarely home. Russell wouldn't care. That much was owed to her.

Until then, Ruth would help her mother live out her final days, try hard to please her and put her own suffering aside. Her time would come soon enough.

Fran could see that her little plan was beginning to take effect on Ruth. She could tell by the way her daughter looked at her, took extra care mixing her mush, and lately, came to comply with Fran's sweetest most sincere wishes. Her *last* wishes, or so Ruth thought. Not really, but Fran would let her believe what she wanted in order to speed the whole process along. In truth, Ruth's compliance (though Fran knew Ruth didn't see things this way) was her second last wish. Her *dying* wish was to get her hands on that damned boot box. She needed to see it one last time.

As promised, Russell had come with a truck load of firewood, and Ruth had altered her routine according to her mother's wishes. She now read from the newspaper after Fran's breakfast as the two women sat in their chairs by the fire. Fran, surprisingly, did not complain, though she would have preferred Ruth to read during breakfast. It was more of a distraction this way, with the fire and the monotonous reading--too many things at once to interrupt her meditations. She was determined, however, for her plan to succeed, and willed her mind to create its usual scenes in its semi trance-like state (though the excitement of how well the plan was going interrupted her thoughts on occasion, along with the nagging heat of the fire at her shins).

Scissors and duct tape. These were the next two things she needed in order for her plan to succeed. Fran decided that she must find a way to get her hands on both. Even though Ruth had been getting better in complying with her mother's wishes, she was still *always* underfoot, keeping an eye on her mother even more so now, due to her "drastic change in behavior" (as Fran had overheard her tell Russell).

Fran knew where both items were located--the scissors in the kitchen drawer under the spice rack, the duct tape under the sink (left there by Russell who had taped over the tiny holes in the paneling to prevent mice from getting in). Ruth would think it odd, even suspicious if Fran asked for them--or even worse, found her removing them. She could not do this while Ruth was in the house. Fran convinced herself that the only way to remove the two items and hide them from Ruth's eyes would be to do so after her daughter had gone home at night (an idea which came to her as she was charring her flesh by the fireplace and listening to Ruth's stupid voice trying to imitate the Saturday morning funnies).

Fran was finding it hard to smile in the appropriate places as her daughter read, especially once the idea revealed itself to her. She had to hold back her triumph.

"I just love *That Dog Murray*, don't you, Mother?" Ruth was saying just after the idea revealed itself to Fran.

Fran laughed, the closest thing she could do to crying in sheer happiness.

"I'm glad you agree."

Ruth left Fran's house every night between eight and eight-thirty, depending on how hard a time Fran would give her about being put to bed at such an outrageous hour. Fran did not see the point of her daughter making her go to bed so early. She could put herself to bed if Ruth wanted to go home, and had told her so on several occasions. Ruth, however, wouldn't hear of it. "I would be able to sleep a lot better, Mother, knowing you were safe in your own bed. You never know what could happen."

You never know what could happen. This phrase is what Fran believed stood in her way of death. *You never know what could happen* was like a road block in Fran's life, keeping her from pushing on any further.

"Don't go upstairs alone, *you never know what could happen.*"

"Stay away from the basement, *you never know what could happen.*"

"Keep the bathroom door unlocked, *you never know what could happen.*"

It grew tiresome, really. But lately, Fran wasn't too concerned about the nagging phrase. She needed to get around it.

Before Ruth tucked Fran neatly into bed (a process which Fran hated, believing it contributed to her feelings of helplessness) she would settle her mother down with a cup of hot milk (ironically, something Fran would do for Ruth herself when she was a child). Fran always assumed that Ruth slipped something in the milk before giving it to her, something to make Fran (and Ruth) sleep better. She had accused her daughter of doing this almost daily but never had the proof she needed for her suspicions to be confirmed.

"You're just being paranoid," was Ruth's response when her mother accused her of being a heartless daughter, trying to sedate or maybe even kill her by slipping pills into her drink. She could tell by the look of guilt that quickly flashed over Ruth's face that her accusations held some truth. She just didn't have any proof.

To get her hands on the scissors and duct tape, Fran needed to stay awake long enough after Ruth had left at night to be able to maneuver this section of her plan.

"You look tired, Mother." It was Ruth herself who gave Fran the idea, "Why don't you turn in early?" She waited for Fran to protest.

"Okay."

Ruth was startled. Fran could see it in her face as she attempted to get up from her chair. Ruth darted to assist her.

"Thank you, Ruthie. I'm so tired. Could barely get up on my own."

"Well, let's get you to bed." Ruth guided her mother into the dining/bedroom to help her into her pajamas. Fran did not protest though she did not particularly enjoy her daughter gawking at her shriveled, naked body.

"I need to sit down," she told Ruth as she attempted to pull her mother's pajama top over her head.

Fran perched herself on the edge of the bed. She couldn't stomach her daughter touching her; it was all she could do to keep herself from complaining.

"There you go, Mother. All set." Ruth swung Fran's legs onto the bed and under the covers (Fran could have done this herself but decided, for the occasion, that it would be best to let Ruth do it for her). "I'll just go into the kitchen and fix your milk for you."

"I can't drink it, Ruth. Too tired." She ended the statement with a wide yawn.

Ruth was hesitant., Her mother really *did* look tired, like she could probably sleep right through the night without liquid assistance. But what if she didn't? What if she awoke in the night, disoriented and confused and wandered out into the street, getting hit by a car? Ruth was about to protest, but Fran was already asleep.

Fran was conscious of her daughter hovering over her for some time. Why the *hell* didn't she leave? Fran went through the motions of a person asleep--a grunt here, moan there. She even allowed a slow trickle of drool to escape her mouth before Ruth's mind was satisfied and she could leave her mother to rest in peace.

Fran heard the back door click shut and opened her eyes. She decided to count slowly to a thousand before she got out of bed, that way, Ruth was sure to be long gone and she didn't have to worry about being caught without some sort of explanation. If Ruth came back and Fran was out of bed, Lord only knows what would be in store for the future.

Fran made it up to five hundred. She had mentally calculated that somewhere between ten and fifteen minutes had passed and figured she should get started soon than she thought--just in case she *really did* get tired. She slowly swung her legs out from under the blankets and slipped on the slippers waiting for her beside the bed. Holding on to the bed for support in the dark room (better to be safe, she thought, risking a fall was not an option) she groped her way through the dark to find the light switch. Turning it on, she made her way to the kitchen where she turned on a second light. The rest was

simple, scissors in the drawer, which Fran first took out and inspected to make sure they were sharpened before clutching them in her left hand (her pajamas had no pockets) and moving on to find the duct tape. It was just where Russell had left it. Fran had to smile at how easy the task had been.

Fran slid the roll of tape over her wrist. Out of curiosity, she reached up to the cupboard above the sink (only able to do so standing on her toes) to confirm some of her suspicions. The small bottle of blue capsules was just barely within her reach. She maneuvered it with her fingertips allowing it to fall in the sink. The child-proof safety seal held and she picked up the bottle.

Fran O'Neil. Take two capsules with liquid before bedtime.

Just as she thought. Fran pushed the bottle back into place and shut the cupboard door. A surge of the old hatred for her daughter was making her hands shake. She tried to calm herself by reflecting on her plan. Serves her right, Fran thought as she pictured Ruth snooping around her bedroom to come up empty-handed. I will show her, trying to keep me under her thumb. We'll see who wins *this* time.

She turned off the kitchen light. Fran decided that the perfect spot to hide her "little helpers" would be behind the plastic potted palm at the foot of the stairs. It was a short distance, the stairs being right outside the dining/bedroom doorway. The corner was dark and no one would be able to see them there, not even in the daylight. Ruth wouldn't think of going near the plant anyhow. It didn't need watering and the side of the stairwell hid the plant when one was looking down from above.

With these items in place, Fran tucked herself back into bed. The task had exhausted her and because it was past her usual bedtime, she was more tired than she would have usually been.

Fran soon fell asleep thinking of the boot box that would be awaiting her in the next few days.

It was the perfect opportunity. A friend of Ruth's from high school, Brenda or Betty or something (Fran didn't care much about the name) was in the Village visiting some relatives (the Beaumans, Fran had known the family for years) and wanted to meet Ruth for lunch one day that week.

Fran listened to the conversation from her chair by the fireplace. Ruth was telling the woman that, yes, even though it had been a long time, it was impossible for her to make it and, yes maybe next time. She hung up the phone, resuming her seat in the chair opposite her mother.

"Who was that?" Fran played stupid. She figured it would be easier than admitting she was eavesdropping. Besides, if Ruth thought she couldn't hear her she would not be curious as to why her mother was not complaining.

"No one important."

"Well, it had to be somewhat important, you talked long enough."

"Just an old friend from school."

"Who?"

"You don't know her."

"Well, what'd she want?"

"Nothing, Mother."

"Had to want something, wouldn't have called otherwise."

"Oh, *alright*. She wants to meet up with me for lunch sometime this week. She's in the village visiting some relatives--*the Beaumans*."

"Good people. I've known them for years--since your daddy and I moved up here. So, are you going?"

"No."

"Why not?"

“Because.” Ruth picked up the newspaper she had been reading, “Where were we, Mother?”

“Because *why*, Ruth?”

“What’s that, Mother?” She was pretending to be searching for the article she was reading. Fran hated when she acted so stupid.

“Why don’t you want to see your friend. The Beaumans are all such nice people. She must be too if she’s one of them. Don’t you like her? Isn’t she a nice girl, Ruthie?”

“Yes, Mother, I like her fine.”

“Don’t you want to see her?”

“Of course I’d like to see her.”

“Well, why aren’t you going?”

“Mother, please!” Ruth crushed the newspaper to her lap, “You know I can’t go.”

“You can go anywhere you want.”

“What about you? What am I supposed to do with you? Leave you here all by yourself? What if something happened?”

“I can dial a phone.”

“No, Mother, absolutely not! I am not leaving you here by yourself.”

Fran knew her daughter’s paranoia would not let her give in. She had an alternate plan. “Russell can stay with me.”

“Russell?”

“He’d be more than happy to give you a break. You deserve one, Ruthie. Besides, your brother’s retired and all he’s got is that stupid dog to keep him company. He could probably use a real person to talk to for an afternoon. Should’ve listened to me and got married--” Fran cut herself off, not wanting to seem to ornery to Ruth, “You haven’t gone out in a long time.”

Fran knew she had hit her target. Ruth was known to grumble around the kitchen (supposedly out of Fran's earshot) about her brother and how he did not pull enough weight when it came to their mother. Fran had her right where she wanted.

Ruth paused before she responded. Her mother was right. It *had* been a long time since she went anywhere. Besides, it wouldn't kill Russell to sit with his own mother for an afternoon.

"I guess maybe I could talk to Russell. I'd only be gone a few hours."

"Good."

"I'll call him tomorrow."

"You'll call him *today*."

Ruth made a list and checked off everything before her departure:

A list of emergency numbers on fridge

Mother's turkey breast and mustard sandwich on a plate covered with plastic wrap

Number for the restaurant taped to back of both doors of the house, plus one on the fridge

List of Mother's daily routine outlined for Russell on kitchen table

She checked to make sure the stove was off and there was a new roll of toilet paper in the bathroom, plus a visible roll of paper towels in the kitchen--just in case. Nothing could go wrong, Ruth had to remind herself. Russell was perfectly capable of looking after their mother.

Ruth was driving Fran crazy. For two days she had been fussing and whining about leaving her all alone. It didn't matter what she said, however, Ruth only got worse as the lunch date drew near. This, Fran did not understand, for there were only three

restaurants in the village, all practically within walking distance of Fran's house. If there *were* to be any problems, it would be more than simple to locate her; and besides, she would be able to hear the sirens (if any) or hear of any strange on-goings from the local gossips whose second homes were the restaurants.

Seeing her daughter's behaviour, Fran was conscious to make somewhat of an ordeal upon Russell's arrival--how excited she was to spend the afternoon with him, how much fun the two of them would have, how cute his stupid dog was. She figured everyone would benefit from her sappy performance, and something like this could not be overdone.

Ruth did not want to crush her mother's spirits. She was right (for once). It *was* only one afternoon.

"I left instructions for Russell on the table, Mother. Make sure he gets them along with the emergency numbers and the number of the restaurant," she strained to see her brother's figure from where she stood in the parlor. He was chopping more wood out back, his dog wagging its tail at his feet. "I do wish he'd come in here. I'd feel much better leaving that way."

"Fran was getting impatient, "He'll only be a little while, then we're going to have lunch together." She gave Ruth one of her "happy" smiles.

"Alright, Mother. Have fun then."

Fran followed her to the door, praying her daughter wouldn't attempt to kiss her or show any kind of an affectionate departing.

Ruth didn't. "Stay away from the door, you'll catch a cold."

Fran obeyed. As the door clicked shut, she attempted to do a little dance of triumph, but stopped herself in time. She didn't want to lose her balance and fall. A broken hip was all she needed.

Fran had a checklist of her own. She made her way into the kitchen, and pulled back the curtains to observe Russell killing time at the woodpile. He looked like he'd be a little while longer. Once in a while, he'd slice the wood too thin and stop his chopping to play a game of fetch with the dog. The longer he could avoid his mother, the better.

Fran thought this was perfect. The longer Russell took, the better the opportunity to get things underway. She didn't really care about spending time with her son. He annoyed her, just as his sister did, but in a different way. Russell was spineless. Everyone knew it. He had been that way since he was a child. He was the kid who'd been bullied, the little sissy who let the younger kids tease and boss him around. This was probably what had hindered him from finding a wife, Fran thought, a dog was about all he could handle. Ruth believed Russell just didn't care about anything. Fran knew better. He had given up *trying* to care. There wasn't much of a point anymore. Fran, too, had given up on Russell's insecurities a long time ago. She could now use them to her advantage.

The first thing Fran did was rip up Ruth's itinerary and throw it in the kitchen garbage, being careful to camouflage it with bits of food wrapper and paper towels. One could never be too careful, she thought. The rest of Ruth's lists were harmless in regards to Fran's plan and could be left where they were. Russell might get suspicious if there were not instructions at all left by Ruth. He knew his sister was uptight and needed to have her way to allow herself peace of mind.

Next, she went into the kitchen and opened the cupboard above the sink. The sleeping pills were still there. Fran stood on her toes and maneuvered the bottle to the edge of the cupboard and let it fall once again into the sink. She opened the lid and removed two capsules (just to be on the safe side). The hard part was opening the capsules themselves. Fran's fingers didn't work as well as they once had, and in the end, she had to break the seal with her front teeth before pouring the small bits of yellow powder into an empty coffee mug.

Fran was stirring hot coffee into the contents of the mug when Russell entered the kitchen. He knew better than to bring the dog inside, leaving it chained to the back porch.

“Cream and sugar, right, Russell?” She smiled up at him, “I poured you a cup of coffee. You’ve been working so hard out there. Looked like you could use a break.”

“Thanks.” Russell took the cup and went over to the kitchen table. He sat at the table and proceeded to read the newspaper Ruth had brought that morning.

Fran had calculated that it would take approximately fifteen minutes to a half hour for the pills to work (she wasn’t exactly sure about the time frame but was judging by her own reactions to the pills and the reactions to characters she had witnessed taking them on TV—mainly MAUD). She decided to sit across from her son and pretend to be occupied with observing the winter grass turning colour out the back window. This way she could keep an eye on Russell and know exactly when to act.

The first yawn came with Russell’s second last sip of coffee. The second came as he picked up the second half of the paper. At this point, Russell took the opportunity to put down the paper and stretch his arms and neck and rub his eyes. Fran took this to be her cue. “Not getting enough sleep, son?”

“Huh? Oh, no, I’m fine, Mother.”

“Maybe you need glasses. Should get your eyes checked.”

“You’re probably right, Mother,” he yawned and stretched again.

“Why don’t you lie down and rest them for a while?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“You might as well rest now. My show’s on for the next hour and you won’t have to worry about entertaining me. When it’s over and you’re all rested we can have a nice

game of Scrabble. Won't that be fun?" She stared at him, sending mental signals--*You are getting very, very sleepy.*

Fran waited. Russell didn't look like he could hold out much longer. "Why don't you just lie down on my bed for a while and I'll wake you after my show?"

"I donno, Mother. Ruth wouldn't be too happy with me leaving you all alone like that."

"For God's sake, Russell! You're not leaving me alone. You'll just be in the next room--"

"But what if I fall asleep? What if something *really did* happen to you?"

"You're starting to sound just like your sister. Look, I'm a big girl. I know that you forget--"

"Mother, I didn't mean--"

"Okay, okay. If I need you, I'll yell real loud. Alright?"

Russell's eyelids were beginning to droop. "Alright, Mother. Just promise you won't leave the living room. You'll only sit and watch TV, then wake me when the show's over."

"Yes. Now go lie down before you fall asleep on the table."

Fran followed her son into the dining/bedroom and watched him pull off his shoes and lie on the bed. He closed his eyes and Fran left to go into the parlor. If she stood and gawked at him he might question her motives.

Russell had already started the fire so she wouldn't have to worry about that. Fran decided to click on the TV. The hum of the screen made her sigh with relief and she decided to keep it on with the volume muted while she carried out the rest of her plan. It would help her to relax.

With everything in place in the parlor, Fran crept back to the dining/bedroom doorway and stuck her head in to observe Russell. As she had hoped, he was asleep. *Fool*. Now her adventure was about to begin.

For the past few years, the stairs had been a problem for Fran. Even as she held on to the railing and stopped briefly on each step, it was not much help. She tired so quickly now. Fran could not have this problem stand in her way. She needed to move along as swiftly as possible before Ruth got back and ruined everything. To her dislike, Fran would need something to help her get up the stairs without putting her at risk. She decided that the best thing to aid her in the job was the stupid wooden brass-tipped walking stick Ruth had given her for some birthday. Fran laughed in Ruth's face when she opened it, cursing her daughter for forcing feebleness on her and vowing "never to use the damned thing," and that she would rather "risk falling down the stairs and breaking both legs than use it!" It had sat in the corner beside the stairwell ever since, taunting her from a distance; but now, Fran had to admit, it would come in quite handy. Who knows, Ruth might even be *proud* if she found out, Fran thought.

Fran removed the duct tape and scissors from their hiding place and put them in the pocket of her house dress. Then, taking the walking stick in hand, set out to tackle the stairwell.

There were seventeen stairs in all. Fran decided that even though time was precious, she must move slowly, both feet securely planted on each stair, aided by walking stick and banister before attempting the next. She could feel her heart pounding against the walls of her chest, her breath coming in small quick gasps. She couldn't tell if it was from nerves and excitement or if she was in the process of dying. Halfway to the top, she decided to sit a bit on one of the steps, catch her breath, and go over things in her mind. Fran rested the walking stick on her knees and inhaled deeply, letting the air go in long, even strides. She was almost there (*inhale, exhale*). She couldn't (*inhale*) die when she was this close (*exhale*). (*Inhale*) Her efforts would have been useless (*exhale*). She

couldn't let them win (*inhale*). She *must* finish (*exhale*), if not to beat Russell and Ruth (*inhale*) but to prove something to herself (*exhale*). She *Fran O'Neil* (*inhale*), as old and feeble as she might be, *did not need anyone to help her* (*exhale*). (*Inhale*) She could do it herself.

Fran let her last deep breath escape her chest. Her heart had slowed a bit, no longer making her feel like it was about to break through her ribcage and flop around on the floor. Fran stood, and though her legs were still a bit shaky, managed to make it to the top. She looked back and laughed. *Fool*, she thought. It was a long way down.

Shuffling down the hall towards her old bedroom, Fran still utilized her walking stick. It really *did* help her move along better, though she'd never admit it to Ruth. The bedroom door was open, to Fran's surprise. She figured Ruth would have locked it in an attempt to keep her under control. Everything *seemed* to be as Fran last saw it, however, one could never be too careful. Fran ran her fingers over the top of the night stand. She must give Ruth credit for keeping the room neat and in order. She half expected to be greeted by hordes of dust bunnies.

The old wind up alarm clock on the nightstand had stopped a long time ago. Fran opened the jewelry box on the dresser and checked the time on her battery-operated wrist watch. It had been another gift from Ruth, one that Fran didn't dislike too much and was glad to have--especially on this occasion. Forty-five minutes had passed since Ruth had left the house. Twenty since Russell had gone down for his nap. She figured Ruth had already picked up her friend and arrived at the restaurant and was just now ordering her meal. She would be out of the way for at least another hour and Fran hoped Russell would too. However, if Russell did catch her upstairs she was sure she could make up some excuse and get out of it faster than she could with Ruth. There was still enough time if she worked according to pace. She must get moving.

Fran opened the closet door as wide as it would go to allow the electric light to enter as her aide. She then managed to drag the desk chair over to the closet and position it accordingly. Fran paused, perking up her deafening ears. She hoped the sound of the chair's legs scraping across the hardwood floor did not wake Russell. No sound. Good, she thought, and proceeded to climb upon the chair.

The chair was big enough for Fran to hold on to her walking stick, steadying herself with it on one side while holding onto the closet bar with her free hand. It did not shake or wobble, allowing her to steady herself easily. With all that out of the way, she let go of the bar and reached up to the bedroom shelf. She was glad Russell had built it low. It was just above eye level and easily accessible to her.

Fran stood on her toes and squinted through her glasses to see better. The lump underneath the quilts and blankets told her that the box was still there, untouched and unharmed by Ruth's intrusions. She pulled the blankets towards her, inching the box closer. When it got near the edge, Fran dropped the blanket to the floor and revealed the box.

Just as she had left it, the ragged brown boot box with the letters SSL (*Sullivan Shoes Limited*) stamped across the sides sat staring triumphantly at her from the shelf. "*I am still here*", "*I am here*" it called silently. Fran carefully slid it off the shelf under her arm and stepped down from the chair. She placed the box gently on the bed then went back to the closet to straighten up the mess she had made.

Fran was too tired to refold the blankets and climb back on the chair to replace them on the shelf. Instead, she pushed them towards the back corner with her walking stick, shut the door, then slid the chair back into place. She was breathing hard again. It was more work than she had expected.

Fran sat on the flower print bedspread beside the box. Might as well sit while she could, she thought; she still had a long way to go. Fran removed the scissors and duct tape from her pocket. The scissors were sharp and had begun to poke a small hole through the pocket's bottom. She smoothed it over with her fingertips. It wasn't too noticeable.

The duct tape was strong and unraveling a piece from the roll was proving to be difficult. She hadn't thought about that. She had chosen it over masking or scotch tape because of its durability and knew it would be trustworthy when forced to withstand such a job, but never considered just *how* trustworthy it would be. Inch by inch she pulled at the tape using as much force as her withered arms would allow her. Creating a long enough strip made Fran's arms ache, and she was happy that she only needed to give it one quick snip with her scissors to secure it over the box's lid. Fran flipped the box over and shook it. The tape held the lid firm. Everything was in place.

Fran replaced the scissors in her pocket and picked up the box. She was finished with this part of her plan, happy that she had accomplished her task but even happier that she had proved her daughter wrong. *Screw you, Ruth. I did what I needed to do all on my own.*

Even though her walking stick turned out to be useful, Fran decided she would have to leave it in the bedroom as she finished her journey. Clutching its handle was beginning to make her arm ache and she needed to feel whole and free for the rest of her plan. She left the stick in the corner by the closet and headed back towards the staircase.

Fran sat on the top step and placed the box between her feet. "See you at the bottom," she gave it a kick and down it bounced--*seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen*....until it hit the ground with a hollow *thud*. Fran was next. If she had been younger, she would have slid down the banister for the sake of time and enjoyment. Not this time. She would use her second best option. She gathered her house dress around her knees and bumped down each step, her old butt bouncing merrily along the way. It

was much easier than attempting to climb back down but she was still winded and lacking energy by the time she reached the bottom.

Fran paused at the bottom step to wait for her heart to calm itself and listen for Russell. He stirred slightly, but did not waken. *Good.* Fran gathered up the box and stood up. A pain was beginning to form in her chest; *“Not now, Goddammit. Can’t you wait until I’m done? Ten more minutes!”* She walked slowly into the parlor and eased herself into her chair. She was almost ready.

Fran ran her hands over the box’s surface. She could not remember the last time she had taken it down to go through its contents. It didn’t really matter now, Fran supposed. She had it back in the safety of her own two hands. No one knew of its existence, no one knew of its present situation. Fran had won.

She removed the scissors from her pocket and slashed through the tape on the box’s lid. The act was effortless, seeing as the scissors were quite sharp. The tape gave way with a relieved *“pop”*, inviting Fran to lift the lid--which she did with excitement and pleasure (though the nagging pain in her chest fought to interrupt her moment).

Fran placed the cardboard lid on the floor beside her. The tissue paper was still folded neatly over the box’s contents. She had half expected the thin white paper to have yellowed or begun some kind of disintegration after all these years, but it too was exactly how she had left it.

She carefully unfolded the paper and peered in at the box’s contents. For the size of the box, one would expect its seams to be bursting with its contents. Not at all. Inside was only a handful of articles which Fran considered worthy of “treasuring” status, items which she felt could not be trusted with just anyone.

Funny, no one had ever discovered it. Fran had carried the box from her parents’ old farmhouse, to the boardinghouse in Goulais, to her first home with Hal. The box, at the time of her first departure, carried only a few things--her birth certificate, her baptismal certificate, and the diploma she had been given upon completing the highest

grade offered at the schoolhouse in her home town. It now also contained two of her only three remaining baby pictures (the third was now in a frame on the mantle) and a copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (her favourite book as a child). As the years passed, Fran added more and more to the box's contents--marriage certificate, Ruth and Russell's baptismal certificates (they each had their own birth certificates at home), a few snapshots of her wedding (a civil service requested by Hal), her mother's silver wall cross (inherited after her death), a picture of the farm she grew up on, Hal's death certificate, and her great grandmother's (on her father's side) original recipe for apple turnover cake (passed down to the oldest girl in the family). Fran picked each article up and studied it thoroughly, putting the desired items (the ones with dates pertaining to herself) aside instead of back into the box with the others. There were only four things Fran needed to finish off her plan. The rest would be passed on to Ruth--a pity, for Fran did not think Ruth actually deserved such precious artifacts. The only other option was Russell but he was too much of an idiot to be given such things. The only logical choice (and one that was still living) would have to be Ruth.

Fran folded the tissue paper back into place and replaced the floppy lid of the box. She set the box down at her feet. When Ruth got home, its ownership would be transferred to her.

The articles which Fran had removed from the box lay spread out on her lap. She picked each one up and studied it carefully--birth certificate, baptismal certificate, diploma, marriage certificate. Each had her name and date of birth typed neatly in the appropriate space. She thought about the person she was when each event had taken place--baby, Christian, wife, mother--so many different people over so much time, yet the only one able to describe her, Fran O'Neill, was the birth certificate. She had been new. There was nothing to describe her then besides the black type on the now fading paper. Everything about her belonged to her and no one else. Like her death. It would be her own and eventually, she would just be a name on a cement block in the cemetery--her

remains a mystery, her life unknown. Birth and death would be the same, something that belonged to her alone.

Fran could feel her heart bouncing in her chest, needing for her to finish the job and allowing it to end. She leaned over in her chair and dropped each document into the fire, waiting for each one's disintegration to ash before erasing the next.

She held the birth certificate last--Francis Moira O'Neill. The letters stared back at her in her chair, at her aged and withered self. She gave it a silent good-bye before dropping it into the fire and watching it fade to nothing.

Ruth pulled into the driveway and turned off the car's ignition. She had been gone longer than she had expected. From the outside, everything appeared to be normal, the house standing quietly in all its strength, waiting for her to come back. She slid her purse over her shoulder and reached for the take out tray of treats she had brought her mother. They were Fran's favourite, fudge walnut brownies. Usually, she wouldn't allow her mother such rich delicacies, for they would promote the decline of her health, but Ruth figured just this once wouldn't hurt.

She felt happy as she walked up the front stairs of the house. She had only been gone a few hours, but had actually *missed* being there. The sight of the house in its brick silence as she turned onto the street was a comfort to her. She felt that things would be different. With Mother coming around the way she had been and Russell's willingness to help out, Ruth felt that maybe a new part of their lives was on the verge of beginning. Maybe she would go out a few hours every week. Maybe Russell had enjoyed spending time with their mother and wanted to do so more often. Maybe her mother had missed her in her absence. Maybe things were going to be different.

Ruth opened the front doors and entered the house. Her mother was sitting in her chair by the fire where she had left her. Ruth unlaced her boots, jabbering about her friend, about their lunch together, and the things she had seen on the way home. Fran remained silent, and Ruth felt a twinge of the old resentment towards her.

“Where’s Russell, Mother?”

Fran’s head was turned towards the fire in silence.

“Mother?”

Fran did not respond. She could not hear her.

Vita Auctoris

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