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# *Small Spaces*

by Jake Redekop

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

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2001

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# *Small Spaces*

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*For my friends and family for always encouraging me to write.  
And for Drew Cook who told me that I could.*

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## ***SMALL SPACES***

## *Father*

When I get there the ice is already shovelled free of snow. The opposing teams, dressed in worn hockey jerseys, skate across the frozen pond slapping a hard rubber puck at goalies who neither cringe nor blink despite their lack of adequate equipment. The game stops only when the puck is shot into one of the misshapen mounds of snow that surround the ice. When this happens, the nearest player digs into the snow with the blade of his stick until the puck is free and the game can resume. This is the way the game is played on frozen ponds across Southwestern Ontario. Here, there are no offside rulings, whistles or salary arbitrations. Here, they play for the Stanley Cup everyday.

"How's the ice?" I holler.

"Good, hurry up," is the terse response.

The ice is hard and black, and very smooth. It is the product of a bitterly cold night. I sit on one of the mounds of piled snow so that I may take off my boots and put on my skates. The cold numbs my hands and I have to warm them regularly by cupping them over my mouth and blowing on them or burying them deeply within my pockets.

About a dozen kids from the neighbourhood occupy the ice. My brother is one of them. He lumbers on his skates somewhat awkwardly, but he is smart with the puck, big on his skates, and is a valuable player. He'll get picked first. I am saved the embarrassment of being picked last because there are kids here who are younger than my twelve years, smaller than me, and lack the strength necessary to contribute to the physical and robust game that is needed to win.

I skate well but am timid and unwilling to make the physical sacrifices that score the big goals and win games. I glide on the periphery, attempt fancy moves – often without success – and go for low percentage plays. I am Wayne Gretzky with only a fraction of the skill. I am a pacifist who loves a violent game. We play all afternoon, and my brother's team wins. I am on his team, so I win too. It is a good feeling, winning. The final goal is scored off a rebound. The goalie stopped the first shot, mine, by kicking out his leg with astonishing quickness. My brother took the rebound and lifted it over the prone goalie an instant before he was checked hard onto the ice. He got up to his knees slowly, put one skate on the ice and, placing his stick across his knee, pushed himself to his feet. His smile was one mixed with glee

and discomfort, but he was happy to take the punishment in exchange for victory.

After the game we all sit around the ice and exchange our skates for boots and prepare to make our ways home. We reminisce about the highlights of the game, make excuses for plays that went wrong, complain of tired legs, aching backs and sore throats. Nonetheless, it is a good feeling to have won, to be able to boast the next day, to savour the moment, to be envied. Losers recall the missed pass, lost opportunities or the goal post that may have made the difference. I am spared that today.

The walk back to our house is not far. My brother and I walk in silence across the field of snow that lies between the frozen pond and our house. There is no animosity between us, just indifference, apathy perhaps. The frozen snow crunches underfoot, and walking is awkward but manageable. A limp that is barely noticeable hampers my brother's step, likely a result of the day's play.

Father is sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper when Brother and I arrive home. A glass of rye sits beside him which he sips slowly. Father is a large, powerful man, his eyes are dark and alert like my brother's and his hair, black and thick,

covers most of his body. He does not look up when we enter the house.

I can remember, if I think long enough, when Father used to drink more. Never heavily of course, always in control, but enough for him to loosen up and tell us stories of when he was in the military or stories from years ago when he "was just a little older than you." Brother and I would sit close and listen, startled at the life our father once had. Everything changed when his father, my grandfather, died.

In his youth, Papa was an uncompromising man. Papa was one of the eager, patriotic men who lied about his age so he could fight for his country. He was later released from the military because of emphysema. Even as a child I can remember the uncomfortable cleanliness and order of Papa's house, the austere neatness. One did not want to be the cause of any disorder in Papa's house. As the years passed, there was a distinct parallel between the cleanliness of Papa's house and the amount he drank. Towards the end, it became unsettling to visit Papa. Father always seemed angry when we did visit and sometimes would ask us all to leave the room so he could talk to Papa alone. Mother would stand quickly and hurry us from the room. I would then hear Father's voice, strong and frightening, talking to his father

in ways I would never dare speak to mine. Papa would respond in quiet, muffled tones and eventually things would calm down and we would all return and Papa would try to make us laugh to break the tension and awkwardness in the room. Papa would smile, revealing his toothless grin and when my brother and I would laugh, he would feign concern over his lost teeth and instruct Brother and me to help him look for them.

When he would not drink, his hands would become unsteady and he would cough and spit and need to support himself on the furniture when he walked as people do when the room is dark and they are uncertain of where they are. When this happened, Father would tell Papa to sit down and he'd bring him a glass of rye, slamming it down on the table beside him and announcing that we were leaving. Mother used to call the rye that Papa drank *bad medicine*, that only the sickest people needed. My most enduring image of Papa is of Christmas, five years ago. It was Papa's last Christmas and we had put on our nicest clothes and gone to visit him. When we arrived we found Papa lying face down on his living room floor beside an overturned chair and his glass of rye miraculously still upright in his hand. The smell of urine was strong in the air. He became conscious as we walked in and struggled, unsuccessfully, to get to his feet. "Like a three-

legged turtle on its back. Poor man," Mother said, sometime later. Father took two quick steps and pulled him up violently by his right arm and onto the couch, as a parent might a small misbehaving child. Father told my mother to go home with my brother and me.

He was going to take care of Papa.

Father came home late that night and slammed the door behind him. Mom would try to comfort us during the days when Father came home ill-mannered and slamming doors, explaining that it was difficult for him during those final months of his father's life. I remember Mom's explanation for Father's behaviour that night five years ago. It was perhaps the most poignant thing Mom ever said. "Death comes to us all. It's the reasons why, that hurt." I became aware of death that night, and Mom was preparing my brother and me for Papa's. He died in late February, five years ago, of liver failure. Standing in the kitchen today, the smell of rye brings all of this back to me.

Mother entered the kitchen and smiled. "Help your Mother with supper," Father said, standing up and bringing his paper with him into the living room.

The next day I gather with some of the neighbourhood kids and once again play hockey on the frozen pond near my house. Brother can not come because he is helping Father renovate the basement.

The excitement of the game passes the afternoon quickly, and none of us take notice of the low hanging sun on the western horizon. It has begun to darken and I realize I am forbidden to be out this late; the consequences for this are well known to me. I take off my skates quickly and run for home. As my house comes into view I almost miss the spectre of my father, standing just outside the door, obscured by shadow. I turn onto our property and slow to a walk. Father removes his belt and I prepare for the inevitable snap of leather and the stinging on my backside. I begin to whimper and shake uncontrollably as Father, grim and determined, stalks.

I awake the next day to find my brother's bed empty. His covers are thrown back as if he had gotten out of bed in a hurry. For a moment I wonder where he is, and why he is out of bed so early (as it is not his custom), but the distant sound of a chainsaw reminds me that it is Saturday, a day often spent across the northern field in the nearby forest gathering firewood. I lie on



my back and listen to the angry hum of the chainsaw, imagine my father enduring the barrage of wood chips and saw dust as his saw melts away the side of the tree. Brother will be sitting on the tailgate, hands buried in the deep pockets of his jacket, waiting for the tree to fall so he can begin clearing it of smaller branches and eventually load the pieces of wood Father cuts into the back of the old red truck. They will return in a few hours and I will have to go outside and help them chop the pieces to a size that will fit into the small metal door of our wood-burning stove. I lie in bed until I hear the saw go quiet. I will be needed soon. I get out of bed.

Mother greets me and asks me if I'm hungry as she fills a white ceramic plate with scrambled eggs, 2 slices of bacon and a slice of toast. I eat quickly knowing that Father and Brother will return soon.

"You all right?" Mom asks, brushing hair away from my eyes. I nod my head and continue eating. "Because you were out pretty late last night, and-"

"I know Mom, but I was just playing hockey. I just forgot. I came home as soon as I saw how late it was," I say, tears coming to my eyes.

"I know Sweetheart, but you know your Father." I bite my lip and nod in accordance. "Kids got it too easy these days," she says in a lower tone, cleverly imitating my Father, "I didn't raise any bums or sis-" Mother stops suddenly and I look away sharply, "You know I don't believe that." I nod and try not to cry. "Your Father is just from a different time," she continues, sitting beside me. I finish eating and look up at Mother. She is uncertain of what to say and is feeling guilty; I can see this on her face.

"I know Mom, it's ok," I force a smile and sit back in my chair.

"They're going to be back soon, I'll get your stuff," Mom leaves the kitchen for a moment and returns with my jacket, a wool scarf, and a pair of gloves. I thank her quietly and dress hastily. Mom steps in front of me and dries my eyes with her shirt, kisses me on the forehead and tells me, "Mind your fingers when Daddy's chopping." I nod and leave the house.

The roof of the old red truck comes in and out of view as it travels along the side of the fallow field. As it comes nearer and completely into view, I open the doors to the woodshed and drag the chopping block out into the open. I then go back into the shed and retrieve the large axe Father uses to split the blocks of

wood. The axe is heavy and I marvel at how easily Father lifts it up and brings it down with absolute precision and power. The old red truck turns towards me, bouncing on old, noisy shocks as it navigates the rutted path that leads to the woodshed. Father pulls the truck in so that it is in line with the woodshed and in front of the cutting block. He gets out, spits on his hands and takes the axe from me.

My brother has retrieved a large slab of wood from the back of the truck and places it on the cutting block. Father lifts the axe over his head slowly, takes measure of his target and divides the block of wood cleanly. My job is to pick up the pieces of wood and stack them neatly in the shed. A few pieces of wood have fallen from the pile in the shed and I move to pick them up and return them to their places. Father becomes angry with the growing pile of chopped wood around his feet.

"Pick up these pieces of wood," he says, measured, like the swings of his axe. I turn immediately and scramble to pick up the pieces around Father's feet. Brother helps me subtly by pushing some pieces of wood closer to me with his feet. It is difficult for me to keep up with my father's frenzied pace, but knowing the consequences, I push myself to keep up.

It is nearly suppertime when we finish. Brother and I come inside weary and hungry from the day's work. Mother greets us and cautions us to be mindful of the snow on our boots and her recently scrubbed floor. I can smell baked apples, turkey, and my mother's perfume as she hugs me and helps me out of my winter layers. It is a relief when I am in only one layer of clothes, and lying in front of the fireplace. It relaxes me and soon I am asleep.

Mother wakes me and tells me supper is ready. My clothes are hot now because of my proximity to the fireplace and I am dizzy from the heat. Rolling away from the fireplace helps me to cool down and after a few minutes I am no longer dizzy and able to stand confidently. I walk into the dining room and my parents and brother are sitting quietly awaiting my arrival. My mother smiles and Father begins putting mashed potatoes on his plate. Mom fills my plate for me, considerate of my tastes: no stuffing because of the onions and celery it contains, not too many potatoes because I prefer turkey and peaches, milk, not orange juice. Father says nothing but looks disdainfully at my meal.

Mom always dresses up for supper. She looks nice, really pretty. She is wearing a new pale red dress, and her hair is neatly arranged on top of her head. Mom asks if anyone would like more turkey despite the fact that all our plates are still full.

My brother and I answer politely, "No thank-you." I have saved one of my peaches for last and now begin to eat it slowly, cutting it into small pieces and eating them one by one. Father looks down at me disapprovingly. I see this out of the corner of my eye, pretend not to notice, and eat the rest of my peach hastily. I peer at my mother as she fidgets with the top button of her dress.

When I am finished I put my hands on my lap and stare at my plate. My brother has been done for some time now, but waits for permission to leave. He too stares at his plate. Father has taken his teeth out of his mouth and is picking the food out from between them with his mouth and fingers. None of us look at him while he does this, not even Mother. We have learned not to look at the lion without his teeth.

When he is finished, he snaps his teeth back in place and leaves, telling us to help our mother with the cleanup. We comment on how good the food was. Mom smiles. She is pleased. Brother clears the table while Mother and I wash the dishes. Mom says she is looking forward to having turkey sandwiches. Brother and I agree.

That night Mom sends my brother and me to bed early so she can talk to our father. Brother and I lie very still straining to hear their subdued conversation.

"Can you hear what they are saying?" Brother whispers through the darkness.

"No. You?"

"No, but I heard Mom talking on the phone earlier today and she said that a wolf has been killing sheep and chickens around town. They're probably going to hunt it and kill it."

"Who?"

"A few of the men from town. I think they asked Father to come."

"Is he going to do it?"

"I don't know. I bet they're talking about it now."

There's a moment's pause and then Brother continues, "I hope the wolf gets him," he says bitterly.

"What?" I reply, more loudly than I had wanted.

"Shh!" Brother replies, irritated. We wait in silence for a few moments to ensure that the conversation has not stopped in the adjacent room. "You know how he is, except you get to work with Mom all the time. Imagine working with him everyday." What my brother is saying is true. That's how it's always been in

our family: I help Mom with her work; Brother helps Father with his. This is Father's decision. I am a failure in his eyes because I don't know the difference between a Philips and a Slot screwdriver. I can't drive a nail straight into a piece of wood. I am slow and lazy and weak. Unlike my brother I take after my Mother. My shoulders are small and my arms thin. Father has never said anything to this effect, but I see it in his looks and I, like my brother, believe he thinks it. I am glad it worked out this way. I am spared the tension, hard labour, and my Father's violent impatience. "I hope the wolf gets him," Brother repeats into the silence. I don't reply.

I awake the next morning to barking dogs and an excited conversation outside. I sit up in my bed and peer out the window. It's my father, uncle and some men from town. I am just in time to see them put their rifles in the back of the old red truck and drive away. My uncle's hounds are also in the back of the truck pacing nervously. I see Mother standing on the deck, pulling her shawl tightly around her shoulders in an effort to ward off the cold winter wind as she watches them go. I roll out of bed and walk into the kitchen.

"Where is Father going, Mom?" I ask, taking a seat at the table.

“There’s a wolf running around, and they have to kill it, but I don’t know why he has to do it. Let some of the younger men from town do something for once,” Mom says, pulling back the curtain and peering out the window.

Father returns several hours later just as darkness has settled in. Mother, watching for them from the window for most of the day, goes outside immediately. I run to my room and peer out my window. The men gather around the old red truck, laugh and shake hands. I see my uncle lift a blood-stained potato sack from the back of our truck and heave it into his. Mother seems somewhat reassured and returns into the house.

The next day everything goes back to normal, I am helping Mom set the table for supper, and Brother is with Father putting up drywall in the basement. Brother holds the sheets of drywall in place against the wall while Father inserts the small black screws. Mom finishes preparing the leftover turkey and then helps me arrange the silverware.

She begins to tell me about her day. This is something she does regularly. Today, she remarks about the various household chores she has accomplished or has yet to accomplish, her telephone conversations—whom she talked to and what about—



and how tired she has been recently. Mom explains how Aunt Beth is still cheating on her husband (this isn't a secret to anyone) despite the trials her two children suffer because of it. Mom has always had a penchant to retell stories, this one alone I've heard more than a dozen times. All of this is very boring to me, but I endure it, and listen to her attentively. My brother comes into the kitchen and my mother stops talking. He looks tired; his shoulders sag in front of him and his arms hang loosely at his sides. "Father said you have to come down," he says, shrugging and descending back into the basement. I look at Mom pleadingly, but finding no help there, follow Brother down the stairs.

In the basement there is a vague cloud of white dust that kicks off the drywall when it is cut by Father's power saw. Father is almost completely covered by the fine white powder, but he seems not to notice this or the cloud of dust in the air—he has become accustomed to it. I see Brother cough quietly and rub his nose; perhaps the short time spent upstairs has made him aware of the conditions in the basement. I immediately begin coughing. The cloud stings my eyes and I am convinced I will suffocate.

I am told to help my brother hold up the drywall against the wall because he can't do it himself anymore. I say nothing

and move beside my brother in front of the wall. Father cuts the next sheet of drywall, adding to the airborne white cloud. When he is finished, my brother helps Father bring the large sheet to the wall and position it so that it's straight and aligned properly. Father tells me to help my brother hold the sheet in place so he can secure it with small black screws.

Holding the sheet in place is difficult; it is heavy and there aren't handholds making the task of supporting the weight a tremendous physical burden. My arms start to shake before Father has even put the first screw in. My strength fails me and the sheet slips slightly out of place. In anger, Father pushes me to the floor and with one hand pushes the sheet back in place violently. I scramble to my feet and take a step back and watch as Father drills the first screw into place by holding the sheet up with his right hand, and using the drill in the other.

There is a slight pause in my father's actions.

A moment later he lurches forward and the drill falls to the ground. Brother takes a step away from the wall and looks at me. We're both unsure of what to do and unconsciously look away. I hear Father try to say something but it comes out as an indiscernible grunt. He drops to one knee and then rolls onto his

back. His breaths are short and shallow, and his hands are clutching his chest. Brother and I both take another step back.

Father looks up at us, his face contorted in anguish, "Go," he whispers harshly, shutting his eyes in pain. Brother turns and runs up the stairs hollering to Mom that something is wrong with Father. I hear him tell her to call an ambulance. Father is lying on the floor; Papa, drunk and disoriented, lying face down in his living room, couldn't look more helpless than Father does now. "Go," he repeats through gritted teeth. I run up the stairs.

Mom's voice wavers only slightly when she announces that we are going to visit Father. Someone outside of the family probably never have notice Mom's slight vocal quiver, but in a house as quiet as ours, very little goes unheard. It is an interesting proposition, visiting Father. I've only been to the hospital once and that was to visit my brother when he got his tonsils removed. That was easy—he didn't talk much so I told him what was happening at school and ate ice cream. But visiting Father will be a completely different experience. He's always held dominance over us, has always maintained a position of power. But now, whenever I think of him, all I can see is his rigid body lying on the basement floor, white with drywall chalk and

with the look of unmistakable fear in his eyes. Lying on the floor, Father was only six inches tall.

The drive to the hospital is short, but I wish it were longer. I have a queasy feeling in my stomach and I walk slowly behind my brother and mother. Mom looks back, takes my hand, and tells me to hurry up.

Father is on the first floor, and his bed is in the far corner of a little room. There are large machines with flashing lights surrounding his head and upper-body and tubes are stuck in his nose. His breathing is very loud. As we step closer he stirs, and opens his eyes about halfway. Mom smiles and walks the rest of the way to his bed. My brother and I stop just inside the doorway. Father looks past Mom, looks at us briefly, and, grabbing Mom by the arm, pulls her down towards him. I hear harsh whispers and see Mom look over, nodding her head sharply. He releases her arm and rests his head back on the pillow. His eyes close and he resumes the heavy breathing that greeted us when we first arrived. Mom turns to us and says, "Daddy's tired. We'll come and visit another day." The same quiver from before is in Mom's voice.

We don't go back to the hospital until a week later, after Father had been moved into another room on the second floor.

His bed is just to the right of the door. There are three other beds in the room, but they are all empty and neatly made. Father is sitting on his bed reading a newspaper when we enter his room. We wait at the foot of his bed for a few minutes until he folds the paper and puts it on the bed-side table. I notice a plate of food lying upside-down on the floor.

Father says two things to Brother and me: "Are you doing your chores?" and "Are you behaving at home?" To each, Brother and I mumble identical answers: "Yes, Sir." Father complains to Mom about having to remain in bed all day, about the boredom, and about stupid old men who try to talk to him.

Despite what he could say or do, Father doesn't look the same to me anymore. He has lost weight, and the left side of his face—especially his mouth—does not seem to move with the rest of his face. None-the-less, the doctors have been complaining about him. A nurse stopped us at the entrance to his room and told Mom that her husband has been rude to nurses and refuses to eat his food—they've been forced to feed him intravenously. Mom looked away when the nurse told her this and told her that she understands, and that she'll try to talk him into behaving more appropriately. She agreed it was unacceptable and that this

cannot be allowed to continue. From the time when Mom entered Father's room until she left, she never brought it up.

The next day I am watching television when Mom comes into the living room and brushes my hair with her hand.

"I'm going to pick up your father now. Are you okay?" I tell her that I am, and watch her get into her car and drive away from the living room window. When the car is out of sight, I make my way through the house, descend into the basement and stand in front of the spot where Father had fallen. Nothing has been moved since the paramedics took Father away. The drill is still lying on the floor, and the sheet of drywall is bent and hangs awkwardly on the wall, suspended by a single screw. I can see in the chalk dust where Father fell, a handprint and a vague outline of his body. Indications of what used to be there.

I hear Mom's car pull into the driveway and return upstairs after taking one last look at the chalk silhouette. I enter the kitchen a few seconds before Father opens the door. He is thinner, looks several years older, and the numbness in his left side is more noticeable than it was in the hospital. He stops in the doorway and we exchange an awkward look.

"Hi," I say, as my vision shifts to Mom who comes up behind him. Father turns away and lets Mom inside, closing the door behind her.

Father brings his hand up against his mouth, "Where's your brother?" he asks, easing into his chair at the table and angling it so that I am not in his direct line of vision.

"In his room."

Father nods, and leans back in the chair, closes his eyes and releases a long, slow breath. I watch him as he rubs his face with two hands and looks around the room as if it were the first time he had seen it. His eyes fall on me briefly, but he turns them away and looks forward through the backyard window. Mom busies herself organizing the already neat countertop. After a few moments, Father brings his hand back to his mouth and tells me that he needs to talk to Mom for a minute. I leave the room.

The doctor told Father to take time off work to rest and not to tax himself for the next couple of weeks because he needed time to recover. None of us were too surprised when Father went back to work in the basement the following day. He didn't ask for my help or even my brother's. In fact, he didn't say much at all once he returned from the hospital. When he did speak,

however, his hand always covered the left side of his mouth that didn't move with the rest of his face.

I am outside in our front yard two days later when the sound of an ambulance's siren is heard. Instinctively, I know it is coming to our house. The ambulance stops in our driveway and two paramedics emerge from the vehicle and hurry inside. A few minutes later, they emerge with Father, lying prone on a stretcher, breathing through an oxygen mask. Mom is outside too, crying and running alongside the gurney.

The following day, we return to the hospital, but find that Father hasn't regained consciousness. Machines surround him and it is difficult to get very close. I move to the left side of the bed, opposite my brother, and stand staring at my father. Mother sits solemnly in the chair at the foot of the bed holding her head in her hands.

The doctor had told us that he was cautiously optimistic about Father's chances to recover, but he never did. He lay in the hospital bed unmoving for three days and then died in his sleep. I remember when Mom got the phone call from the hospital. Mom was preparing breakfast and Brother and I were upstairs in our room. The ring from the telephone and a crash from the



kitchen brought us running downstairs. Mom was sitting upright on the floor, with the phone in her hands and a chair overturned beside her. She looked up and I saw tears running freely down her face. I began to cry too, joined her on the floor, and we embraced each other. I looked up at my brother who hadn't moved since he entered the kitchen. Standing in the entrance, he bit back the tears, turned his face, and refused to cry.

## *Household*

Mrs. Hoshal, my fourth grade teacher, killed the bat that was in the boy's bathroom at school. Danny Gilbert told her about it, but I saw it first, as soon as I walked in. It wasn't hurting anyone; actually, I think it was hiding. The bright florescent lights of the bathroom had sent it into the corner in a desperate search for darkness. Well, it found it, thanks to a whack from Mrs. Hoshal's straw broom. She kept the broom in the classroom because a lot of dirt gets tracked in after recess and she liked to keep her classroom *squeaky*. That's what she always said, *squeaky*. She also threatened to give us a whack with it if we misbehaved, although I don't think she ever did. Danny Gilbert said she hit him with it once on the behind during recess, but no one believed him. Danny lied a lot.

Everybody wondered how a bat got into the school in the first place. Mrs. Hoshal said it probably flew in the night before. She was also the principal of the school and sometimes had to stay late to do work — like a bad kid. I never had to stay late, but Danny Gilbert did — a lot. Mrs. Hoshal said she left the door open the night before because it was hot in the school and that was most likely when the bat got in. She said she had to kill it

because it could have flown into someone's hair looking for a place to hide. I didn't want to tell her about it, but Danny did. He was trying to be the teacher's pet.

I lived really close to the school and as soon as I got home I told Mom about the bat. She got really upset and asked me if I was okay. I nodded and told her she should have some concern for the bat. Mom said bats were dirty – “Black rats with wings” – was what she said. Mom was like Mrs. Hoshal in that way. She always kept her house *squeaky*, although, that was not something she would ever say.

Mom was peeling potatoes to make French fries for dinner. Her hands were covered in a thick brown juice, a mixture of dirt and potato juice. She wiped her hands on her apron when I came in so that she could hug me and brush my hair out of my face. Her hands were rough, smelled of potatoes, and there was dirt beneath her fingernails from digging potatoes out of the garden. I usually dug up the potatoes for her, but she did it herself when she wanted to start supper early.

The next day at school every boy who went into the bathroom checked the corner where the bat had been hiding to see if another had flown there or just to stand around the spot and talk about the whole thing, like witnesses to an accident.

Danny said the bat turned its head and snarled at him with big fangs and yellow eyes. I told him he was a liar, and pointed out that bats don't have yellow eyes — they're brown, black almost — and that fruit bats were almost completely blind in bright light conditions. No one believed me; the truth wasn't sensational enough for them.

Mrs. Hoshal had a difficult time keeping everyone calm that day. It seemed like everyone saw bats — Danny alone saw three. It didn't take long for Mrs. Hoshal to start doubting the kids' bat stories and put a limit on the amount of time we could spend in the bathroom. She said that if we didn't start behaving ourselves she would take away recess and make us clean her classroom. After that no one saw any more bats.

After school that day I went to my grandfather's house to remind him to take his medication and to keep him company. He often complained that he was lonely so I visited whenever I could, usually after school. He was very weak, and confined to a wheelchair most of the time. For this reason his driver's license was revoked, and he was declared unfit to drive. "When I get this mess sorted out with the license people," he said on nearly a daily basis, "I'll take you wherever you want to go." Papa refused to sell his old brown Chevrolet Caprice Classic as a

testament to this declaration. Mom said it would never happen, but encourages his optimism. She said it was good for him. The car sat on four partly deflated tires in his garage.

I usually found Papa standing in the front room of his small but adequate house staring blankly outside. Sometimes he'd have his face pressed up against the window like a kid on a school bus. I had wanted to fly our kite that day, but since I got it tangled in a tree the last time, I was worried that Papa didn't have the time or ability to fix it. It was a kite that Papa flew as a child. He said it was the last gift he got from his father, and that it was always special to him. Before I even said hello (Papa was never fond of courtesies anyway) I asked Papa if he had been able to repair the kite.

"Bah! It'll take more than a ten-year-old and an oak tree to keep it down. It don't look as pretty and won't fly quite as high, but it'll come through—always has." My grandfather had been a fighter pilot; he had flown an A-20 bomber before he was shot down by the Bismarck and badly injured his back. I always liked to hear his stories—especially the one about the Bismarck raid—and listened to him intently.

"Let's go, Boy, time's wasting," he said, taking a small slow step toward the door. I grabbed his wheelchair and placed it at

the bottom of the stairs, then held the door for Papa as he made his way outside. With one hand on the railing and the other on my shoulder, Papa descended down the three stairs and sat in his wheelchair. I ran back inside and grabbed the kite and gave it to Papa as I took the handles of his wheelchair and took him to the park.

Papa perked up every time I took him outside; when asked about it, he said it was like seeing the outside world for the first time. I usually left Papa under the cool shade of an oak while I flew the kite. That day though, Papa looked distracted and stared at me intensely.

"Papa?" I asked, reaching for the kite.

"Harold," he said, grabbing my shoulders with his large, soft hands, "an old man like me ain't got youth or freedom no more, not like you. You are free so long as you are young and willing to be. Don't let them pound conventions in your skull or stick you in a cubical or as sure as hell don't let them keep you pent up nowhere—don't let them until you can't hold out any longer, 'cause once it's gone, once you let go, Harold, there's nothing left, not a damn thing," Papa released his grip on my shoulders and was quiet for a few moments, a hint of sadness in his face. I didn't really understand what Papa was talking about,

but I felt it was very important to him, and so I nodded my head and pretended to understand. He seemed satisfied with my response.

“Do you think you can fly clear of the trees this time out?” he asked, as he held the old tattered kite, and forced a small smile. “You see this kite has been through a lot. This hole here,” he continued, pointing to a patch on the left wing, “that happened over the skies of Germany, took an anti-air missile it did, damn Nazis thought it was an allied bomber, I figure. Never flew the same since, but it still flies,” he said, as if it was a matter of pride for him. “Now go,” he finished, handing me the kite. I took it, certain that the week before that same hole was the result of a dogfight with a German BF-109 “Gustav”. It really didn’t matter that much to me, although I could be sure that whatever happened to the kite, it happened over Germany, Papa’s story was always consistent on that point.

When I was confident that I was far enough away from any obstacles, I let out a little string and began running, watching as the ragged wings caught air. Little by little, I released more string until the wooden spool was empty and the kite had reached its apex. I noticed it didn’t fly as high as it once did, but not significantly so. The wind was strong that day and I held on to

the spool with both hands, worried that I would lose my grip and the kite would slip away. In the air the kite made quick darts down, then up again or slid side to side as it sifted through various airborne forces.

I looked over at Papa and, even from my distance, I could see he was crying, his head in his hands and his shoulders bobbed. I pulled in the kite and ran over to him.

"Papa?" I asked, putting my hand on his arm, "are you all right? You look tired."

Papa composed himself quickly and wiped the tears off his cheek with the back of his hand. "Yes, well maybe I am," he said, "take me home, Boy," he decided, coughing quietly. He took the kite from my hands and sat quietly during the short journey home. I stayed with Papa for a few minutes, but he announced that he was going to take a nap and sent me home.

"You're home early," Mom remarked.

"Papa, was tired today so we left the park early and I took him home," I said, sitting on a kitchen chair, watching Mom finish washing a small pile of dishes. Her hair was pulled back in a bun held together by several bobby pins. A red and white kerchief was on top of her head to keep her hair out of her face and food.



"Did you have fun?" She asked, drying a hand on her apron and scratching her nose.

"Yeah, Papa fixed the kite and we flew it."

"That does sound like fun, I wish I had time to go to the park with you and Papa more often," Mom said, standing on her toes and looking out the window. Mom's kitchen was small, but there were two large windows—one over the sink and the other by the table. She kept plants wherever she could. She said it gave her some hope and a little light.

Dad always said he was going to build a little greenhouse for her when he had time, but that never happened. I only saw him on the weekends because he worked in Oshawa and stayed there during the week. Mom told him to relax whenever he came home, "I already have a greenhouse," she always said, "it just happens to have an oven in it." Dad always smiled, and said, "Maybe next month when things around work slow down."

Mom got lonely too, just like Papa. She never said it, but sometimes I saw her staring out the kitchen window—looking for the neighbours whom she did not know—or heard her crying late at night when I was supposed to be asleep. I was her only child and with Dad gone during the week, Mom was left by herself most of the time.

“What did you do at school today?” Anymore bats?” she asked, in an odd, excited tone as she prepared a roast for the oven.

Her oven was one of those old, black models that were so black that when I was younger, I thought that even standing near it would make me dirty. Mom always complained about her oven, telling Dad that she needed a new one, and Dad always said “Maybe next weekend.”

“No, Mom, just because there was a bat in the school one day, doesn’t mean that they can get in everyday,” I said, shaking my head, “Besides, Mrs. Hoshal is probably lot more careful now about leaving the door open at night.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Mom said, closing the oven and sitting in the chair beside me. Mom’s face changed suddenly, and her smile was replaced by a look of concern, “Harold, you said Papa was tired and you took him home—are you sure he was okay? He didn’t look sick did he?”

“I thought for a minute and then shook my head, “No, he said he was just tired, but I think he was sad too—he was crying,” I said, remembering the look on his face. Mom nodded her head, “I better call him to make sure. Thanks, Sweetheart,” she said, messing up my hair and walking to the phone. “Supper will be

ready soon, and then you're going to have to go to your room because I have to wash this floor."

I was lying in bed when Mom finished washing the floor. I could smell the fresh pine tree scent when she came into my room. Mom sat in the chair beside my bed and began reading. She usually picked a story from a book of fairy tales—stories like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Cinderella*. I was too old for these stories, but they were the only suitable books we had and Mom liked reading them to me.

I woke up a couple hours later and found Mom watching me from the doorway. The room was dark and I could only make out her silhouette leaning in the doorway.

"Mom?" I asked, sitting up and rubbing my eyes, "What—"

"Go back to sleep, Sweetheart," she said, turning away and disappearing into the kitchen. I was too tired to argue and did as I was told.

The next day at school there was no more talk about the bat. I saw a few boys glance up to the corner in the bathroom, but that was as far as it went. Had it flown in someone's hair or tried to bite someone or done anything extraordinary perhaps then it would have been a point of interest. But it didn't. Its life in our

school was unremarkable and the incident was two days removed from our memories.

The rest of the day passed slowly, I was caught a few times by Mrs. Hoshal and scolded for daydreaming out the window. It was a relief when the final bell rang and school ended. On my way home I stopped at Papa's house. Mother was already there when I arrived.

"Harold, my boy! Come here and give your Papa a hug," he said, pushing himself up from his wheelchair and taking a step towards me.

"Dad," Mom said immediately, "let him come to you. You know you shouldn't be exerting yourself," she said, taking his arm, and easing him back into the chair. I hugged Papa awkwardly once he had sat down and climbed on the couch in the living room.

"When a man can't even hug his own grandson, what is there left?" Papa said quietly, drawing a concerned look from Mother.

"Oh, Daddy, you can't go around defying your doctors," Mom said, shaking her head. "You remember what happened to Mrs. Cooper last winter when she tried to shovel her driveway and put out her back – the poor woman was in the hospital for

months. She was never the same after that. And Mr. Southwick who slipped in his own bathtub because he refused to get hand rails put on the walls," Papa slouched in his chair and looked like a misbehaving child being scolded. "People your age have to be careful, that's all I'm trying to say, Daddy," Papa did not immediately respond. Instead, he sat there for a few minutes then turned towards me and asked me how my day was. I told him it was fine as Mom brought him his medicine and a glass of water.

It rained all of the next day, cancelling all our recesses and making the inside of the classroom hot and uncomfortable. By the end of the day the rain had become a light drizzle making walking home from school possible. I headed directly to Papa's. Papa was not in his front room, but his wheelchair was so I called for him and searched through his house, but found it empty and dark. I left his house and ran home.

"Hi Harold," Mom said, stirring a pot of soup on the stove.

"Where's Papa, Mom?"

Mother stopped what she was doing and looked at me, "He isn't at home?" she asked, looking concerned. I shook my head.

“He doesn’t have anything scheduled for today,” she said, grabbing my hand and hurrying outside and into her car.

Mom drove quickly to Papa’s house and ran inside. A few minutes later she emerged from the house, disappeared into the garage for a moment and then emerged once again, running hurriedly back to the car.

“His wheelchair is there, but his car is gone. He knows he can’t drive. He could be anywhere by now,” Mom said, looking very concerned. For the next hour Mom drove up and down every street looking for Papa. We were about to give up hope and Mom said we were going to have to go home and call the police, but on our way home we passed by the airport and caught sight of Papa’s car vacant at the side of the road. There was a slight ditch and long grass leading up to a chain-linked fence that closed off the airport runway. Papa was standing at the bottom of the ditch wearing a wide brimmed hat and raincoat, clutching the fence and watching the planes land and take off. The long grass between the old brown car and where he was standing had been trampled. There was grass and dirt on Papa’s back and a large portion of grass at the bottom of the ditch had been flattened where he must have fallen while trying to make his way to the fence. His head was cocked upwards at an awkward angle

and didn't move, even when we stopped the car beside him, so intent was he on the movements of the lumbering planes.

"Daddy?" Mom said, sliding down the ditch and running to him. Papa took his eyes off the sky for the first time and looked at his daughter. "What are you doing out here? Do you know we've been looking for you for over an hour?"

"I flew fighter planes once," Papa said, looking back into the sky, as if that one statement was enough to answer all her questions.

"I know Daddy. Come on, I'll take you home," Mom said, taking his arm and leading him away from the fence. When they got to the edge of the ditch I took Papa's other arm and helped him up the incline. Mom led him to her car.

"You're getting wet, you should have worn your raincoat," Papa said, coughing forcefully.

"You should concern yourself about you. You're going to catch your death out here," Mom said, opening the passenger side door and helping him into the car. Mom decided it would be best if Papa stayed at our house for the next few days. Papa didn't respond. Actually, the only indication that he was even listening to his daughter was a slight, barely perceptible, nodding of his head.

When we got home Mother left me alone with Papa to get clean sheets from the laundry room because he was going to be using my room and I was going to sleep on the floor in the living room.

"Well, you can keep on talking then," Papa said unexpectedly, as if Mom was still in the room, "and Mrs. Cooper will continue to do as she pleases and if Mr. Southwick never needed assistance bars before why should he now — he's a stubborn fool anyway. So you can keep on talking, and I'll nod my head and I'll be fine. I flew an A-20 bomber once."

"What was that Daddy? I couldn't hear you," Mom said, reentering the room.

"I said I'll be fine," he replied, smiling easily.



## *Kilim*

Daffodils arrived today. I didn't even read the card. I've never read a single one. Yesterday I got jonquils, I think.

Faceless people hoping that their compassion will spare them from tragedy, that God will acknowledge their pity. Flowers for every occasion: Roses for love; chrysanthemums for friendship; bulbs to get on God's good side.

Ever since it happened, Mom has been going to church three or four times a week — Dad too. It had the opposite effect on me. I stopped going a couple weeks after it happened. I used to think God punished me, that it was something I had done, that if I would have gone to church more often or told Father Ward in confession about what I do with David Brenner or if I sent more flowers that God wouldn't have taken Andrea away — that that vengeful son of a bitch would have taken someone else. Mom and her new found religiosity would have a conniption if I ever said that out loud, but we all deal with this in different ways. Mom goes to church. Dad is renovating the guestroom. I curse and sulk and displace my anger. That's what my shrink tells me. That I'm displacing my anger onto others and until that stops I can never heal. All that for a hundred bucks an hour and so that

Mom and Dad can feel they are addressing the problem, so they can have peace of mind that they are helping their fucked-up daughter. Like I'm the only one with a problem. Mr. Handyman and the Virgin Mary are perfectly healthy. At least I'm trying to address the issue. Thanks Mom, Dad, Doctor, for all your help, your flowers are in the mail.

I remember waking up and hearing Andrea scream, and how the bed trembled with the commotion and struggle that was going on beneath me. He must have had his hand over her mouth because her screams were muffled and terrified. I started screaming for someone to help us, and that's when I saw Nathan Oxby run to the window and climb out, Dad entered the room a moment later and yelled frantic instructions for me to call 911. I was terrified and couldn't move, and thankfully Mom had already called. She came in few moments later and knelt beside Dad and cried. I wanted to join them there on the floor beside Andrea, but I couldn't. I was frozen in place and never felt more alone in my life.

The next day a police cruiser stopped in front of our house and I was asked if I would try to identify the man I saw the night before. I was brought to the police station and sat down in a small room with a few officers and told that I had nothing to

worry about, that the men I was about to see could not see me through the large one-way window that was in front of me. A moment later a group of men entered the room, and I knew immediately who was the man from my room the night before. He was the first one to come out and stood there like any of the other men. He was unremarkable, and appeared average in everyway. And even though I saw him for only a second before he climbed out my bedroom window, there was no doubt. I pointed him out and started to cry. The man I identified was Nathan Oxby. He is also suspected of killing three other girls over the span of two years. I often wonder why he chose my house that night, why his random acts of violence had to include my house. Why Andrea was special to him.

About a month later, after a few visits with Dr. Gall and when everybody started to pretend that things were back to normal, I started sleeping over at David's. I used to rationalize that I just couldn't sleep in the house that my sister was killed in, but it was more than that. I had to get away from my mother and father, their constant check-ins "just to see if you're okay," and the reminders of Andrea. And it's not just the obvious things—like her toothbrush or her vacant seat at the dinner table—it's the little things too: her coffee mug, her copy of *Les Misérables* with

the bookmark three-quarters of the way in or the mail that is addressed to her. It's all too much for me to take.

"Hey, you ready to go?" Alex asks as she pokes her head in the front door. I shrug my shoulders and nod my head. If Dr. Gall says I should try to occupy my free time then that's what I'll do. Mom is looking at me with a stupid smile frozen on her face like I just gave a valedictorian speech. Like this token act is a great step forward towards mental health. I want to tell her, in my sarcastic cynical tone, that it has been well documented that taking a class in Persian rug making is a sure fire cure for depression, but I hold my tongue. Mom and I exchange an awkward smile and Alex and I leave.

Alex's Pontiac Buick is a piece of shit. The passenger-side window doesn't roll down and the horn goes off every time she makes a right turn. When driving downtown, Alex waves at people on the street corners as if the horn was blown deliberately to get their attention. It tempers her embarrassment. Alex starts the car and pulls out of the driveway.

*Honk.*

I wave at the silhouette of my mother in the window.

"Hey, thanks for doing this class with me."

"Oh, no problem. It gets me out of the house," Alex says. It seems that neither of us can handle silence so we fill it with small talk. I get a lot of that now. Everyone is terrified of a single silent moment with me. I guess it's a part of trying to act natural, as if nothing has happened. I would love to, just once, answer a comment about the weather with "Yeah, the weather has been holding out. Nathan Oxby stabbed my sister twice with two knives from my mother's kitchen set on a day almost exactly like this one." I would love to see their faces after that. I would love to make them understand that everything is not all right, that no matter how good their phoney smiles are, it won't gloss over what happened. I guess it's a part of our society: a terrible news story is watched and forgotten with a click of the remote. Everyone wants to leave this behind.

"Are you all right, Ali? Honestly, if you want to talk—I mean I don't have a PHD or anything, but I knew you and Andrea and you can talk to me."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm doing all right. You know, as well as can be expected. It's hard you know—every time I try to walk into my room—" I start to well-up.

*Honk.*

I laugh nervously. Alex laughs too and makes a comment about getting a new car in the new-year. "Are you planning getting right-turn honking as an option?" I ask, "because, I'd sure miss it if you didn't." Alex laughs again. We are saved by small talk, and both grateful. A few minutes later we walk into the community centre and find a spot on the floor among a small group of mostly middle-aged people.

Our teacher is a thin Persian lady with a very thick accent. She's nervous. She fidgets with the buttons on her black blouse, and touches her face. That's a sign of insecurity. At least, that's what Dr. Gall tells me anyway. It's ironic, this is coming from a guy who chews on his pencil throughout our sessions and has a picture of his mother on his desk. Freud would have something to say about that I'm sure.

"We will make a Persian *kilim*. It is a very beautiful rug," our Persian host says through bony fingers. I shake my head and wonder how I ever got talked into this. I'm making a rug—one more thing for my family to walk over. She holds up a finished rug, turns it over and points out, in strained English, that it has the same design on both sides.

When we were younger, Andrea, Alex and I would come here to take gymnastics, but the classes were cancelled after our

instructor was killed in a car accident. Andrea and I actually drove past it, gave it the curious look that passersby do, and didn't think much of it. I felt guilty later, but I'm not entirely sure why. Maybe because I didn't stop or even slow down or even remember I'd seen it or even cared about the people involved or never thought that it could be me. We sent a nice arrangement of flowers to her family.

For about a month after, whenever I'd talk to someone from gymnastics class, we'd tell each other where we were when Ms. Shandler died. Alex, at the time working at the Inside Scoop, said she suddenly felt a moment's panic and dropped a full ice cream on the floor. None of us believed her. We all thought she was trying to one up Andrea and me.

On the far side of the room is a stretching bar and a long mirror that covers almost the entire wall. I look into the mirror and see my sister doing a hamstring stretch on the bar. I keep this image in my mind for a moment and wonder what people tell each other they were doing as Nathan Oxby came into my room that night? I was two feet away. I woke to her terrified screams, spared because I was on the top bunk, because I had won the coin toss when we were deciding who would sleep where.

One up that one Alex.

I suddenly become conscious of the tears streaming down my face, and the murmurs of conversation around me. I feel a hand on my shoulder and Alex ushers me quickly from the room.

"What happened in there?" Alex asks, once inside her car.

"Just memories of the place, I guess," I answer, avoiding eye contact.

"I was afraid of that, I was hoping we'd get the room downstairs—look, we don't have to go to those stupid classes anymore. We'll just find something else to do on Tuesday and Thursday nights."

"No, I want to go. I should go. I mean, it's not like there's going to be a place that lets me forget. And I don't want to forget, not like everyone else," I say bitterly, turning to look out the window.

"I know, but understand that people have to deal with this in their own way. Just because your mother is putting her faith in God doesn't mean she's forgetting about Andrea or cared any less about her."

Alex knew me well; better than anyone. I faulted my mother the most for forgiving Nathan Oxby and stating the will of God as the answer to all of life's calamities. She knew this and got right to the point.



"No, I can't accept that. How can a woman who just lost her daughter to a madman put so much faith in a religion that has never done anything for women?"

"Ali, that's not the point—"

"But it is the point, why would He even put someone like Nathan Oxby on earth? To do something like that?" I'm screaming, and Alex looks uncomfortable. I apologize, Alex sighs, nods her head, and starts the car.

*Honk.*

I smile wryly with the corner of my mouth.

"I don't want to argue with you, Ali, but I do think you need to talk to your parents more about this—especially your mother—they need you right now," I nod, she always was the rational one of the two of us.

"You want me to drop you at home?"

"No, I'm staying the night at David's," Alex makes a face, for only a second, then nods her head and we make arrangements for next week's class.

"Hello?" I call, walking into my parent's house the next morning. The only reply I get is the rhythmic pounding of a hammer coming from the downstairs' bedroom. I walk to the

room, lean in the doorway and watch as my dad, with a pencil resting behind his ear, bends over a carefully charted diagram illustrating his planned changes. Already the room has been changed dramatically since the last time I'd seen it. Dust covered clutter litters the floor and all of the furniture has been removed except for the bed, which has a clear, plastic sheet protecting it from paint and dust. Dad has not noticed my arrival.

"It's a bit of a mess," I remark, with a chuckle. He turns around and forces a smile.

"Hi, Honey. How was your class last night?" he asks, grabbing his pencil, making a correction to his plan, and returning it to its spot behind his ear.

"Fine, I guess,"

"And David?" he asks, erasing his last adjustment.

"Good, he sends his regards." Dad nods and scribbles something on the blueprint.

"Well, I'm off to shower," I say, waving indistinctly as I turn to leave.

"Your mother waited up for you last night," His voice is quiet, pained. I feel as if I'd been punched in the stomach.

"She's outside on the deck if you want to talk to her. I think you should."

"Okay," I reply, running up the stairs to the bathroom, and locking myself in. I am relieved to see Andrea's toothbrush and other toiletries have been removed. I don't think I could have taken the sight of them this morning. I undress quickly, discarding my clothes on the bathroom floor, and step into the shower. I let the hot water run over my head and back and try to relax, try to forget about everything that's gone on the past few days. Try to forget about David, who's been increasingly distant, my parents who expect more than I'm capable of right now, and Andrea, who is all I can ever think about. I let the hot water wash over me for several moments and try not to think about the mess my life is in right now. Perhaps, I think, I can try to reconcile with my mother, and I step out of the shower.

I get dressed and return downstairs. I stop in the kitchen and see Mom sitting outside in the sun. She's wearing a wide brimmed hat with a large pink bow and a pair of dark sunglasses. She's reclining on a lawn chair reading. I take a deep breath and pull open the patio door and join her outside.

"You didn't come home last night," she remarks, not bringing her eyes away from her book.

"Mom," I sigh, "we've been through this."

Mom snaps her book shut and takes off her sunglasses,  
“And we’re going to continue to go through this until you start acting like a member of this family. You hardly even eat here anymore for God’s sake.” The tension from Mom’s face fades quickly and she leans back into her chair, “Ali, you have to understand we—I need you here with me. It feels as if Nathan Oxby took both of my daughters away from me, and you have to understand that that’s hard for me to take,” Mom starts to cry, and I can feel my eyes also filling with tears. I nod my head and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. “Will you come to church with your father and me tomorrow?” Mom pleads, I can see how important this is to her.

I shake my head, unable to look at her, “No, Mom, I can’t. How can you put your faith in something that takes your daughter away from you and lets Nathan Oxby live? *Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.* Remember that one Mom? Does that not include Andrea?”

Mom is looking at me with shock and disbelief, “You can’t take a quote like that out of context—”

*“Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For*

*Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.* So it was Nathan's right as a man? You are a woman and a mother who just lost her daughter to a psychopath how can 'God's will' be enough for you?" I am crying now too, partly because we're talking about Andrea, but mostly because of the sight of my words hurting my mother so much.

Mom shakes her head, "No, no, it's not to be taken like that. It offers so much more if you'd just open your mind, and stop hating for one second," Mom begs, and is about to continue, but stops as her crying begins to become more obvious. She takes a few deep breaths, and composes herself, "You should not speak to me like this, not in my own house," Mom says shaking her head and trying to suppress her sobs.

I look away, wipe the tears from my eyes and begin to wonder why I came here in the first place. I remain standing in front of Mom for a few minutes, unsure of what to say or what to do. Mom has pulled her legs up to her chest and is sitting sideways on the chair, crying quietly. I begin to regret this whole conversation, and do not know what to do. Mom breathes in sharply, wipes her face dry and looks up at me.

"Your father and I are going to church tomorrow," she says swallowing back her tears for a moment, "You are welcome to join us if you'd like, but if you have other plans I understand," she says unevenly, replacing her sunglasses on her face and picking up her book. I watch her as she finds her place and begins to read. I wait for a few more minutes and turn and walk back into the house. Dad passes me on my way out and joins Mom on the deck. He kneels beside her and takes her into his arms. He talks softly to her and she nods her head, biting back her tears.

Having nowhere else to go, I leave and go to David's. David lives only a few blocks from my house; it is not a long walk. I feel badly about how I talked to Mom, and wish I had handled it better. She doesn't understand me. I arrive at David's and knock on the door. The door opens a few moments later and David, who seemed to be still in bed until just a moment ago, looks surprised to see me.

"I thought you were going home," he says turning around and walking back to his bedroom. I take off my shoes and follow him.

"I did, but my mother pissed me off."

"Again?" David mumbles as he falls back onto his bed and pulls the covers over him.

"She still wants me to go to church with them," I say sitting beside him. David doesn't respond. "David, aren't you going to talk to me?" I ask, shaking him gently.

"Ali," he says, obviously annoyed, "I worked late last night and I'm tired. I thought you were going home,"

"You already said that, what, you don't want me to come here anymore?"

"Ali, you're a great girl, but ever since Andrea was killed you've practically moved in here. We weren't even dating seriously when it happened. I thought we had an understanding, and then it's like we're married or something." David doesn't look at me while he says this. He rubs his face with both of his hands, sighs and gets out of bed. I don't know what to say. Of course, he's right, but I never expected this from him.

I follow David into the kitchen and watch as he drinks orange juice out of the carton. He is drinking too quickly and some juice is running out of the corner of his mouth, which he wipes away with the back of his hand. He returns the juice to the refrigerator and leans on the counter, crossing his arms over his chest.

"So what now?" I ask quietly, ashamed that I'm so hurt by him.

"Ali, I have a lot of stuff going on right now, and you obviously need more than I can give you. It's not fair to you, I know this, but I can't do any better right now," he says matter-of-factly, seemingly unbothered by anything that's happened since I arrived.

I nod my head and start to cry again, "You bastard, you were pretty fine with everything last night," I say bitterly.

"That's my point, Ali. Last night is how we were, all this other stuff is crap I didn't sign on to."

I'm stunned. I've never seen David this cold and uncaring towards me.

"Do you think I signed on to have my sister killed? Do you think that was part of my plans?" I'm screaming now, but David appears unconcerned.

"No, of course not Ali, but all this stuff you're dumping on me isn't fair. I'm 19 years old. This is too much real life for me."

I want to scream at him, beat him until he understands what I'm going through, that I'm 19 too and that this is life, but his impassiveness, his cold indifference, paralyses me. I look around for something to throw and grab whatever is near. His telephone



is behind me on the table and I hurl it at him. He brings his hands up around his head but the cord reaches its end and slows the forward momentum before it is ripped from the wall. The phone hits the floor with a crash and slides to his feet.

“You asshole,” I yell, as I leave his apartment, slamming the door behind me. I hear the dead bolt lock and see him watching me through the small window of his door. I pick up a handful of stones and throw them at him. He ducks away from the window, and the stones bounce off the glass harmlessly.

I walk back home and, still infuriated with David, slam the front door behind me. I go into the living room turn on the television and fall onto the couch. I curl up into the fetal position and cry into a cushion. It’s one of those full body cries that shake the entire couch. A few minutes later I hear a car pull up. The doorbell rings and I hear a quiet conversation between my father and whoever is at the door.

“Hey, you all right?” Alex says, coming into the room and sitting beside me.

“What does it look like,” I snap, turning away from her.

“Your father called me. He said you had a rough morning. What happened?” Alex asks, putting her hand on my arm. I don’t answer.

"Ali, talk to me, what happened?"

"I got into a fight with my mother and David is an asshole,"  
I mutter into the cushion.

"Your father filled me in on your fight with your mother,"  
she says sympathetically, "and David was never meant to be a big  
part of your life anyway – you said so yourself when you first  
started seeing him. He's not worth getting so worked up over."

"That's easy for you to say," I say bitterly (more so than  
Alex deserves.)

"Why are you so angry with me?" Alex asks, obviously  
offended.

I sigh and roll over to my back.

"I'm not angry with you."

"Then who? Your mother?"

"I don't know. Everything is just so messed up right now."

"I know it sounds like a cliché, but no one did say this was  
going to be easy. You are doing well considering."

I look at her sceptically, and shake my head.

"I'm making a mess of everything. I want to reconcile with  
Mom, but I can't go to church. If there is a God, then He allowed  
Andrea to die, and I can't accept this as God's whim."

“God’s will,” Alex corrects, laughing gently through her nose.

“I know, but whim seems more accurate. There doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to anything. I can’t accept it.” Alex nods her head, and I am glad she doesn’t argue with me. She is the only person I can talk to who actually listens and that I trust. We talk for about an hour before she says that she has to go to work. She tells me she’ll see me tomorrow for class and leaves.

I fall asleep again and am awakened by Dad, who tells me it is time for me to see Dr. Gall. Appointments with Dr. Gall are always an unnerving experience. Inevitably, everything comes back to Andrea, her death, and my feelings about it. Needless to say, I’m in emotional turmoil leaving his office. It’s Dad’s responsibility to pick me up after my appointments (Dr. Gall decided it would be best if I did not drive myself), and, to his credit, he is never late. Today, when I emerge from Dr. Gall’s office, I find Mom in the waiting room.

“Your Dad asked me to pick you up today,” she says standing up, forcing a smile and walking towards the exit. I have not talked to Mom since yesterday’s argument on the deck, and our attempts at conversation previous to that weren’t much

better. Needless to say, the prospect of spending half an hour alone in the car with her is not very appealing.

Mom starts the car and says nothing. The radio is off and the tension between us makes me very uncomfortable. Finally, after several minutes, Mom breaks the silence, *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill,"* Mom's voice falters for a moment, but she continues, *"and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.* It is our time to mourn, Ali, you are right about that, but not for ourselves or for Andrea, but for our loss. You came at me armed and ready for a fight, and that wasn't fair. It wasn't fair either how you judged me or talked to me. Do you remember this one? *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God."* She pauses then and looks at me, letting her words sink in. "Why can't you let me believe that Andrea is in a place where nothing but love can touch her? Why do you want to give everyone your anger? Anger will not bring Andrea back. Nothing will. According to you, my only fault is my faith and me

wanting to share something with you that gives me peace and perspective. It was not Andrea's time to die. It was her time to dance, Ali," Mom says these things with such passion and reverence that it sends a chill through my body. I nod my head, and stare out the passenger-side window. Mercifully, Mom doesn't say anything else for the remainder of the drive home.

When we get home I follow the sound of Dad's hammer and stand in the doorway of the guestroom.

"Hi, Sweetie, how was your session?" he asks. A nail hangs from his bottom lip like a cigarette, as he reads the indicator on his level; he makes a minute adjustment to a new bookshelf he is installing.

"Fine," I say, "but I was expecting you, Dad." Dad makes a final adjustment and drives a nail into the wall. He wipes the dust from the top of the bookshelf with his hand and looks at me.

"What was that? Oh, yeah, I had some work I wanted to finish up in here so I asked your mother to pick you up. Was there some kind of problem?" he asks, feigning ignorance.

I shake my head and tell him no.

Fatma, our Persian instructor, tells us the history and cultural significance of the kilim while she shows us the

techniques for creating our own. "Kilims," she explains, "are made in the same way today as they were hundreds of years ago."

As she talks, she twists lengths of wool into threads with two small, wooden spindles. When she is finished with a thread, she soaks it into a basin of dye and then hangs it to dry on a bar over the basin. Once that is finished, the threads are woven together with a loom using vertical warps and horizontal wefts.

"Thousands of years ago," Fatma explains, "before writing existed, village women used the kilim as a way to tell stories, with simple patterns and designs. Women could live forever in their work, and communicate with relatives that would not be born for centuries and tell them who they were and how they lived just as their own ancestors told them through their work. To these women it was a voice, often their only voice, that remained unchanged throughout time." Fatma continues and shows us different kilims and explains the iconography weaved within them.

She then allows us to work on our kilims and walks around the room offering suggestions and help to those who require it. Some time later, she announces that class is over and that she'll see us next week. I look up astonished at how quickly the class passed the time.

"How you doing?" Alex asks, once we're back in her car.

"Fine," I say nodding my head, "I never thought I'd say it, but this class does help me get my mind off things. At least for a while."

"Good," Alex said smiling, "I'm glad. You going home?" I tell her that I am and she starts driving.

"I'm sleeping on the couch until Dad finishes the guestroom. Apparently he's almost done," I say, shrugging my shoulders.

"How are things with your mother?" Alex asks, cringing with the question.

"It's hard to say. A little weird definitely – it's a work in progress," I say, laughing and shaking my head, "It's getting better though, I think," I say, remembering Mom's lecture in the car, "at least we're not openly snarling at each other anymore."

"Oh, I've been meaning to tell you, I can't make next Tuesday's class. My parents are throwing a party for my grandparents and I have to be there. Is that okay?"

"No problem," I say, we'll go Thursday though, right?" Alex assures me that we will and we fill the rest of our time together with small talk.

For the next couple of nights I sleep on the couch in the living room, waiting for Dad to finish his renovations in the guestroom. It is Saturday morning when he wakes me and announces that his alterations are complete. I follow him into the guestroom and stand in the doorway.

“Your new room,” he says, spreading his arms out wide. Everything is either new or redone. The walls have a fresh coat of paint on them, a new bed sits beneath the large eastern window and a large oak desk is along the opposite wall. On the nightstand, beside the bed, is an alarm clock and a picture of Andrea and me. It is a picture from her eighteenth birthday, earlier this year. I am wearing a birthday hat and she has her arm over my shoulder. It has been enlarged and is in an 8x10 silver frame. There is an inscription on the frame, “Sisters forever”, surrounded by embossed hearts. I wipe tears from my cheek and thank my Dad, hugging him tightly.

“Well, I’ll leave you alone to get settled in,” he says, smiling and leaving the room.

I lie on my new bed for a few minutes thinking about the last couple of days. I hear Mom and Dad talking in the adjacent room and a moment later, Mom appears in my doorway.



"Your father did a good job. The room looks good," she says, taking a step in.

"Yeah, he worked hard," there is a long awkward pause, and we both look away. "I don't want to fight with you anymore," I say quietly, sitting up in my bed. Mom does not respond or move. "I've been thinking, and while I still won't go to church, at least for the foreseeable future, I understand why you need to go and in the interests of family cohesiveness, I'll concede holidays and special occasions and accompany you."

Mom smiles, "It's a start. Can I get that in writing?" she asks.

I smirk and nod my head, "Sure," Mom turns to leave, "I need someone to take me to my kilim class next Tuesday night," I say in an offhanded manner. Mom stops and turns her head in my direction, "Will you take me?" Mom stops in the doorway for a moment, then says that she will and leaves my room. I run my hands through my hair and release a long slow sigh.

It's Tuesday and, disregarding pleasantries, Mom and I haven't talked since Saturday when she came into my room. There's still a weird tension between us, but like she said, it's a start. It would have been easier to ask my Dad to take me or not

to go at all, but I want to resolve this situation between my mother and me and move on.

When it is time to leave I sit in my room and entertain the possibility that Mom had forgotten and we'll miss the class – the fantasy is not entirely undesirable. I decide that my anxiety is ridiculous and stand to remind my mother of her commitment. I step in front of Mom as I exit my room.

"Ready to go?" she asks, rubbing hands together.

"Yup," I reply, raising my eyebrows at her peculiar behaviour.

"So I'm excited to learn how to make a kilim. Is there something wrong with that?" she asks, noticing my expression. I laugh and shake my head, wondering if I'd prefer the expected tension.

Nothing is said during the short car ride to the community centre. We both seem to be searching for something natural to say. The silence becomes awkward, "It's up here on the left," I blurt out, knowing that Mom is well aware of the location of the community centre. Mom looks at me and laughs and I wonder which *mother* I'll get once inside. I lead her to my usual place among the group and give her a synopsis of our lectures so far.

"This is where I brought you girls for your dance instruction," Mom says, looking around and smiling, "Your recitals were here too."

"I know Mom," I say, securing a length of wool in my spindles.

"Here, I can do that," Mom says, taking the spindles from me.

'You two danced beautifully, without equal in your class," Mom continues as she twists the wool into a thin thread.

"That's what all mothers say," I reply.

"You're probably right," Mom's voice trails off for a second, "I still have videos from all your recitals. I should dig them up and we could watch them."

"I don't know, Mom," I reply, feeling increasingly uncomfortable, "you almost finished with that thread?" I ask, trying to change the subject. Mom doesn't reply, I look over at her and she seems distant in thought.

"I know right where they are too."

"Mom, the thread?"

"I'll find them tonight and we can watch—"

"Mom," I say sharply, breaking her from her trance.

"What?"

"I don't want to watch the stupid movies," I snap, turning away and occupying myself with my kilim. "I'm just starting to get myself together again, I don't think I can handle movie night tonight. Okay?" Mom stops twisting the wool and shakes her head.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asks, tears filling her eyes, "One day you tell me you don't want to move on or forget about Andrea, and the next you tell me you can't take the thought of her or even talk about it. I'm trying here, Ali, but I don't know how we can deal with this when you keep changing the rules," the first tear streaks down Mom's face, tracing the curve of her cheek.

"Mom, I know, but I don't know the rules either. I'm trying too, but I don't know what to do. I don't want an easy answer for everything because I don't want anything about this to be easy. I want to struggle through this, but it can't be resolved in one night. Let's work on getting through a conversation about her before we bring out the home videos."

Mom nods her head, and inhales deeply. We both pretend to occupy ourselves with our work, trying to cover up the awkwardness of the situation. "So," she says abruptly, "ready for

the next thread." I smile half-heartedly, take the thread from her and she secures another between the spindles.

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It's been a year now since Andrea died. After the kilim classes ended, Mom and I bought our own loom and so I could finish my work. Mom helped occasionally, but understood that this was something I wanted to do on my own. It is finished now and I stand in front of the closed door of my old room. I take a deep breath and push open the door. The room is dark and cool; a faint smell of perfume still lingers in the air. With the exception of her bed that was removed shortly after the incident, the room is unchanged. My old bed is still neatly made in the far corner of the room. This is Andrea's room now as far as I'm concerned, and I don't think that will ever change. I would not be comfortable sleeping in here without her, and would rather remain in the guestroom downstairs. I walk over to my old bed and lay my finished Kilim over it. My craftsmanship is simplistic even when compared to my classmate's novice work. My design scantily resembles a gymnast stretching at the waist. Looking at its black and white pattern brings both a smile and a tear to my

face. I hope Mom's right; I hope it is Andrea's time to dance. I smooth away the wrinkles from the kilim with my hands and close the door behind me.

### *Mrs. Caderly's Party*

"Ooo-weee," Mrs. Tate exclaimed, "the Caderlys are having another party." She removed the card from the small envelope and read it aloud: "*In commemoration of our daughter, Mary Jane Caderly's, successful completion of her university studies. Very cordial, wouldn't you say,*" she said, turning her unwieldy upper body at the waist and facing her son, Daniel, who was sitting in the matching armchair to her left reading the morning paper. Mrs. Tate's icy blue eyes flashed and her cherubic face, child-like in its plumpness, held a look of utter joy and excitement.

Daniel folded the upper portion of his paper, and took the invitation from his mother. "Mom, this isn't even addressed to you. Why are you opening the Baxter's mail?" he asked, holding the card in the air as evidence.

Mrs. Tate shook her head, maintaining her look of exhilaration, "What does it matter, it's just an invitation – and besides, I opened it out of force of habit, before I read who it was addressed to. The mailman must have put it in our box by accident – it is right beside thiers, you know. I'll just put it in a new envelope and drop it in their box tomorrow. They'll never

know the difference. It's just an invitation. I'm sure I've got mine coming."

"You certainly do," Daniel said under his breath.

Mrs. Tate narrowed her eyes, not quite hearing what her son had said, but understanding his message in his tone. She turned around and said aloud, "I have to think of what I'm going to wear. I don't want to seem out of place. I'll have to think very carefully about this."

Daniel thrust his arms down, crumpling the paper in his lap, "You're going? You weren't invited. It's not your invitation," he shouted, astonished.

"Daniel, I've known Mary Jane since she was like this," Mrs. Tate said, reaching down and positioning her hand barely a foot from the floor.

"Since she was a foot and half tall?" Daniel asked, raising his eyebrows. "What the hell does that mean? Everyone in town knows the Caderlys," he said shaking his head, deciding that arguing with his mother was pointless.

Mrs. Tate ignored her son's ridicule and continued, "It's only appropriate I see her through her most special of days. It's the only proper thing to do. But finding the appropriate thing to wear is essential."



"Well, then why don't you just call Mrs. Caderly and ask her?" Daniel said smugly from behind the paper.

"Because I haven't gotten my invitation yet," she replied, missing her son's point. "I have no time for chit-chat now, I have to scour my closet," she said, pushing herself up out of her chair with great effort. Daniel watched his mother climb the stairs to her room, that single act leaving her breathless at the top, leaning on the banister huffing and red-faced.

"You'd be tired too if you had to haul me up a flight of stairs," she said in between heaving breaths in answer to Daniel's silent concerns. After he moved back home, Daniel suggested that Mrs. Tate take the room downstairs and he'd take her room to save her the constant climbing. Mrs. Tate flatly refused, "I can't sleep on the first floor. A woman in my position must take the upper level room. Symbolism isn't lost on everyone, Daniel." Daniel rolled his eyes but placated her, thinking the added exercise would do her good.

"Daniel," Mrs. Tate called from her bedroom. Daniel put the paper in his lap and waited for his mother to continue. "Are you planning on going to the party?" she asked. Daniel shook his head and continued to read his paper, deciding it better not to respond.

“Because if you are, we should have a coordinated wardrobe for when we come in together. The entrance is everything, Daniel.”

A few moments later, when only silence ensued, Daniel heard the floorboards moan in protest under his mother’s weight as she moved over to holler out her bedroom door, convinced that the only reason her son did not respond was because she was not heard.

“Daniel?” she hollered again.

“No, Mom. I’m not going unless I get an invitation with my name on it,” he shouted, as he continued to read his paper. There was silence for a few moments and then the floorboards moaned in the opposite direction as Mrs. Tate walked back to her closet. “But she is one of your contemporaries. You went to the same university as she did.”

“Mom! I’m two years older than Mary Jane. We’re not invited and I’m not going unless we get an invitation,” Daniel said, a noticeable edge in his voice. Daniel listened for a moment and could hear his mother trying to come up with ways to explain his absence: “Terribly ill, he wanted desperately to be here. He sends his best, but that job interview in Toronto come out of nowhere.” Daniel sighed and tried to concentrate on the paper.

Some time later, Daniel knew his peace with his paper was coming to an end as he heard Mrs. Tate descend on his position wearing an extravagant black dress and carrying an armful of clothes. She had positioned herself in front of him and he did his best to ignore her. After a few moments, Mrs. Tate lost her patience.

"Daniel," she said softly, almost sweetly, "when you have time, could you give me your opinion? They say black is slimming, do you think this dress is working?"

Daniel sighed, folded his paper and gave his mother his full attention.

"Yes, Mother, you look fine," was the best he could manage.

"But is it slimming?"

"Yes."

"You're a sweetheart," Mrs. Tate looked down at her dress and swung her hips from side to side. "Maybe I should see if that fashion law works cumulatively and wear five black dresses," Mrs. Tate said, giggling wildly.

"Oh, Mom, you look fine," Daniel said, tossing the paper on the floor beside his chair.

"Okay, back to business, I'm going to try on a few other things to get your opinion, okay?" Daniel nodded his head; he

owed her that much at least. The death of his father five years ago left her widowed and without income, but through good management and endurance through many personal hardships, Mrs. Tate financed Daniel's education and was continuing to support him until "his big break".

He realized that his mother would have moved years ago with her friends and neighbours when the neighbourhood started to decline, but she was determined to have a university graduate for a son, and made the sacrifice for him.

Mrs. Tate began to walk to the bathroom with her armful of clothes when the doorbell rang, spinning her around and bringing her bounding to the door. She swung open the door revealing Mrs. Guilloe, their neighbour from across the street. Mrs. Tate disliked Mrs. Guilloe immensely, considering her beneath her, but she found solace in her ability to be amicable to any of God's creatures.

"Tina," Mrs. Tate exclaimed. "What a pleasant surprise. Please come in." Mrs. Tate stood away from the door and motioned Mrs. Guilloe into their sitting room.

"You're all dressed up. Going to a party?" Mrs. Guilloe asked, taking her seat opposite Daniel. Daniel had taken up his paper again and had begun rereading it. He would have

preferred to leave the room but that would have embarrassed his mother considerably and he could spare her that much.

"Oh, not today," Mrs. Tate sang chuckling, shaking her head. "I think it's always important for a lady to look her best," she said, ending her statement with a click of her tongue and a tip of her head. *Not that you need to worry about that*, she thought, looking at what she described as her "low rung" neighbour.

"What about you, Daniel? How are you keeping yourself busy all these months after graduation?" Daniel peered over his paper and looked at Mrs. Guilloe, her large yellow teeth and stringy blond hair, attributes that, if white and washed respectively, would be quite attractive.

When he did not immediately respond, Mrs. Tate answered for him, "He's waiting for his big break," she said, resting her bulk in the chair adjacent to him. "One day he'll get some of his work published and his career will just take off. A novel perhaps," she said nodding her head and beaming with pride. Mrs. Guilloe nodded her head slowly as she eyed Daniel intently. "I know not of a single successful 25 year old writer," Mrs. Tate said, falsely implying she was well read or even read at all. "His time is coming. It's always darkest before the dawn."

Daniel sank in his chair. He had a degree in English and wrote poetry, "prosy, contrived tripe," a professor in the department had said. By his own estimation, his prose was far less praiseworthy. To make matters worse, his mother had him writing novels on a whim. Daniel was certain this place would suffocate him before long. Smiling thinly, Daniel resumed pretending to read his paper.

"Have you heard? The Caderlys are having another party?" Mrs. Tate said, sitting up straight as she played her trump card. Daniel shook his head from behind his paper. *Another party?* He couldn't remember the Caderlys ever throwing a party, let alone the implied multitude of them his mother tried to convince herself of. She thought that because they had money, they threw extravagant parties on a nightly basis and sipped tea during the afternoons.

"Yes," Mrs. Guilloe said decisively, narrowing her eyes, "I got my invitation today. I came over to see who else got one." Mrs. Tate slouched in her chair and could not believe this woman got invited before her. Nothing worse than bottom rung citizens, Mrs. Tate thought. She may not be thin or even an attractive woman, but she believed she was a good person, established routinely by her pleasant outlook and ability to be amicable to

anyone, even low rung trash like Mrs. Guilloe. Mrs. Guilloe was a reputed liar, and this was another in a long line of self-promoting lies, Mrs. Tate thought. Mrs. Tate would not believe that the Caderlys would invite her into their home on their daughter's most special of days. Especially before or perhaps instead (although Mrs. Tate would not even entertain this notion) of a lady like herself.

Daniel watched his mother squirm with this news and took no small amount of satisfaction from her discomfort. A little *hubris* would go a long way in teaching his mother a much-needed lesson, he thought with a wry grin.

"Can I offer you some tea?" Mrs. Tate asked, standing up. Mrs. Guilloe declined, stating that she just wanted to check in.

"Brag more like it," Mrs. Tate huffed after she had shown her guest out. "Did you see the look on her face when I told her I had an invitation? Her eyes were narrow and beady, like a rat's."

"I wasn't paying that much attention, Mom."

"Well, I was and she knew very well that I didn't get an invitation today. I bet she followed the mail man around and saw exactly who got invited and who didn't," she said, throwing herself on the couch tragically. "Oh, who cares anymore," she pouted. Mrs. Tate remained glum and checked her mailbox half a

dozen times that afternoon, each time returning empty-handed and even more depressed.

It was late evening when Daniel emerged from his room to find his mother curled up on the couch on the verge of tears.

"I've hit rock bottom, Daniel," Mrs. Tate said, pushing herself into a sitting position.

Daniel sat beside his mother and put his arm over her shoulder, "Sometimes mail gets delayed, you'll probably get yours tomorrow," he said, reaching into his pocket and offering her a tissue.

Mrs. Tate took the tissue and wiped her nose, "But what if I really didn't get invited?"

"Well, Mom, then you have to think that it's just a party and there'll be others. The Caderlys throw parties at the drop of a hat. It's not the end of the world."

Mrs. Tate nodded, wiped her nose a final time and then rose to her feet, "I must get some sleep," she said as she left the room and climbed the stairs.

The next day Daniel awoke to the excited squeals of his mother. "Daniel!" his mother cried. "Daniel, come look at this!" Daniel did not need to get out of bed to know that his mother had



received her invitation, but he decided to humour her and rolled out of bed and shuffled out of his room.

His mother was dancing in the sitting room holding her invitation in her fleshy hands. "And this one's got my name on it," she said, waving it in the air as if it were a fan. *"In commemoration of our daughter, Mary Jane Caderly's, successful completion of her university studies. We will be entertaining guests from 5pm-7pm."* Mrs. Tate took the little card in both hands and pressed it firmly against her chest. "You know Daniel, I know it's not a novel, but you should consider writing greeting cards – they make people so happy."

Daniel sighed and dropped himself down on the nearest chair, "So, can the Baxters have theirs back now?" he said, deciding to ignore his mother's last statement.

"Oh, yes, I already dropped it in their mail box. So do you think that black dress is good enough for the Caderlys?"

"Yes, Mom, you looked nice," he said, managing a smile.

"Good. So you'll wear your tux and we'll make quite an entrance," Mrs. Tate said, spreading her arms out wide and spinning herself around.

"I am not wearing my tux. No one is going to be wearing a tux, and that includes me," Daniel said unfalteringly. Mrs. Tate's

arms fell loosely at her sides, and looked as if she just got shot in the back.

"Am I that much of an inconvenience to you that you can't do one nice thing for me?" Mrs. Tate said, looking mortally wounded.

Daniel sighed, "Okay, all right," he said, waving his arms, "I'll wear my tux, and we'll be the talk of the party."

"Oh, thank you, Daniel, thank you," Mrs. Tate gushed. "I have to pick out shoes. The party is this Saturday. Can you believe it? The Caderlys!" she exclaimed in a dreamy voice. Daniel sank even lower in his chair and closed his eyes, hoping his mother would change her mind as she climbed up the flight of stairs.

The day of the party arrived and Mrs. Tate was buzzing around the house in a frenzy to ensure everything would be perfect. Daniel entered the sitting room and saw his mother checking her lipstick in the reflection on the front window. "Oh! You look handsome, Daniel. I told you the tux was the right choice," Mrs. Tate said, putting a hand over her mouth in astonishment.

"It's uncomfortable. It's too small," Daniel said, sticking a finger beneath his collar, attempting to give his neck a little more room.

"A small price to pay," Mrs. Tate said, smacking her lips and admiring her son.

"Okay, whatever, can we go now? We're going to be late," Daniel said, checking his watch.

"Yes, yes, we don't want to be late for Mary Jane's most special of days."

"No, what a pitiable scene that would create," Daniel muttered. Mrs. Tate waited in front of the door and looked back at her son. Daniel rolled his eyes and opened the door for her.

"Thank you," she said curtly, stepping gingerly outside. Daniel followed her outside hoping there wouldn't be any puddles from here to their car. Mrs. Tate's BMW sedan was the last holdover from her days in "high society." Weekly washings and extreme care had kept the car looking as it did the day it rolled off the showroom floor. Mrs. Tate would have it no other way. "It's one more thing that separates me from the low rung," she once said.

Mrs. Tate stopped in front of the passenger side door and looked back at her son. Daniel ignored her, opened his door and, leaning over, pushed his mother's door open from the inside.

Mrs. Tate huffed, "Daniel, if you can't act like a gentleman, then no matter how well you are dressed, you'll never be one."

"Mom, it comes from inside, it doesn't matter what you look like. From the inside," he said, pounding two fingers into his chest.

"It comes from everything, Daniel. Who you are, how you conduct yourself and how you look. It's everything, Daniel," she snapped. Daniel rolled his eyes and pulled out of their driveway.

"Your father was a gentleman," she said, some time later. "He knew how to conduct himself and how to treat a lady."

"Okay, Mom, I'm sorry," Daniel said, hoping she would drop it.

After a few minutes of silence, Mrs. Tate looked at her son with a conspiratorial look on her face, "Mary Jane is going to be there," she said, in a teasing, child-like manner.

"Obviously, Mom, the party is for her," Daniel said shaking his head and turning onto a county road.

"Well, I know that, but you two went to school together. You have a lot in common," she said, in the same juvenile voice.

"That's right, Mom. We're meant for each other because we went to the same school," Daniel muttered, shaking his head.

"Oh, Daniel, you have no sense of chivalry."

"What does chivalry have to do with anything?" Daniel asked, turning to face his mother.

"This isn't the way to the Caderlys," Mrs. Tate said, noticing they weren't on the main road.

"I know, Mom, but do you want to get there late? I'm taking a service road. It's a shortcut."

"I want to get there period," she said flatly, "and alive. Who knows what sort of low lifes live out here," she said, locking her door.

"We'll be fine."

"I want you to turn around, Daniel."

"We'll be even later then," Daniel protested, driving faster.

"Daniel, please, turn around," she said placing her hand on the steering wheel.

"Mom stop it," he said glaring at her. The car drifted off onto the gravel shoulder and Mrs. Tate screamed, terrified that her life was about to end. Daniel veered to the left, then over-corrected to the right and crashed into a steep ditch. Daniel's

head bounced off the steering wheel cutting and disorienting him. Mrs. Tate moaned and started to cry.

“That’s it then. We’re going to miss the party,” she said, sniffing. “And the car, the car is ruined,” she finished, crying even harder.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Daniel asked, wiping the small trickle of blood from his forehead.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?” she screamed. “I knew we shouldn’t have taken this road. Now we’re ripe to be picked off by any low life that happens by us,” she exclaimed dramatically. Daniel could see that his mother was all right and took stock of the situation. The car was nearly vertical in the steep ditch, and the front end was folded badly. The ditch they were in was half filled with muddy water and some had begun to seep into the car.

“We have to get out of here, Mom, the car is taking in water,” he said, touching her shoulder lightly. Mrs. Tate nodded and tried to open her door. It didn’t budge. She pulled the handle frantically and threw her entire weight against it.

“Daniel, help, the door won’t open!” she said frantically, clawing at the window.

"Calm down, we're not in danger, Mom. You locked the door a way back, remember," Daniel said opening his door and stepping out into the bottom of the ditch. Mrs. Tate opened her door and rushed out of the car, slipping and falling to her hands and knees.

"Everything is ruined!" she said again, splashing in the water in frustration.

"I'll climb out and then help you up the ditch, okay?" Daniel hollered as he began to pick his way up the embankment.

"Hurry," Mrs. Tate said, pushing herself to her feet and straightening her dress.

Daniel got to the top and took his mother's right hand, pulling her up to the shoulder of the road.

"I'm covered in mud, Daniel. We can't possibly make the party now," Mrs. Tate said, sitting on the ground and crying softly. "What are we going to do, Daniel?" Mrs. Tate asked, as headlights appeared in the distance.

"Maybe these people will help us," Daniel said, waving his arms and standing in the middle of the road. As the lights drew nearer, Daniel could see it was an old orange pick up truck. The truck pulled over at the side of the road and a tall, bearded man wearing overalls stepped out.

"See y'all got inta sum trouble," the man said, walking towards Daniel. "Saw it from my winda," he said pointing back down the road, "told my wife to start sum tea. Y'all can come with me, I live on my farm 'bout a quarter mile down. My wife called Earl, the tow truck guy. He'll yank you out when he gets here."

"Okay, you see that, Mom. This nice man is going to help us," Daniel said, easily guessing his mother's opinion of the man by the look on her face. Daniel walked back and helped his mother to her feet.

"He's common as dirt," Mrs. Tate said, not caring to lower her voice. Daniel flashed a threatening look at his mother and looked back at their benefactor standing by his truck.

He seemed not to hear Mrs. Tate's disrespect.

"Now, Mother, I don't often tell you what to do, but this time you'll listen," Daniel whispered harshly. "We are going to get into his truck and he'll take us to his home and you are going to say something nice to him."

"Their house will be nothing like the Caderly's," she said, shaking his hand off her arm and thrusting her chin in the air, striding toward the farmer's truck.



"Name's Charlie," he said, holding out his hand. Mrs. Tate looked at it for a moment with raised eyebrows. Daniel cut in between them and took the farmer's hand, shaking it vigorously.

"We're pleased to meet you, I'm Daniel Tate and this is my mother," Daniel held on to Charlie's hand to ensure he would not offer it to his mother again. "Let me thank you, for your kindness and good natured help." Daniel said, looking squarely at Charlie.

Charlie shook his head, "Ain't nothin' any lawful person wouldn't do."

Mrs. Tate was waiting silently by the passenger side door.

"It ain't locked," Charlie said, opening his door and climbing into his truck. Daniel hurried over beside his mother, flashed her another look and mouthed, "Be nice," as he opened the door and climbed into the truck. Mrs. Tate followed Daniel in and Charlie turned his truck around.

"So," Daniel said, "how's this year's harvest going?" He used an exaggerated cheery voice.

"I wouldn't know. My wife and I are in livestock – pigs," Charlie said.

"Pig farmers?" Mrs. Tate asked, enunciating clearly and slowly.

"Having a good year?" Daniel asked, determined to keep his mother out of the conversation.

"Very good year. Just last week we had a sow push out a half dozen snorting babies," Charlie said, proudly.

"That's great," Daniel said, mimicking the farmer's broad smile.

"Here we are," Charlie exclaimed, pulling up beside a modest farmhouse. Mrs. Tate stepped out of the truck and released a sound of disgust as she covered her nose with her shawl.

Charlie laughed, "That's manure. You don't git out to the county much I'd wager," he said taking a deep breath. "You git used to it and it even starts smellin' good after a while."

"Nothing wrong with a good natural smell like this," Daniel said smiling, and taking a deep breath of his own. The smell assaulted Daniel and he couldn't help but cough and turn his face in disgust.

Charlie laughed again, "You city folk are all right by me," he said, slapping Daniel on the shoulder and walking toward his house. Daniel and his mother held their breaths until they got inside.

The room they entered was the old farmhouse's kitchen. The walls were covered by bright yellow floral wallpaper and the floors were white linoleum, both impossibly clean. A small table, with seating for four, was to their immediate right, and a counter ran along the opposite wall; built into the counter were dual sinks and an old fashioned stove. A lean, powerful looking woman, wearing jeans, a white t-shirt and a floral apron was bent over the stove removing a kettle of boiling water.

"I'm Betty, and I just feel sick about what happened. What a shame," she said, shaking her head emphatically. "Would you like some tea?" the woman asked, hurrying over to the counter with her kettle.

"That would be wonderful, thanks," Daniel said.

"How rude of me, won't you sit down," Betty said over her shoulder. "I'll be with you all in just a moment." Daniel and Mrs. Tate sat down and a moment later Betty put tea on the table in front of them and sat down with her husband.

"So, where were you going all dressed up and in such a hurry?" Betty asked, sipping her tea.

"To the Caderlys," Mrs. Tate announced. "They're throwing a party, for their daughter. She just graduated from university."

“Well, isn’t that nice, but I can’t say I know the name,” Betty said shaking her head.

*No, I can’t say that you would,* Mrs. Tate thought. “They’re friends of ours, live about half hour from here. Delightful people.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. Fine people like you would only have the finest of friends,” Betty said, nodding her head quickly throughout her statement.

“Our two boys didn’t want any schooling,” Charlie said. “They’re happy tendin’ to the pigs and I’m happy for the help. They git all they need from me. ‘Round here, anything worth knowing can’t be taught at school.”

*Nothing to aspire to when you’re born in filth,* Mrs. Tate thought, looking around but finding no filth in the house except what was on her and Daniel.

A passing vehicle blew its horn on the way by and Charlie stood and went to the window. “That’s Earl,” he said, stepping into his boots. “I’ll take ya back to your car and Earl’ll take ya home.”

Daniel and Mrs. Tate stood and they followed Charlie to his truck. Charlie drove them back to their car, waved hello to Earl, and drove back home, leaving Daniel and his mother standing at

the side of the road. The car had all ready been hitched to the tow truck and was being pulled out. A moment later the car was removed from the ditch and Earl stepped out of his truck and took a quick look underneath Mrs. Tate's car.

Earl was a large, heavily built man. His black t-shirt could not contain his large, hairy belly that hung over his black track pants. His scarred, steel-toed boots were untied and the tongues lolled out like those of dogs. In a low, raspy voice, he said, "Damn German make, I pull more of these out of ditches than anything else. For what they're worth, we should just round 'em up and send 'em back to the stinking cesspool from where they came." He cleared his throat and spat on the ground.

"Your house?" Mrs. Tate said, glaring. Daniel's jaw dropped and he looked at his mother in utter astonishment.

Earl's head snapped around and looked at Mrs. Tate, "Pardon me?" Mrs. Tate raised her chin, shook her head, but did not respond.

"I think you should teach your old lady some manners," Earl said to Daniel.

"It may well do me some good, but I'm afraid to say all the manners in the world wouldn't make you a decent human being," Mrs. Tate responded, holding her ground.

Daniel blinked and couldn't believe his mother was behaving like this.

"I don't know who you think you are lady, but I'm the only way you're getting home right now," Earl said, with surprising resolve.

"I thank you, Sir for taking care of my car, but my son and I will find our own means home," Mrs. Tate said affably.

Earl shook his head, "Suit yourselves," he said, as he climbed back into his truck and sped off leaving Mrs. Tate and Daniel standing at the side of the road.

Daniel watched as their ride home and their BMW bounced down the uneven road and receded out of view.

"Well done, Mom," Daniel muttered. "Now we're going to have to walk home."

"Better than spending another moment with him," she responded making her slow way down the dark, unlit road. On either side of her, in gloomy fallow fields, choruses of crickets rang out into the night. Daniel watched his mother walk defiantly up the road, holding her dress up slightly with her hands. She believed she had made her point. Her hair had come out of its tight arrangement on top of her head, and, at some point during the evening, she had lost the heel of her right shoe.

She seemed unbothered by all this as she strode down the empty road, holding her head high.

## *Shrink*

Women are thinner now. Their bodies have receded, shrunk below even the once desirable *perfect size six*. It's increasingly difficult to remember the full-figured women of the fifties and sixties posing in musty black and white magazine pages like Rossetti's aloof and sensual *Lilith*. Now it's thin, spindly limbs dangling from formless bodies; determined marionettes, manipulated by an unseen force. And it's not just their bodies. Eyebrows and lips are plucked and painted into thin lines, horizontal representations of the female form.

This woman is no different. Elizabeth. 23. She cuts her steak into small pieces and chews them slowly. Wipes her pale lips with the napkin on her lap and takes a drink of water. Her hair is blond and flows loosely over her shoulders ending at her breasts. She turns her head now and flips her hair over her shoulders. She looks up, smiles, and continues to eat. Elizabeth is always posing, camera ready.

Another small piece of steak is cut with a surgeon's precision. She chews it slowly. Sip of water. Napkin. She is wearing a white blouse with the top button undone. The blouse too is thin and her bra shows through. Her breasts are small



bumps barely noticeable under her clothes. Her black skirt is also loose and ends halfway down her pale white thighs.

Before her was Melissa. She was 29 and waitressed at a nightclub he and his ex-wife, Cathy, once frequented when they first started dating. Martin ran into his ex-wife once while out with Melissa. Cathy looked down at her contemptuously, as if she were a canker or some malignant growth on the underside of her foot. "I didn't know you were babysitting on the side, Martin," she sneered. Cathy always had a way with invective. Melissa laughed it off, but the insult stung. Martin ended it a couple nights later explaining that he needed someone a little closer to his own age. Elizabeth revealed that for the lie that it was. In truth, Martin ended it because of Cathy's disapproval, her reproachful look. He shouldn't care about his ex-wife's opinion, but he does, no matter how fiercely he denies it.

Martin finishes his wine and refills his glass, "A little more?" he asks, holding the bottle up by its neck.

Elizabeth shakes her head. Swallows. Napkin. "No. Thank-you, I think I've had enough of everything. I've absolutely gorged myself." She laughs, takes a sip of water and pushes her plate to the centre of the table. "I'm going to freshen up."

Martin watches her go, stares at her delicate frame, prefers this to the stolen looks he chanced during dinner. He does not feel guilty when he is able to admire her without her returned look. He worries that her pale blue eyes are sizing him up, trying to discern whether or not 38 is too old for her. Whether or not his income makes up for it.

Ultimately, it doesn't really matter Martin thinks. Cathy is sure to snarl at this one. She's just a placeholder, Martin decides, an appetizer for the next real thing. It's an emotional rebound. His divorce is only two years removed. These things take time, Martin tells himself.

Elizabeth returns. A second button from her blouse has been undone in the washroom. Her lips are freshly painted. Martin smells toothpaste. They look at each other. Elizabeth smiles. Martin looks down, takes a drink of wine and wonders if she'd like it if he moved to the seat next to her. Put his arm over her thin shoulders. Played with her hair. Put his hand on her thigh. He's not sure, and doesn't try any of it.

"I have to get groceries," Martin says, when he has finished eating. "I'll take you home."

Martin put the two bags of groceries on the floor and runs his finger down the list of names. He has only been here once before and almost missed the squat, four story apartment building. His finger stops beneath APT. #12 JANE VALE. He presses the buzzer and waits in silence.

Several moments later the speaker crackles and a quiet voice comes through the speaker, "Hello?"

"Hi, Jane, it's me, Uncle Martin. Can I come up?" A moment later he hears a buzzing and the doors to the apartment building unlock. Martin grabs the bags of groceries and goes inside. He climbs the stairs to the third floor and finds Jane's door ajar. He pauses for a moment preparing himself for the coming encounter. He is unsure of what he'll find.

He pushes the door open, closing it carefully behind him. The inside of the apartment is neat, dimly lit, and uncomfortably warm. The thermostat beside the door shows 86 degrees. Disregarding the furniture there seems to be no signs of life—no dirty dishes in the sink, no magazines, mail or clutter on the coffee table, no pictures of friends and family; the stovetop gleams white, as if new. It looks as if this is a place the landlord has set up to show prospective tenants.

"Jane?" He calls.

"In here," a voice responds from the bedroom.

"I brought some groceries," he replies, putting the bags on the counter. Martin takes off his jacket and removes a white takeout bag from one of the grocery bags and walks into the bedroom. Jane is sitting upright in her bed, covered to the neck in blankets. Just below her long, thin neck, Jane clutches the blanket tightly with both hands to secure it in place. Her blond hair is thin and stringy and her face is ashen and hallow. There are large dark patches beneath her eyes. If Martin looks close, as he does now, he can still make out the striking, lively young girl who skipped along the beach as a child. Martin felt an attraction to her back then. It wasn't the sort of perverse sexual attraction that lands men his age in jail, but the sort of attraction one naturally feels towards an incarnation of life and happiness. It was the desire to be close to something like that that drew him to her. Martin sees none of this in the atrophied form shrinking away from him now.

"I like the new place," he says, standing at the foot of the bed.

"You said that last time. Then I said it's a little smaller, but a lot cheaper."

"So I did," Martin replies quietly. There is a moment's awkwardness.

"So, who are you today? Uncle Martin or Dr. Bradley, Child Psychologist?"

"A little bit of both, I suppose. You've got more furniture since the last time I came by," Martin says, changing the subject.

Jane looks around and shrugs, "Mom has something delivered every time I tell her I gained some weight."

"Have you gained? Is it true?"

"Sometimes," Jane says, shrugging again.

Martin nods his head gravely, "Oh." Some of the blanket has slipped down revealing Jane's shoulder. It is white, like her face, and her collarbone protrudes obviously from her neckline giving her skin the distinct look of stretched rubber.

"I brought you something to eat. Have you eaten today?" Martin says, suddenly remembering the small package in his hand.

"I had some soup."

Martin isn't sure if she's lying or not, can't discern from her listless expression. He knows how she tortures her mother. "I brought you a sandwich—all vegetarian stuff." He tosses the

wrapped sandwich on the bed beside her. Jane looks at it but doesn't make a move to take it.

"Go ahead, it's only six grams of fat. When I leave you can call your mom and tell her you gained six grams." Martin says grimly, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Jane sighs and reaches for the sub with a skeletal hand. "How's Melissa?" she asks, taking a small bite of the sandwich.

"Oh, we're not seeing each other anymore. I'm dating a new girl now, Elizabeth."

"What's she do?"

"She's in grad school," Martin says quietly.

Jane snickers, "At this rate the next one will be a minor and you'll be legally obligated to protect her." Martin nods his head slowly and rubs his face with both hands.

"When was the last time your doctor stopped by?" Martin asks, trying to make the trip over worthwhile.

"Mom sends him over weekly – she should arrange for him to bring along the furniture, it'll save her big in delivery costs."

Martin puts his head in his hands and doesn't know how to respond. She's disarmed him with the minor comment, and they both know it. He now knows why Jane's mother doesn't visit anymore and why she asked him to try.

"You should come to the cottage again, like you used to," Martin offers, looking up and smiling falsely. "You can lie on the beach and I'll cook for you. Hey, you could even meet Elizabeth."

Jane nods her head, but doesn't respond.

"Well, you're welcome anytime." Martin smiles again, feeling awkward as if he's the last person to leave a party he wasn't invited to. "I'll just put the groceries away, and let myself out. It was good to see you again, I'll stop by again soon," Martin stammers, backing out of the room.

Martin returns home and drops himself onto his couch resting his head on the armrest. He reaches for the remote but the phone rings and he picks it up instead.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Amanda?" Martin asks, sitting up and checking his watch. It's 9:10.

"How are you Daddy?"

Martin pauses for a few moments, uncertain of what to say. He hasn't spoken to Amanda in over a year. He rubs his eyes and tries not to sound emotional. "What do you want?"

"I just want to talk to my father."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Martin says, quietly.

"Would there be something wrong if I wanted something else?" Amanda asks, a slight edge on her voice.

"No, not necessarily. If you wanted to come down for a visit, that would be fine. We could go to the cottage like we use to." Martin says, sounding hopeful.

"So you me and Mom?" she asks.

There is a long silence as Martin tries to think of a response.

"Yeah, sure, so long as you come."

"What if I wanted money? Could I call you then?"

"Why are we talking about this? Tell me how you've been," Martin says, sitting back on the couch.

Amanda laughs awkwardly, "I've been good, nothing much to say."

"And school."

"That's fine too."

"Come on," Martin says laughing, "you must have more to say than that."

"Dad, I want to go on a trip with my friends and I need a thousand dollars."

Martin puts his hand beneath his nose and tries, unsuccessfully not to cry. He tries to answer, but he doesn't want



to let on that he's been hurt so much. He takes several deep breaths and clears his throat. "I give your mother money, Amanda – more than the court ordered me to and tell her to give it to you. Do you know that Amanda?"

"It's not enough, Dad. Can you give me the money?"

Amanda responds quickly, a little irritated.

"Yeah, sure, Sweetheart. You can come by tomorrow and I'll write you a check. Maybe we can have lunch. I'll cancel my app –"

"Actually, I can't tomorrow. Can you just run the check over to the bank and deposit it in my account?"

Martin nods, "Sure, no problem. Maybe next week –"

"Thanks, Dad. Bye," Amanda says hanging up the phone.

Martin remains on the phone for several moments until he hears the dial tone and is certain his daughter has hung up. Martin drops the receiver on the floor and lies back down, closes his eyes and tries not to cry. She's eighteen, he rationalizes, all girls her age find their parents a nuisance. It's just a phase. Comforted somewhat by this notion, Martin falls asleep.

The next morning after he had made the deposit into his daughter's account, Martin drives across town to the beach, takes

off his shoes and walks along the water's edge. The beachgoers have not yet spread their over-sized towels on the sand or propped up their striped, multicoloured umbrellas to protect them from the sun. They will be arriving soon, but for now Martin has the beach to himself. He enjoys these mornings spent on the beach when he has no appointments, walking along the water, letting his feet feel the cool sand. It's therapeutic for him to take in the fresh air and cool morning breezes.

The summer before last, two brothers and their father drowned here. Martin had known the father; they had gone to school together. The younger of the two brothers got caught in an undertow; his brother and father swam to him, actually had a hold of him, and for a moment it appeared that tragedy had been averted. The three bobbed in the water huddled together like survivors from a shipwreck. In that moment, the onlookers from the beach could not know that all three young men were now caught in the undertow. Water safety dictates that when caught in an undertow one must stay calm and swim diagonally towards shore until free from the dangerous undercurrents. Led by the father, these three did just that, did everything that people caught in an undertow were supposed to do. A minute later they were swept beneath the water.

Martin called 911 from his cell phone while restraining the grief stricken wife and mother. "Let me go. I have to go," she kept insisting, while scratching and pounding into Martin's chest and arms. He wondered if he really was doing her a favour. Wondered if someone could recover from losing one's entire family. The bodies of the three young men were never found.

That was the summer Martin's marriage ended and his practice started to decline. Both these events happened slowly, over the course of many months and one was not unrelated to the other, Martin suspected. Cathy came from hearty Italian stock. Dark features, large, dominant nose, strong arms and legs, thick at the waist. Practical and pragmatic, like her mother. Martin adored her. He would nibble at her nose, claiming she had some to spare anyway or tickle her under her arms. Cathy would slap him away and feign annoyance, while privately enjoying Martin's adorations. They married young, foolishly Cathy's parents would say, and had Amanda by accident when they were just nineteen. Martin was still in school and the three of them suffered through many personal hardships. Eventually, Martin finished school, started his practice, and life finally started to seem as if it were going his way.

After their debts were paid, Martin bought extravagant gifts for Cathy and Amanda, insisted on new cars and family vacations. Cathy protested, urged him to start saving, make smart investments as her father did and be more responsible. Martin refused, stating that they suffered without money for years; he was going to enjoy life.

Then Martin's practice started to decline, and Cathy became even more insistent with her demands to save. Martin refused, claiming the lull in his business was only temporary. Cathy didn't wait to find out and filed for divorce. The divorce was quiet and congenial, but it didn't help with his public image and his practice suffered even more.

Martin hopes his patient numbers will remain steady this year and that he'll make a great turnaround.

"Martin?" a voice from behind him asks.

Martin turns to find Elizabeth striding towards him. She is wearing a baby blue bikini revealing her long thin body. Ridiculously large sunglasses sit on the top of her head holding back her hair. Impossibly, Martin thinks, she appears to have lost weight since last night.

"I thought that was you," she says, dropping a shoulder bag in the sand at his feet. "What are you doing here?" she asks, hugging him.

"Going for a walk," Martin replies, smiling. Martin is uncomfortable. He feels vulnerable and looks around, expecting Cathy to arrive at any moment.

"What are you doing here?"

"I cut class. I'm meeting some friends here," she says, feeling awkward, standing next to a fully clothed Martin. She reaches into her shoulder bag and removes a beach towel, wrapping it around her shoulders. "Why don't you stay? It'll be fun."

"No, I can't. I have to see someone right now," Martin says, feigning disappointment with an unconvincing frown.

"Oh, bummer," Elizabeth says. Martin nods his head, kisses her on the cheek and walks back to his car.

After work, on his way home, Martin decides that he'll check in on Jane. He presses the buzzer for apartment twelve, and several moments later Jane's voice responds, "Hello?"

"Hi, Jane, it's Uncle Martin." The doors to the apartment unlock and Martin goes inside.

"I'm in here," Jane calls when Martin enters the apartment. Jane is reclining in her bed. She is resting on her elbow and props her head up with her hand. Her other arm is extended down the length of her body and rests on her hip. She is wearing a white, frilled nightgown and a blanket is pulled up to her waist.

"Two days in a row," Jane remarks, "is Mom paying you for your consultation?"

Martin shakes his head, "How are you feeling today?"

"A little bloated, actually," Jane responds, placing an emaciated hand on her stomach.

Martin turns his face in disgust and wonders if it would do any good to tell her how unhealthy she looks. "Jane, come stay with me for a while until you get better."

"Why?"

"I'm a psychologist, it's what I do. If you came to stay with me, I could help you."

Jane smiles as if she's just been paid a compliment, "Who would that be helping more?"

"What do you mean? Jane, you're wasting away," Martin says, using his sympathetic psychologist voice.

Jane nods her head and smiles wryly, "Come to save the skinny girl," she whispers in mock appreciation, sitting up and

clasping her hands at her chest. "I'll just jump out of bed, pack up my bathroom scale and go with you to your wonderful house of healing." There is another moment of silence as Jane waits for Martin to reply. When it is clear a response isn't forthcoming, Jane continues, "You're right, you're not thin. Not like me."

"Not thin, not like you? What do you mean?" Martin asks, his face contorting in confusion.

"You're the Ph.D.," Jane says, shrugging.

Martin shakes his head, "I have to go. I'm expecting Elizabeth tonight," he says, turning and walking out of the room.

"Good-bye, Martin," Jane says to his back, as if she is an old friend of his.

Martin waves over his shoulder and leaves her apartment and climbs into his car. Enough with Jane, at least for a while, Martin thinks as he speeds away. He'll tell his sister that she is a lost cause. He'll call Amanda tonight to make sure she got the money all right and to wish her a good time on her trip. Maybe they can get a coffee before she leaves. He would like that.

Martin stops his car by the beach and climbs out to watch the sunset from the water's edge. The water is dark and cool and strangely inviting. He remembers the three young men clutching onto one another from two years ago, bobbing on the surface of

the water like buoys. He always pictured them dying the same way: three bloated bodies huddled together somewhere at the bottom of the lake, tangled in seaweed, eyes open but not seeing, faces serene.



## *VITA AUCTORIS*

Jake Redekop was born in London, Ontario, in 1975 and raised in the small town of Vienna, Ontario. He graduated from East Elgin Secondary School in 1994. He now makes his home in Windsor, Ontario near his alma mater, the University of Windsor. His initial aspirations were towards law enforcement, but he abandoned this pursuit (after earning a B.A. in criminology) in favour of the faded yellow walls of the University's Department of English. He earned a B.A. Honours English in 1999 and is currently a candidate for an M.A. in English and Creative Writing (2001).