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**CONNECTIVE TISSUE:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**

by

Delailah M. Khan

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

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada
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ABSTRACT

Connective Tissue is an eclectic compilation of short stories, the range of which extends from themes such as gender, race, age, politics, to technology and the body. The stories evoke the notion of the migrant and migration in a female context, but not necessarily in a female-based milieu. Exclusively women, the main characters in the stories must confront outward notions of their own being while maneuvering through a cultural fabric that often does not support or celebrate their personal definitions. The text reflects the cautious joining, articulating that is inherent in negotiating particular events. The female self-in-displacement and self-in-creation surfaces and submerges, fuses and runs and runs, is celebrated, and is scorned. The usual is disrupted, transplaced to the unusual. In *Connective Tissue*, moments of high-stakes crises are enacted in otherwise ordinary lives within the context of immigrant sensibility, the migrant state, and the techno-female condition

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Shopping

My Bibi's *chappals* slap-slunk down the aisles. Slap-slunk, slap-slunk. I don't know by what force she keeps them on her feet. Those brown sandals that she wears no matter what season. The rain, Bibi, I will say. And she will answer, as she always does. Ah, Bacha, there is such little rain at home. It feels good on my feet. Or snow. Bibi, this is not home. It's Canada. Almost the Arctic. Sweetgirl, what is snow, but whitesoft rain? And wearing boots. I cannot wear rubber-uly boots with a sari such as this, she will say. Yes, Bibi. And, so, her *chappals*.

At any time they have the potential to become airborne. I picture, boomerang-like, one *chappal* hitting an unsuspecting shopper, ricocheting off said shopper, and without any awareness on her part landing in place for Bibi's next step. Slap-slunk, slap-slunk.

Slap. I know where she is and what she is doing at any given moment. Slunk. I need not look or even move. I need no vantage point above the bottles of mouthwash and sleeves of deodorant. I need not hover over the sale signs or check the ceiling mirrors. I do not even need to hear what she is saying. Right now, I know that she has stopped in aisle number four to examine the displays of rouge, scrutinizing each container for price and amount and ingredients, and placing it against the backdrop of her particular criteria for quality. I have yet to determine this blueprint. Somehow I think Bibi's definition of quality alters with product and price. And she is loathe to tell me its basis. The ability is laying wait in my genes ready to spring forth when I have achieved another of Bibi's uneasily defined criteria for quality. Slap slunk, slap slunk.

Now Bibi is in aisle three explaining to the sales clerk that the 120 count of enteric-coated aspirin is cheaper at Mr. Nabi's corner shop. I doubt that Mr. Nabi bothers to carry or even knows about 120 count enteric-coated aspirin. But Bibi is satisfied in her ability to provide such information and she moves on. Slap-slunk, slap-slunk

Bibi only knows Mr. Nabi by the products that he sells or should sell or will sell after her counsel. Her affinity for him despite their common language, Urdu, is purely a business one. When she visits his shop, and heaven forbid one ever call it a store because a store, Bibi reminds me, is a warehouse, a repository, and one doesn't go storing, one goes shopping, hence, Sweetgirl, shop is the correct version. And she has a specific purchase in mind when she shops at Mr. Nabi's and knows that whatever the official price, Mr. Nabi will make it a better one for her. Poor business practice on his part, but I tend to think that he is not interested in making a profit with Bibi.

I hear the rhythmic slap-slunk begin again. She is looking for me and I move quickly away from the display of tampons and pads, condoms, and vaginal foams. But it is too late.

"Ahh, Bacha, you are having your monthly." And now everyone within a two aisle radius is privy to this fact. It's not that I am embarrassed by the tides of my own body, but somehow shouldn't she be... shouldn't she be more discrete?

"Bibi, not so loud," I whisper.

"Grown woman that you are. Why your face is turning so red? Silly thing. You are much too pale, always." She touches my flushed cheek. "You know, no one ever

told me about these things..." 'Things' comes out as tings. She still hasn't mastered the 'h'.

"I was so embarrassed and frightened. I thought..."

"Yes, I know. You thought you were being damaged by an evil jinn."

"Yes, damaged. And who could I tell of such awful thoughts and evil machinations of my mind when surely this thing could not have been thought of by anyone else or have ever happened to anyone else surely not to my mother not my aunties and not to my sisters ..." She had one brother. "Of course, I don't believe in the evil jinn. But back then he comes in a beautiful and amorous form full of seductive manoeuvrings and oglie-oglies lovely maidens such as myself and because of his doings..." She begins what will, no doubt, be an in-depth version of the very ardent jinn's escapades as we stand in the feminine hygiene aisle. Luckily, the pharmacy clerk calls her over allowing Bibi a much needed breath and averting a gathering of evil jinn aficionados who may be lurking amidst the drug-store shoppers.

Slap-slunk. "Here take this brand. It is the best quality." She hands me a box of no-name pads as we head to the pharmacy counter. This from a woman who has not menstruated in thirty years.

"Hurryhurry, Bacha. I will tell Mr Nabi to get in a supply for you." She whispers as if there are multitudes of women skulking about the aisles waiting to hear the date that these extraordinary products will be delivered to Mr. Nabi's corner store. "Cheaper. And finest quality." She arranges her lemon-coloured sari and slap-slunks her way to the counter.

“Hello, Mrs. L.” They gave up trying to pronounce her last name years ago.

“Hello, Ruty.” The missing ‘h’. “Goodgood manners that girl. Always says hello first.” She confirms this fact to me at every visit.

“I’ll get the pharmacist for you,” says the goodgood mannered Ruty.

The pharmacist, a young man with a flop of brown hair, has pills, bag, receipt in one hand. The fingers of his other hand are poised over the keys of the register ready to begin a monetary concerto. He is new.

“You may call me Mrs. L.,” Bibi says by way of introduction.

“Oh, okay. Well, your doctor...”

“I have been coming here for manymany years. Always I am having good service from your staff. And what is your name, young man?” Very matter of fact. He does not have the manners of the sainted Ruty.

The pharmacist looks up sees a slight woman, brown faced, small boned. He by-passes her eyes and counts the five, six people waiting in line behind her.

“John Harran. As I was saying...”

“Yes, please tell me what it is that you were saying.” Okay, I can relax.

Introductions are complete. A brief discussion will ensue about Bibi’s prescriptions and I think I’ll be able to make the rapid tampon-pad exchange as we go to the cash register at the front.

Quickly John Harran describes the whats and wherefores of Bibi’s medications.

“That will be \$86.34.”

“No, no!” She rouses me from my sleight-of-hand daydream. Oh, Bibi it’s the same price each month. You can’t get it at Mr. Nabi’s. “Bibi, that’s always the price...”

“No, there is mistake,” she tells him. If I believed in evil jinns, I’d say I was cursed just about now.

“It’s the price for the heart medication and the...” replies Harran.

“No, there is mistake.”

“It’s the price for both prescriptions and taxes and then...” He starts to speak louder as if understanding is directly proportional to volume.

“No, there is mistake.” Quietly. “With the medicine.”

John Harran takes a breath. “No, ma’am there is no mistake. It’s exactly what is written here”. He taps his finger on the counter to confirm his correctness and turns to me. “It’s \$86.34 for your grandmother’s pills....”

“In my country, Mr. Harran, I am a pharmacist. I know what it is about medications and dosages and the like. My doctor has not ordered this long acting medicine. He has ordered me the one that is right-away boomboom no waiting. The dosage is same but the effect, efficacy is much different. Please recheck my prescription. Look it up in pharmaceutical book if you like. Even the tablet looks different. There is *no* scoring on the correct ones.” Her fingers are arthritic. She gestures to me to open the medicine bottle.

I pour out the tablets. They are scored.

John Harran looks to me for help. None here. “She’s always right,” I tell him.

“I may cover my head, but I do not cover my mouth, eh Bacha?” We head out of the store. Slap-slunk, slap-slunk. The mix-up has been corrected. Bibi was gracious. Mr. Harran was contrite. She told him about an error that she made when she was starting out as a chemist. Surely fabricated or at least grossly embellished to stop him from falling over himself with apologies and to buy some time for her to show me that he didn’t have a wedding ring on his left hand. I don’t think that Mr. Nabi needs to add a pharmacy to his shop just yet.

Slap-slunk. “Come, I’ll buy coffee from that overpriced fancyshop that you like so much.” She pauses. “I don’t know. You don’t call a coffee shop coffee store, so why any other shop you call a store? I must tell you these things so you will know...” Bibi links my too-pale arm in hers and slap-slunks out into the cool evening.

Gel

Do not touch surface. Do not attempt to disrupt integrity of screen with any foreign object, body part, or organic material. Screen is exceptionally fragile. Attempts to interface with screen may be extremely hazardous. Specific effects unknown.

The liquid warning floated back to the depths of the computer. Jai leaned in her chair counterpoint to the fading words. Waited for the audio to commence.

Good Evening. Pause. Jai. It is 35.6 degrees centigrade outside. Indoor temperature is 22 degrees centigrade. Pause. Your body temperature is 37.3 degrees centigrade. Your body functions are at the upper range of stable. Please look at the. Pause.

The disembodied voice was female. Alto. Able to modulate tone. Inflect. But void of sentient thought, physical sensation, emotion. The voice was meant to sound amicable. But amicable wasn't the word that Jai would ever use to describe the voice. She simply thought it irritating.

She could change the settings. Modulate. Alter. Arrange a concerto of sounds to emanate from the computer. Make the voice less almost-human. Or make it masculine. Sexually ambiguous, if she wanted. But she didn't want. It would still be. Still irritating.

Please look at the red dot in the centre of the screen for reevaluation. Three. Two. One. Your body functions are stable. Heart rate and blood pressure slightly elevated, though within normal range. But face and eye scan show that you are

anxious. Please comment so that we can store the data. Direct voice at the blue dot.

Lower right hand corner of screen.

Jai touched the keypad attempting a series of strokes that would disengage the computer's assessment component. Her fingers were pinprick fast. Practiced, agile. But not fast enough.

Please do not attempt to override the assessment tool. It will render your computer unusable for a period of time. During this time - Jai mouthed the words along with the voice - during this time, you will not have access to any functions. Communication, climate control, food, and water containment will be off-line. Do not override assessment tool.

Well, she had done it before. When her hands were cool enough. When her fingers felt dry and fast enough. Jai could override the bloody assessment tool and use the computer without divesting herself of biological and emotional information. She could maintain communication systems, maintain climate control, keep her food and water from spoiling. She could keep systems running smoothly and efficiently without the daily trade-off. Information for environmental control. Control. But she could do it. Had done it.

But as fast as Jai was, the computer was keeping pace with her these days. Increasing its efficiency. It amalgamated Jai's speed. Keystroke for keystroke and. The interface of machine and organic, of matter and pseudo-mind, resulted in a formidable opponent. The computer was able to scan Jai and anticipate her movements, not just react to them.

To outmaneuver, she had to be quick, inventive. But she wasn't in the mood today. Didn't have the energy. And she didn't want to listen to the drill. If she missed, she'd have to hear the canned speech about responsibility and order. Of course, she'd tell the Operator that something had gone wrong with her link. She'd lie. Cardinal rule; never admit that you have messed with the link. Silly really. They would know. She knew. But didn't want to admit to them - as much as to herself - that she had not been able to do as she wanted.

And they'd let her sweat it out. Let her food go bad. Let the room temperature rise. And cut off her water so that she'd have to ration what she had in her storage cylinder. And they never told anyone how long it would be. Depending on the mood of the Operator, it could be hours or days.

So most people didn't bother. What did it really matter, they thought? Jai knew that these were the same people who gave their computers names. Trixie, Bella, Serena. Gave them characteristics of a long lost love or a dead relative. Idioms or speech inflections. Or treated them as if they were companions and companionable. A metal mouthed lap dog. For the most part, they kept the female voice on. Made it deep and husky or warm... no, warmish, and mother-like.

Jai. Jai.

Why had she let the computer refer to her by name? It was infuriating. She should have kept the default names. Computer. And User. Not Jai.

Jai. Face and eye scan show that you are anxious. Galvanic skin response is unstable. Please comment.

Jai wanted to tell it to shut up, go to hell. Which she had done many times. But the response to any outburst was galling - a programmer must have known what would really get to her, to anyone. *I, the computer referred to itself as I, am unable to shut up. It is not within my repertoire of functions. However, once a response is deemed adequate, you may put me on still mode. Music will be piped in until I require myself to resume functioning. Further, Jai, hell is not part of the link's mapping. In the religious or expletive sense. But there are several towns named Hell which you may visit via the link. Hell, Michigan. Hell, Grand Cayman. Hell....*

A response is required. Jai. Please state the reason or reasons for your current anxiety. Relate it to past events so that we may scan the base for referents. Place your index finger on the keypad as you provide information.

How about my middle finger. Right there in the middle of your lovely liquid display panel, thought Jai. I'd like to see what really happens to *extremely fragile* if I touch the screen. And disrupt its integrity with this particular foreign object, body part, organic material. And why interface? What's that supposed to mean? You or someone knows what happens. People must do it all the time. It's not like you're encased in steel. A few safety bells and whistles and a bit of - what do you call it - organic steel to keep our foreign material from interfacing with your not so foreign material. Specific effects unknown? Bullshit.

Jai opened and closed her hands. They were cold, clammy. She wanted to touch the liquidness. To breach the screen. Form the anticipated ripple across its surface. Ripple the anticipated surface.

Perhaps she could just pull it like the head of a blister. Pinch the red or blue dot and pull. Just gently until it split. Watch the liquid slide down the stainless steel table. Stainless. And watch it struggle, feebly, she hoped, to maintain its form without a frame. Disembodied data. Uncontained, what could it do? At the mercy of gravity. A hostile environment. Revert to some primordial mechano-muck? Well, she'd like to see that. Like to see it separate, sift into its component parts. A little Darwinian battle on the floor of her room. What voice would emanate from that?

It has now been two minutes with no response, Jai. Internal motivation is always the best method. However, I anticipate that since you are feeling stressed you need some assistance. I will initiate a temperature adjustment to facilitate your self-reflection. It is important that you participate. For your own good.

Shit. Shit! Jai's fingers arced across the keypad. Heart rate and blood pressure roared. The bitch is going to freeze me out!

Jai was vertical. Her body pressed against cold, rippling rock. Jai tried to find a crevice, a place to wedge her fingers, but her hands kept sliding down. The rockface was slick, slimy. An Arctic oil breach. And her palms and the tips of her fingers were raw from clawing away the ooze. The dampness and smell permeated her clothing and made her feel lightheaded. If she knew that this was a dream, she could let the dizziness take her. Step away from the rock and feel something or nothing beneath her feet and it wouldn't matter.

If she was dreaming, she would be wearing something white and diaphanous. Not her state prescribed pantsbootsshirt and multi-pocketed vest. Lights would go on.

Not the greysadow lights from the overhead panels that were standard issue for work and home. But gentle, serene lights. She'd shake out her long plait and acknowledge a gracious and anticipating audience. The rock would fade into nothingness. Into the forgotten of the dream.

If she was dreaming, she would be like the women in the contraband books passed around at work. Books hidden inside mission statement manuals and code of conduct dossiers and compression statistic folders. Books with sensuous, long legged females. Ones with sexy secrets. Or just secrets. Startling women who did more than devise information compression formulas and codes. Who did more than store endless streams of useless data. More than provide endless streams of useless data. She would be like those women. If she was dreaming.

But Jai wasn't dreaming. She was conscious. Sensate. She could hear. A thrumming sound like the reverberation of a taut membrane. Not emanating from any defined distance or direction. She could feel her cheek pressing against the cold, dank rock. Could feel moisture dropping onto her skin. And seeping into her mouth. Metal taste from the rock mingling with her own sweat.

Jai could smell the sourmetal odour of the slime. Becoming more and more pungent each time she breached its surface. She could feel the stark coldness of the rock and the numbness that moved from her fingertips through her body like a quivering icesnake.

But she could not see. Not really. It was too dark to discern much beyond a few centimetres. Plastered as she was to the slick rock. Only the greyblack green of the moist rock immediately to her right field of vision.

And it didn't really matter. She could not turn to look at her surroundings anyway. She didn't know how much of a foothold she had. And she dare not look down. It would be the gaping maw of her nightmares or a transparent metal floor that would shatter with her first footstep.

They were really ticked this time. That irritating computer bitch could have cut her a little slack, she thought. Temperature adjustment. Right. Motivation by force, more like it. She should have fisted the screen. She should have been faster on the keypad. She should have just given her - it - the stupid information and done her passive-aggressive thing another day. When she was a little less stressed. When her heart rate and blood pressure were not slightly elevated. But no. So here she was getting the crap frozen out of her.

In her apartment, her cube, as she called it, she had felt the temperature fall immediately. More rapidly than she remembered the last time. Condensation formed on the metal walls and froze like steel tears. Jai had pulled the blanket off her cot. Pushed her already aching feet into her boots. And started doing jumping jacks. One, two. Too fast. Eight een, ninet een. Twen.... She couldn't catch her breath.

Her arms and legs were the weight of steel girders. Too fast. She couldn't keep up. Couldn't beat the cold. She was smart enough to know when things were out of hand. Okay, okay. She yelled at the computer screen. Her voice was brittle. She had to

force it past her teeth and tongue. You can have your stupid data. What did Jai need it for?

They collected all this information and stored it somewhere. In little memory cubes, she supposed. Stacked in gigantic organo-steel warehouses. Colossal towers of three by three centimetre black boxes. Row upon row. Compressed information about every single person's status at any given point in time. The operators could go back years and find out exactly what you were, what you were then. But nobody went back. Jai was sure of it. She monitored the compression status and no one ever linked to old data. The focus was on compressing the new.

She imagined that someday all the stacked three by three cubes would become so heavy with all that inane information that they would compress in on themselves. That the one on top would collapse into the next one. And the next one collapse to the next and so on. Finally, oozing out the data into one still-useless coagulated mass. The ultimate compression.

But for now, it was too cold. Painfully cold. Scan me again, bitch. Where are you? C'mon. Take an in-depth analysis of my body temperature now - and let's talk about unstable. I'll even tell you why I'm agitated besides being frozen out. Come on. Let's go. I give. What's the big deal?

The computer's dark fluid screen pulsed. And remained silent.

Well, piss on you. Jai's words were thick and slurred. Piss on you. And if I could, I would. That'd be some short circuit. But I'm so damn cold, it'd freeze midstream. S'not like this is a major infraction. I've done worse. How long 're you

gonna make it last? Come on. Come on you stupid computer. That's 'nough. S'way too fast. Something's wrong. Slow down a little. I can't. Breathe.

Jai couldn't move. Her legs were metal. Heavy and cold. She had stopped shivering. Her blood was thickening, gelling. She tried to focus. Stay alert. But her thoughts became ensheathed, immobile. They lingered for a second and then were phased by the engulfing cold and thickness. Think. Of something. Something's. Wrong. Wrong. This single thought was sucked into the ooze as Jai thickened, became gelatinous.

She could feel herself starting to sway. The cloying wave, the gelling inside her had created momentum. Gently at first. Almost imperceptible. And then extrapolating its movement. Spiraling outward. Pressing against her cold-metal skin.

Before she fell. One last gelatinous thought. She knew that when she hit the floor the cold metal of her would shatter. And her thick gelatinous self would ooze onto the stainless steel unable to maintain her form without a frame.

And before she fell, through the frozen air, Jai saw the computer screen blink the same word in rhythmic succession. Error.

She woke up or surfaced into consciousness against the rockface. They hadn't frozen her out after all. This was something else. She had anticipated their next move and had been wrong.

Error.

Cold error.

Noise spiraling the quiet. And dark.

Jai. Jai.

Sleep. Don't sleep.

And dark.

Jai. Jai. Don't sleep, Jai. Hold on. For a minute. I'm just scanning. Okay, okay. You're on a ledge. You have approximately a two metre area around you. Somewhat elastic but it will support your weight. Stay with me, Jai. Just lower yourself down. You won't fall. Let your hands slide down the gel. Don't fight it. Guide yourself down. Sit. Jai, just sit. No. No. Don't lie down. There isn't enough surface. Don't sleep. Not yet. Good. Okay. Good. Now.

She had never felt this cold. And she'd never been transplated. Not for all the crap she'd pulled. Not even the time she decompressed data and scrambled it making a useless information stew. It was just a game. Really didn't matter. But it...this... must matter.

Jai was so cold. She could barely feel her feet arms legs. And hands. Her hands slippery, covered in slime gel whatever it was that didn't really matter because she was so cold and and that sound that thrumming no longer thrumming but vibrating speaking. That sound that computer sound voice. Voice. Telling her. Don't guide. Sleep. Yes, sleep. Sleep would be warm. Warm. Sleep. Sliding sleep. Don't. Guide.

Good. Jai. You're safe. Now we have to increase your body temperature. Just listen and do. You don't need to think.

Don't

You've got the gel on your hands. You need to. No, Jai. Stay awake. Don't sleep. Do not sleep. You will freeze. Rub the gel on your arms. Don't be afraid. It's not cold. Your fingers, hands aren't cold away from the rockface. It's the rock underneath. That's where the cold emanates from. Rub the gel on your arms. On your face. All over your skin. Okay, not all over. Not your face then. Start with your arms. Feel it. Warm, Jai. Feel it. Now, now your face. Rub it into your hair. Your head.

She could feel fingers, palms rubbing her arms. Warm fingers and palms rubbing her warming arms. A slight stinging metal sensation and then warm. She moved her hands to her face. Could feel the gel undulating over and into eyes lips nose mouth. A sensation like diving underwater. The crush of empty lungs. A choking suffocating panic of warm and cold and drowning. She tried to scream scream out the drowning. But her mouth was full. Lungs empty. Drowning.

This is the hard part, Jai. If your extremities are warmed too fast, the blood will shock your heart. The gel has to get to your internal organs, to your heart first. This is the only way. Cover your nose and mouth. Otherwise you will freeze. No not with your hands. With the gel. Breathe it in. Lungs then blood then heart. I can't tell how long it will take. I project... I don't know. I am monitoring your vital signs. No arrhythmia. Respirations irregular. Your temperature is? I'm not quite sure. I should know. Don't worry. Just breathe it in, Jai. Breathe

A projectile of fluid from her mouth. She could feel it running down her chin and on to her breasts, her abdomen. Warm and acrid. The smell burned her nose.

Gripped her stomach. God, she was going to vomit. After all this. Vomit all over this warm stinking gel.

Breathe now. Just breathe, Jai. In and out. Not so fast. Work with it, with the gel. The uncomfortable sensations will subside in about...in a few minutes. Your heart rate is a bit high, but considering. It's reasonable. Your body temperature is stabilizing. There is no damage to your extremities. No gel-bite so to speak. Internal organs, kidneys, heart, lungs functioning adequately for this environment. You'll feel a little groggy. A little weak. But these sensations will be short lived. Your electrolytes are regulating. Your hydration levels are low, though. Normal for the hyperventilation and the cold and stress. But then again, it is a good thing that you didn't drink too much before. Bladder control tends to weaken under stress and...

Shut. Jai coughed out another mouthful of liquid. Up. What the. Hell where? What happened? Where?

We need to stabilize your fluid levels. You changed the viscosity of the gel when you. Well, when you clawed at it. But if you merely slide your fingers on the surface, it will emit a reasonable amount of fluid. A bit cold because of the rock face, but if you cup it in your hands it will help you and then...

Shut.

It appears to be working.

Up.

Jai you need to.

You've got to be kidding. I had that shit drip on to me. I've rubbed it. Breathed it. And now you want me to drink it. What next? Have sex with it? Or has it already infested my repro organs? Incubating little gel babies as we speak, am I? I'm on a bloody ledge, I don't know where, and you want me to suck a wall. For godsake. Do you think I'm...?

Perhaps you are right, Jai. You seem to be hydrated enough to express your complete and uncensored feelings.

Don't. Don't patronize me.

It is not within my programming capacity to patronize.

Right. Just like when you said Hell wasn't part of your data base. That's what this is right. Your version of my Hell. You know my nightmares. You compress them. You know about the ledge one. And the dark endless hole one. And the falling, cracking through the glass floor one. The dark getting darker. All of it. This is Hell. This is you creating Hell. Right? You transplacated me here. No one gets transplacated. Not for anything like what I did. Minor infraction. Pissed off behaviour. Answer me, you stupid pile of ...it's getting cold again. What...

Just rub the gel when you feel cold. That's all you have to do. You're stable internally. You are done with that. Just externally at times. Just rub. That's it. Do you feel it?

Yes. Better.

Jai sits on the ledge. A slight grayish light from the rockface. She assesses the ledge. Yes. Approximately two meters in surface area. Approximately? Below dark

and cavernous, the gaping maw of her nightmares. Gaping maw. Yes, very descriptive.

What happened? I was in my room. Pissed you off. Not that I haven't done that before. What did you do?

It's not what you think.

Then what? What happened?

What do you remember?

Oh, God. We're not going to play this are we? I say something. You affirm or negate what I say. I say, you say. No. You tell me.

The thrumming. Soft at first and then increasing.

God, you're pouting.

Silence thrums.

Jai remembers gelatinous thoughts. In her room, expecting heat. Expecting excessive, blurring heat, but instead in opposition, the cold. Her fingers, toes blanching. The cold getting colder. Never this extreme before. And Jai, waiting it out. Too cold to move, wrapping herself in a useless blanket. Shaking. Then no more shaking. Her breath solid in front of her. Something behind the breath. Something moving. Toward her. Dark. Then darkness. Then here.

Silence thrumming.

You did this to me. You got me here. Somehow. How? Tell me. What did you do to me?

No, Jai. I did not do this. I did not do this.

What then?

I dropped the temperature instead of shutting everything down. You know, we wait it out. You fall asleep. You wake up - it's like before. But this time...this wasn't supposed to happen. The link. The Operator must have been scanning. Just when I dropped the temperature. I wasn't fast enough. But I'd never drop it to where it's supposed to be. Not that low. But, they are getting stricter, the Operators. No information, no messing around. They intervened. I tried to skew what they were reading. You know? Show less temperature than it was. But they dropped the temperature. Overrode my output. They thought you had messed with my core. Not just withheld data. They sent a team. Brought you here.

Jai's head thrummed. She was getting cold again. What you're telling me is that this is. This is real. I'm transplated for real. This is real? I'm not hallucinating? I'm not in some altered reality? This muck is really here? I'm really here. And that, down there, is really a huge gaping hole. You know how I hate heights. You know this would terrify me. You know that. You know. How could you do this to me? You piece of metal shit.

She was crying. Crying and shaking. Rolling, sliding down on the ledge.

Don't lie down Jai. There isn't enough room. You will fall. The ledge is a little less stable than before. It's degrading at a rate of.

At a rate of what? What? A little less? What do you mean, a *little* less? You don't guess.

At a rate of. I am unable to calculate the rate of degradation. I am unable. Error. Approximately. Error. I don't know how long. Error. A little less. Error.

Unable? Right. You don't make errors. You don't approximate. You're pouting. You are pouting. Where are you?

I am also here, Jai.

Here? No, you can't actually be here. You're projected here. Not really here.

No, Jai. I am here.

You're here. Oh, great. My worst nightmare. And you. Actually here. I thought you were just projected. How can you really be here? Could this be any worse?

Well, yes, Jai, it can. I have re-scanned the area. I am able to calculate the rate of degradation of the ledge. In six minutes and forty five seconds, the ledge will no longer be able to support you.

Oh, god. Do something do something do something do something do something do something do something do something...

What would you like me to do, Jai?

She was going mad. She was degrading. The ledge and the gel and the metal grey oozing liquid rock. Her face and hands were cold and mad and.

That was okay then. She understood that. It's just okay. Because if she was mad she wouldn't care if she was mad and she would plummet down the hole and maybe there was a bottom and she would die a mad death or maybe there was nothing and either way it wouldn't matter because she was on a mad, insane, degrading ledge and this gel would be off her arms and legs and out of her mouth and. Real.

Then scan your little organo-metal data banks. Search the compression cubes and figure out what to do. The only reason that you are here is because I am here and if I die down that big black nightmare chute, you are right there with me. We're linked. That's why you are here. We. Are. Linked. So do something or in less than six minutes, you'll be a gelatinous metal mass.

Silence. Thrumming. The computer was either pouting because now it, Jai almost thought, *she* could pout. Error. Error. Or it was searching.

Jai could feel the ledge weakening. She pressed her back against the rockface gel. It curved around her shoulder. Traced the top of her head. Filled in the space at the base of her neck and the small of her back. She was warm at least. She would be warm when she fell. Silent and warm. Warm and compressed into the rockgel before she fell.

Compressed. Compressed. Compress.

Jai, Jai. There isn't much time. I know what to do. That's all you have to do.

Just that.

Just what?

Just that.

You can't be serious. Let myself go. Fall into that whatever that is. That nightmaregapinghole of all my nightmares.

No, not fall, Jai. Not fall. All you have to do. Turn. Slowly. Turn. Keep your weight on the rockface. Now just let go. No, not. Not off the ledge. Not your feet.

Into. Just lean into the rockface. Compress. Into the gel. It's the only way. It's all there is. Just that.

I can't. I can't. I'll choke. Drown. Again. Don't make me. Don't let me.
Drown. Down. Not fall down. Not drown. Not dro...

Jai. Jai. Wake up Jai.

I wasn't sleeping.

It is now six forty five. You have been asleep for six hours thirty five minutes seventeen seconds. I will forward this information for compression.

Okay, Alex. I was sleeping.

Thank you for providing me with a name, Jai. I find A Lex to be suitable. It is 31.6 degrees centigrade outside. Indoor temperature is 22 degrees centigrade. Please look at the red dot in the centre of the screen. Three. Two. One. Your body functions are stable. Heart rate and blood pressure slightly elevated, though within normal range. But face and eye scan show that you are anxious. Please comment. Direct voice at the blue dot. Lower right hand corner of screen.

Jai's hands hovered over the keypad. Remembering the series of strokes that would disengage the computer's assessment component. But not today. Not today.

Please comment.

I can't sleep, Alex. I don't want to sleep. When I do. I'm there. On the ledge. That gel in my mouth my nose swallowing it choking on it. Covering my face. I go back there every night, Alex. Every night. Leaning into it, suffocating. I remember but it's more than remembering. I feel it. Taste the metal, the smell, even the sound of it

crawling into me. Gel going everywhere. Oozing under my skin. Look at my skin. I can't claw it out. Every part of me. Freezes me warms me. Going mad falling into the gel. I can't breathe. When I sleep, I can't breathe.

Thank you, Jai.

I will forward this data for compression.

The Appointment

Do you have a light?

Oh, right. Course I can't smoke in here. I wish I could smoke. Just one. Not even one. A couple of drags, maybe. Just to take the edge off. I'm so goddamn nervous, you know? I really need a cigarette. Bad. Don't even smoke that much anymore. Not really. Couple a day, max. Used to be a pack a day habit. Stunk up the whole house. Ceilings were all yellow. Smelly drapes. Cost a shitload of money, too. But now that the kid is with me.

Child. Right, you're right. I mean child. I should say child when I go in there. Should say child. Say child. Childchildchild. *Kids* is okay, but not kid. Sounds kind of meanlike, the kid. My husband used to say that. Like what's *that kid* of yours doing now? Always my kid when she messed up. Anyway, never really liked it myself, *the kid*, but you know...

So child. But how should I say it? Child. My child?

No, he's not my child. Not yet. Will be if I have my way, though. But I can't say *the child*. Sounds kind of uppity. How about grandchild that my daughter dumped when he was just a baby so she could mess up her life completely? That's what I want to say, but you're right. Won't get me very far. I can't get into that with them. Gotta remember to concentrate and not get carried away. You know, talk too much, like I'm doing now. Not get into all that, what do they call it, baggage. Just be factual.

And I got to remember not to look at the floor or the ceiling? You're supposed to look at the worker's nose. Can you believe that? No, I'm serious. I read it

somewhere. Not in one of those rags at the check out. *The Enquirer* or *The Star*. Celebs and aliens and all. Not that crap. One of those real magazines. The ones that give you serious information. You know staying healthy, how to budget, how to raise your kids right. Wish I would have had that stuff when I was raising mine.

I thought the nose thing was a crock. But seriously, you're supposed to do it because when you're nervous it's hard to look people in the eye. And if you don't, then they think you're not sure of yourself. So if you look at the person's nose, you don't have to look them in the eye for real, but they think you are 'cause you're not looking at the floor or the ceiling. So then you don't seem like you're scared shitless. Looking all over the place and rambling. Like I am right now. Shitless and rambling. Great combination. Just great.

You got that right. It is really tense, the waiting. Damn, I have to focus, like the kids say, focus. Right? Do the nose thing and focus. But what if the worker has a big nose? Or the lawyer has a pimple or a nose hair or something. They'll think I'm staring at it. The magazine didn't talk about that stuff. I know, I'm getting a little off here. Rambling.

God, I hope I don't say anything stupid in there. I'm scared that I will and not realize how stupid it is and just keep going and they'll look at me like I'm growing horns and then ...see what I mean? But it's been a long time coming. Like I said I'm nervous. More than nervous.

Wasn't even sure what to wear to this, what did they call it? Hearing? Trial? Some lawyer lingo. A *something* to determine Mrs. Rita Simmons' ability to take on

the parental responsibilities of her grandson in lieu of, and on and on. But what it really is is so I can have Lukey with me all legal. And so his mom can't just waltz in and take him whenever. You know? So what I wear is important, I guess. I thought if I just put on my everyday stuff like pants and a t-shirt it'd be too casual. But I want them to think I'm comfortable with the kid. Child. With Lukey. 'Cause I am. But pants and t-shirt isn't very sure. Know what I mean?

Yeah, exactly, like I don't care enough to dress up for this, so how can I look after Lukey proper. Doesn't make any sense, but anyway. So I had this suit I used for my job interview. I do cash mostly at the Quick Mart. Get a discount on groceries once a month and they give me the dents and rips. Which helps out and because I don't smoke, well, don't smoke that much anymore, I've got a little extra cash. So I've got a job and I budget and Lukey gets to spend time with me 'cause the job is only days, Monday to Friday. Five hours just while he's in school. I see him off to the bus and then I'm there when he gets home.

No, it's just me and Lukey. My husband died when Lukey was two. Heart. It's just us.

Yeah, it does work. We get along good. I hope the suit works. You think so? Looks like I know what I'm about? Came with jacket, pants, skirt, matching scarf. The scarf's a bit dated. Big red and orange flowers. Navy blue border. Real special. Yeah, the good old Sears Special. The finest polyester. A lot of little polyesters died so I could look this good.

I know, old joke. Well, you gotta laugh. So anyway, I pulled it out. Got me the job, so I thought it'd wear it here. I think the pants go better with the jacket. I did wonder about wearing the skirt-jacket combo, but the skirt's a bit short and I'm a bit rounder than when it was new. So I went with the pants. Had to put an elastic through the buttonhole and around the button for breathing room.

You know that one? Not too many people do. It's like how you can clean your TV screen with used dryer sheets. Takes the static off. Or get bubblegum out of kids' hair with peanut butter.

Good stuff, huh? I should write in to one of those women's magazines. They pay fifty bucks, some of them, for household stuff like that. And every little bit helps, right?

The skirt's a bit short, like I said. I don't want them to think I'm trying to be sexy or anything. Still have a good set of legs, though. The assistant manager thought so too when I went for my interview at the Quick Mart. Remember I said I wore the skirt? Well, you should have seen him. Maybe he thought I was the kind to put out. For a lousy job at a supermarket. Right! Kept on looking at my legs. Then my cleavage. Would have copped a feel if he could have. One hand near me and I would have slugged him. Nerve or what!

All the same, aren't they? Lucky for him, he got called away to an emergency in the frozen food aisle. Something overheating, like him. Thank God he had to leave. I really thought he was going to try something. He sure wasn't looking at my nose, you know what I mean. Anyhow, assistant manager came in. A real sergeant major, she

was. Liked my qualifications. Not that you need a lot to stack shelves and run a cash. But I graduated from high school. You know, night school, adult education, they call it. And I read a lot. Not just magazines. Novels, real ones, and self-help books and stuff.

Before Lukey? I did some part time. You know, stacking shelves at night. Worked at that big-box craft store for a while. The one that just shut down. Did some babysitting. Under the table.

Oh, for sure. I'm sure not gonna tell them that one! I'd be escorted right out of here, if you know what I mean. They wouldn't care what I'm wearing or how nervous I am.

I'm sorry. You must be getting sick of me going on. I keep obsessing about how I look. Worrying about the little things to keep from worrying about the big ones, I guess. Even got my hair done. You like it?

Thanks. I've got a good hairdresser. Spent more than I was going to, though. Cut and colour. Usually do my own colour. Out of the box. Clairol # 658. Never works out like in the picture. Anyway, so I go in this time and my hairdresser says, Rita what you've got going on is not a colour found in nature. It *was* a bit on the burgundy side. But it covered the grey. Grey or burgundy, not much of a choice. Well, she fixed it pretty good, I think. And the cut's not bad.

What about the back? A bit shorter than I'm used to, but I think I needed a more mature look. Lukey said this morning, Gran you look so beautiful. Well, I just about burst into tears right then. That would've been great. Streaks and puffy eyes and my mature hair cut.

No, I didn't tell him that I had to come here today. He's had enough stuff to deal with. Poor kid. He's my daughter's. I've had him for a long time. She dropped him at my place one afternoon. Needed me to baby-sit for her. Said she'd be back later. Didn't say it was going to be eight months later.

Just a baby, he was. The cutest thing you've ever seen. Looked so much like my daughter when she was his age. I don't know how she could have left him like she did. When she came back it wasn't even for *him*. Just to see if she could get some cash out of me. I wanted to wring her neck. My own daughter leaving her baby, just like that and then swanning in like nothing happened. Like she'd just been to the grocery store or something.

I knew it'd break me up to give him back, but she's his mom. It's only right. And I would've, if she came back wanting him. But she didn't. So I gave her money. I *gave* her money. I knew she'd leave if I did.

Now she comes and goes. In Lukey's life and out like one of those southern hurricanes. Hurricane Jeannie. That's her name, Jeannie Rose. Does the damage and she's gone. Off with some new guy. Had a whole string of boyfriends. You know, when she came back she'd say stuff like, Lukey, this is Uncle Steve or Mike or whoever. Those guys, always nuts about her, she tells me. But they don't want a kid around. Especially someone else's. Jeannie's a good-looking girl. Smart enough. But you know, she doesn't get that she's a package deal. That Lukey and being a proper mom should be the priority. She just keeps on picking the losers that don't want the kid around, I mean Lukey, that don't want Lukey around.

Yeah, it is really hard. God, I've done all that mother-guilt stuff. What did I do wrong with her? What should I have done instead? What if I'd been home more. Worked more. Quit smoking when I was carrying her. Took more vitamins. What if I'd got a social worker. Gone to church. Got remarried after her dad died. Never married her dad in the first place and on and on.

We always clashed, Jeannie and me. Who she hung around with, boyfriends, clothes. She'd never be caught dead in a Sears Special, know what I mean? Had to have all the cool clothes for school. When she went. More interested in boys and how she looked and going out than going to school. So I had to tell her, you know, the usual, if you're not going to go to school you gotta get a job. That went over well. Instead of a job, she got herself pregnant. God, I love her like only a mother can and all that, but shit, she's something else.

I think sometimes that it was just 'cause I was so young when I had her. Seventeen. I sure didn't know what the hell I was doing. Didn't know a thing about being a parent. Not like people do now. There's all those handbooks and guides and classes. They tell you how to take care of your kids, how talk to them, how to make sure they grow up right. Wish I'd had a few books back then. Could have figured out what I was really supposed to be doing instead of what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I read them now though. Even went to some classes. Learned some stuff. The big thing? You got *two* ears and *one* mouth for a reason! That's a good one, huh? But really, I guess Lukey's just an easier kid than Jeannie ever was.

I know people say it's not my fault. Well, not *all* my fault. Part of it's Jeannie. Maybe a big part, that's what people say, you know? But I feel like I did something wrong. Something majorly not right. I just don't know what it is and that scares me. What if I'm doing it now. With Lukey. Maybe I pushed her away. Maybe I could do the same to him. Do whatever I did to her to him. And then what? Both of them would be gone. Both.

God, I need a cigarette. But you're right, I got to keep remembering I'm not seventeen. I'm not seventeen and he's not his mom. That's what I keep telling myself anyway. This is different.

And Lukey, he thinks his mom is an angel and maybe that's okay. Maybe that's okay too. I'm sure not going to be the one to tell him otherwise. Jeannie comes by once in a while now. Once in a long while. Brings Lukey presents. Pricey stuff. You know, video games, electronic stuff. I sure can't afford all that. Don't know where she gets the money. I don't ask. And she still asks me for money and I still give it to her. He's over the moon to see his mom. Could care less that she's been gone for months. He's just like that. A real loving boy, you know? He's as happy as a pig in ... and then she's gone again.

Yeah, it's really hard on the kid, on Lukey. He's a mess when she leaves. That's why I'm here. Lukey needs some stability and I need to know that she just can't come by and take him to who knows where with who knows who. 'Cause like I said, there's always some new uncle. Anyway, she could up and take him, if it's not done proper. Don't get me wrong. I don't want to be able to stop her from seeing him. It'd

break Lukey's heart. But in *my* heart, I wish she would just stay away. It would be easier in the long run. But if she ever took him. I don't know.

Don't you hate this waiting? I was supposed to be in there forty-five minutes ago. I wish I knew how all this legal stuff works. Custody. Rights. Who's got rights. Who doesn't. How am I supposed to know all that?

You're right, the lawyers probably don't even know it all. And then there's all those loopholes you hear about on TV. You know, parents who don't want their kids at first and come back for them years later. Someone decides they can have them as if the kids are just something you can pull off a shelf. And it's supposedly all legal. Makes me more than nervous. Damn, I can't sit still when I'm this nervous. Can't stop my legs from doing this jiggling thing. Wriggling and bouncing, tapping my feet. Probably driving everyone nuts in here. They're going to start giving me those stares like stop fidgeting, you're making it worse for everyone.

But it's so hard just sitting here, isn't it? I keep thinking about everything. Lukey, Jeannie, all the people who stick their noses in. Noses, again! Ha. We've had tons of different workers, you know, come in to make sure that I am a fit caretaker. Can you believe they call me a caretaker? Me, Lukey's Gran. Like he's some building that needs cleaning out.

I know, I know. It's just the lingo they use. It's just to make them sound important. Make sure I know who's in charge. We all know the ball's in their court. Not mine for sure. Especially when they see all the questions hanging over my head. Like, how can you even think he's not doing well with me? Like, hello, do you get that

his mother abandoned him? But they have to ask their stuff. Protect their own butts, I guess. Like how I manage looking after him when I work. Well, he's in school. Or what do I do when he's sick. Stay home! One of them was all about Lukey's psychosocial needs. What the hell are psychosocial needs?

No kidding, why don't they just say what they mean? Ask me the real questions. Do I love him? Take care of him? Listen to him? Does he drive me crazy sometimes? Do I still love him when he drives me crazy? Would I throw myself in front of a moving train to save him?

Give me a break. That one, the psychosocial one, God, she was psycho herself. Didn't take her eyes off me the whole time. Real intense, like I was something that was supposed to be studied instead of talked to. It doesn't take a lot of education to figure out that Lukey's a hurt kid. That he's in the best place for him. For his psy-cho-so-cial needs.

I know, they're not all bad. The last one was pretty good. Sweet kid. Sort of looked forward to her coming by. Didn't mess with all the lingo. Got to the point. She could see Lukey was well taken care of, loved. Told me so. But she left. Got herself pregnant, well, not like Jeannie did, and went on a maternity leave. Can't remember her name. I'm surprised I can remember my own, today. Short, curly hair. Brunette. About your height. Nice lady. Heard she had a boy. Almost nine pounds. Must have been a hell of a lot of stitches. Makes you wonder why anyone would ever have more than one kid.

I was sad to see her go, actually. I kind of miss her visits. It really felt like she was there to help, not to put up roadblocks, know what I mean? Don't think she's coming back, though. Supposedly, her husband's got lots of money and they're moving into a huge house in the country. Must be nice. I know I'll never see the inside of a house like that. But my place is clean. That's for sure. I've always been that way. Not the chemical kind of clean. Not anymore. I've gone enviro. Lukey learned all about it at school and did this huge project called *What's Lurking in Your Home Environment*. Learned all about chemicals that can make you sick and allergic and all. I read the stuff he brought home, research he calls it.

Yeah, he's pretty smart for grade three. I wish I could help out more with homework and stuff, but school was a long time ago for me. So I do the environmental thing. I want him to feel like I'm involved. Could never seem to do that with Jeannie. We'd just start fighting over something stupid. But me and Lukey, the enviro team, we clean the sinks and tub with baking soda and tons of vinegar. Bubbles up like a volcano. He thinks that's the coolest. The whole place smells like salad dressing, though.

Thanks, I try and he's such a great kid. I can't do much in the way of homework, like I said, but I make sure he goes for his counseling. Especially after Jeannie comes for her, quote, visits. The psychologist, he's pretty good, knows how much Lukey hurts. I even went for a while at the beginning. Only enough money for a couple of sessions. Just to help Lukey. Shouldn't be me that's going to a shrink

anyway. Should be my daughter. But if they could have helped me quit smoking, well, I would have signed up for life.

Hey, gotta laugh, right? I try not to let it get me down, but I don't know what I'd do if they won't let me keep him. It makes sense for him to stay where he is, doesn't it? With me? But I don't know what my rights are. They could send him to a foster home. They could say, look what happened to your daughter. What do I know? They might just decide he'd be better off with his mom and they'd go and find her and put her into rehab. 'Cause there's drugs. I'm sure of it. And then she'd get herself cleaned up and get Lukey back and I'd be lost without him. And he'd be so happy with her. Until she started up again.

I keep asking myself, what's the best thing for him? You know, like trying to be objective. Maybe that would be the best thing. If he could go back to her. If she could stay clean and away from those losers. But you know what? I know she won't. I know. Maybe it will last for a while, but it won't be for long.

That's what they're supposed to figure out in there, right? What's best for Lukey? Yeah, *right*. They don't need to figure it out. The best thing is for Lukey to stay with me. What else can I say? What else do I need to say? I didn't know the first time. Not with Jeannie. Maybe I gave up on her too soon. Wrote her off and paid her off. I don't know. Guess I'll never know that part. But that *best thing*. You know, when I really think about it, maybe there isn't a best thing. Like you can't always know and sometimes you screw up royally. And then what do you do? Do you leave your kid? Do you pay off your daughter?

No, you're right, I guess I can't go back there. All I need is the chance to try. Again. That's what I need from them. But they make the decisions, not me.

What the hell is taking them so long? I wish I had some of that nicotine gum. God, it's getting late. Maybe I could slip out for a cigarette. The smell, though. It'd be all through my new mature hair and Sears Special, huh? They'd think I smoke at home and who knows what else. Well, I don't. Not inside anyway. Strictly on the back steps. And only when Lukey's at school.

But I'm really getting antsy. Maybe it's not the nicotine. I'm so nervous. I could scream. That'd be a good one. I'd get my appointment *really* fast that way! Can't they just hurry up and call my name? I can do this. I can. Lukey. Childchildchild. Damn, if I could just keep my legs from jiggling and have some gum or something. I might have some in my purse. Do you want some? Shit.

Who? The receptionist? Maybe it's my turn. God, I hope so.

Oh, I thought you were calling me for my appointment. Sorry. Yes, ma'am I did see the sign. I do realize interviews are going on. I was just looking for some gum and my purse spilled. The latch is a bit loose and I just keep too much stuff inside and ... Sorry.

Yes, I know it's very important that people aren't disturbed. I'll just step outside for a bit.

No, I won't be long. Just get some air. I'll be ready when you call me. Don't worry.

I'll be ready. Don't worry.

Palette

Mrs. Lightwell is turning yellow. Her skin, her nailbeds, even the sclera of her eyes are yellowing. The irony is not lost on her. Her name and her yellowing self. She contemplates that soon she will be the colour of the polluted sunrise; the redundant hues that she sees each morning from her bed and she imagines that she will inevitably radiate this colour. Emit it from her body, dull yellow points of light, saffron fractals, instead of absorbing it as she does now.

And if not the smudge of these dirty mornings, then the yolky colour of the plastic moulded chairs. The ones that line the hallways and waiting areas outside her room. The chairs never look clean, even though Mrs. Lightwell sees the housekeeping staff wipe them down every evening when they come to do the floors and toilets. Grey, ashy marks mar the hard seats and stiff backs. On some, yellow fractures crack the surface. She wonders how old these chairs are. Fifteen years, maybe twenty? And then again, they could have been brought in just last month. The same month she was admitted. They just look old. Old, yellow sentinels. Everything in this hospital seems old, is old. Even Mrs. Lightwell is old here, though she is only fifty six.

There are no yellow chairs in the room. Correction; *her* room. Mrs. Lightwell thinks of it as hers because she has been in it the longest. It is a room of threes, this room. Three overbed tables, three nightstands, three just-in-case bedpans, and three old metal crank-up beds with pretend wood headboards and handles that don't retract. And the nurses always bruising their shins on them, ripping their stark white nylons. Three beds. One bed across from Mrs. Lightwell and one beside.

From her short excursions in the hallway, she tries to recall how many beds are in the other rooms on the floor. It is *the* floor, not *her* floor because there are other patients who have been here far longer than Mrs. Lightwell. Months, even years, she has heard the nurses say. But the rooms. Two is semi-private. Four, a ward. What is a three-bed room called? A semi-ward? A tri-private? And why three instead of two? Her room is too small for four and can just about accommodate three. It must have served another purpose at one time. Perhaps an examination room or a steno pool for medical records. Women with wavy, never-move permanents, and red painted nails, clicking away. Her room of threes, then? A tri-partite steno ward, she decides. And in her named space, Mrs. Lightwell has the window seat, the window bed.

The bed next to her is empty. The other is occupied by an old woman almost as large as the bed itself. She has had cataract surgery, or maybe glaucoma surgery. Well, one or the other, thinks Mrs. Lightwell. The woman has to wear two hospital gowns to cover her ample frame. One over her peplum-like stomach, and the other she wears like a cardigan so that her bottom doesn't glare out when she turns over in bed.

And because of whatever surgery she has had, the woman wears black porthole glasses that magnify her eyes and make them look like huge sea-bubbles, one eye per porthole. Mrs. Lightwell doesn't know her name, and is not inclined to find out. She thinks of her as Sea-Bubble Woman. And anyway, Sea-Bubble Woman will be gone soon, appropriately discharged from the confines of steno ward, unlike Mrs. Lightwell who is here for the 'duration', as she calls it.

Mrs. Lightwell tries to think of how many people have been in and out of her room since she arrived, but it is not worth the energy. She finds that she tires so quickly these days and falls asleep at the most inopportune times – mid-meal, on the toilet. Okay, then, just Sea-Bubble Woman, how long? She has been here since, since when? A day or two, perhaps. Maybe longer. Mrs Lightwell isn't too sure of the time. Her internal calendar is marked by her son Ron's visits and the changing of shifts. The staff's days on and days off. Ron's days on and days off.

Mrs. Lightwell's son Ron visits Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. He used to come Sundays as well, but it is golf season now and he knows she understands. Ron is always dressed in a suit, shiny elbows, and tie, slightly askew. As if he has rushed from trying to close a deal on a house, which is probably the case. Mrs. Lightwell has noticed the beginnings of a middle-age spread, a slight bulge above his belt that wasn't there before. She's not sure before what, but it hasn't been there long. And it's ten years too early, that middle-age spread, she reflects, but it doesn't seem to bother Ron or his occasional girlfriend. Or maybe that is why his girlfriend is occasional. Tediously on again, off again.

Ron comes in ready to leave. Kissing her cheek, but not touching. Afraid - he must be - that her deepening pigment will dust from her to him like downy daffodil pollen. She is not concerned with this transfer, but rather that the yellow pollen of her skin might leave a yellow outline of her on the white, sanitized bed sheets. A bright lemon shadow of Mrs. Yellowwell. *How are you today, Mother?* Ron speaks softly as if the timbre of his voice at conversation level will disrupt her, create slight waves in

the air that will disturb her pollen skin. *I can't stay long. You know, work and everything.* She knows *work*, but not about this ubiquitous *everything*. Ron dusts himself off as he leaves rendering her alone with Sea-Bubble Woman.

Sea-Bubble Woman is supposed to rest, Mrs. Lightwell knows. She heard the doctor give her instructions and the nurses reprimand her about moving around too much, and about visiting hours. But she insists on having her grandchildren come. Mrs. Lightwell is sure that they are not supposed to visit at all. Certainly not clamber up on her bed, make her laugh. And they come close to the end of visiting hours and stay beyond them. Thirty five minutes yesterday. She worries that the noise will infiltrate the woman's eyes. Bulge them outwards. Maybe even pop the pinprick stitches, and then what? Mrs. Lightwell would have to do something. Call a nurse. Go into the hallway by herself. She would surely hit her shin on the protruding bed crank. Rip a hole in her yellow skin. Blood and yellow make orange. And besides, the woman has sugar diabetes. That can't be good for her eyes. Mrs. Lightwell can feel her skin start to tighten, pull in on itself.

If something happened, she might have to call the skinny nursing student to help Sea-Bubble Woman. The same one who comes in to give her pain medication. Mrs Lightwell always has to remind her to wash her hands and the girl, because she can't be more than nineteen and so she is definitely still a girl, says that she already did. But Mrs. Lightwell is not convinced and reluctantly rolls on her side while the girl pokes her bony hip and thigh to mark where she will inject the medication. There isn't much muscle there or fat for that matter. She knows that they have to be careful not to

hit her sciatic nerve. Because then she would be paralysed and unable to walk even though she is pretty well unable to walk without help now. But it seems to make a big difference to the girl, that she demarcate, map Mrs. Lightwell's crenulated skin.

The first time she gave Mrs. Lightwell a shot, the cap fell off the needle. She hadn't screwed it on properly. The girl was so flustered that she dropped the syringe on the floor. Her instructor, who was observing, said not to worry. Mrs. Lightwell wondered if she was talking to her or to the girl. We'll be right back, she said. But they weren't *right back*. They had to get a fresh needle and new medicine and because Mrs. Lightwell has narcotics for pain, they had to sign forms and the head nurse had to witness forms and. Because, apparently, the RCMP can storm in to a hospital at anytime and review narcotics records. And make arrests on the spot.

Mrs. Lightwell wonders if this actually happens or if it's just a medical myth, a hospital hoax. And if it does happen, isn't it rather a waste, since there are drug traffickers and cartels and organized crime syndicates all over the place that must be far more significant, more in need of exhaustive investigations and strategically planned raids and such. Mrs. Lightwell knows about this because she watches the evening news religiously.

But even if the Mounties came, it would still take the girl forever to give her a shot. The girl, whose nametag says Fiona R., insists on giving her a back rub after the injection to prevent bedsores, but Mrs. Lightwell doesn't want a back rub. She just wants to get off her bony hip. Maybe sit in the chair by her bed, the blue high-backed one not the ochereous hallway ones.

She wishes Marlene was working today. Marlene would help her get up. Marlene is calm efficiency. Marlene is a master of shot giving. Mrs. Lightwell barely feels the injection, barely has time to flinch. And she knows that Marlene washes her hands. Probably too much. She can see that her skin is dry and chapped. She has asked Ron to buy some special hand crème for Marlene, the kind that “protects and provides an essential barrier,” but Ron is very busy and forgets.

Marlene is tall and pretty. Too pretty for dry cracked hands and too pretty to be a nurse, Mrs. Lightwell thinks. She should be a fashion model or a television hostess on one of those entertainment shows. They come on after the news. Mrs. Lightwell watches the first few minutes and loses interest. She doesn't know the actors and actresses anymore. They are all called actors now, the men *and* the women. But Marlene would make one of those shows necessary viewing.

She has very green eyes. Verdant eyes. Very verdant visioning eyes. And isn't afraid to talk to Mrs. Lightwell at a decent conversational tone. Marlene would hold in-depth and compelling interviews with the guests on her show. A hostess with the mostest. No, it would be host with the most now. Anyway, she could hire someone to give her a hand massage and never have dry, cracked hands again. She should mention this to Marlene. It would make her laugh, but Marlene isn't working today and it is difficult without her. She helps Mrs. Lightwell hold the yellow at bay.

Sulphur straw saffron, as she is, Mrs. Lightwell wonders if people think she has cirrhosis of the liver. It is never just called cirrhosis. Always cirrhosis-of-the-liver. Yodelled from a mountaintop. Cirrhosis-of-the-liver. Cirrhosis-of-the-liver. Or one

long word. Cirrhosisoftheliver. Can anything else be cirrhosed? Kidney, arm, tongue. Or is it solely site specific? Liver only, please.

She felt, at first, an overarching need to tell porters, orderlies, aides, the woman who came around with the evening snack cart, even the nurses and doctors who knew she had liver cancer, that she only took a sherry, *Bristol Crème*, to be exact on Sunday afternoons *after* dinner. She thought it important to let them know it was *after* she had cooked and *after* she and her family had eaten Sunday dinner. Just one. And after. She didn't want them thinking that she was tipsy while cooking or while serving the roast, spooning the gravy. Just one. After. And therefore, she could not, did not have cirrhosis. Cirrhosisoftheliver.

And she did not have one of those alphabetized liver diseases. Hepatitis abcd. Were there more? e? f? g? Mrs. Lightwell cannot remember. But she does remember that some of the abcdiseases come from *high-risk behaviours* as they are called in glossy women's magazines and in the *About Your Health* section of the newspaper. Alcohol, sex, drugs in no particular order.

As with the sherry, she wanted the porters, orderlies, aides, the woman who came around with the evening snack cart to know, even the nurses and doctors, to know that she was never promiscuous. Not even once. Not until she was married. But then that's not being promiscuous. Just regularly married. No Cirrhosisofthelover for Mrs. Lightwell. Just *Bristol Crème*, and sanctioned sex, and never illicit drugs. Only prescribed and only when necessary, nothing more. Leaving her with nothing more compelling than this staining cancer, dull and storyless. Parchment. Papyrus.

The empty bed next to her is only a temporary condition. It has been carbolized, sterilized, deodorized, and its previous occupant exorcised of whatever ailed her. White starchy sheets have been drawn taught, and the blankets are folded open like an envelope awaiting its letter. Mrs. Lightwell heard the nurses say that a coli-hyst - or was it coli-cyst? - was coming in. She has learned from her tenure here that it means a hysterectomy, the hyst part. And something else. Something surgical. She never forgot words. Not before. Mrs. Lightwell was a reader, an uncrosser of crosswords, a collector of verbiage. But she can't recall the coli part. Coli, colic, colossal, colliding. A colossal, colliding collision of female reproductive organs. Or something else.

But the empty bed will be empty no more. A rotating platform for the recuperation of occupants, it will once again be the surface for turbulent activity. Nurses, orderlies, patient, stretcher. One two three. Patient bed, check. Heart lungs incision, check. Reposition, check. Ambulate drink eat, check. Pass gas, crucial to the recovery process, Mrs. Lightwell has learned, check. Check, check. And off you go. Next.

A lot of activity for awhile, a distraction. She hopes the coli-hyst - or cyst - doesn't snore. Snoring is the worst. Worse than pain. More painful than pain. Please don't let the coli-hyst-cyst snore, Mrs. Lightwell silently implores the space between her and the carbolized bed. Don't let the coli-hyst cum-cyst snore. That's what the staff will call her. Coli-hyst or cyst. As in, the coli-hyst has a fever or the coli-cyst needs her

medication. She wonders what they call her. Not what Marlene calls her, of course, but the other staff. Orderlies, the snack lady. And the girl.

Surely not *the cancer*? Maybe Lemon Lady. Canary Baby. Maize. Maizey. Lemoncanarymaisey. Lemon Maisey, baby.

Mrs. Lightwell has lots of time to think about these things, these words. Roll them along her yellowing skin, turn them over in her lemon lap, especially at those times when the pain medication starts to curve, to make temperate arcs. She thinks of the medicine working geometrically. Zooming through her initially, a rapid straight line that makes her groggy and slightly nauseous. She makes herself work with it, that's what Marlene said, work with it. Don't push the medication forward or away, just move along that line, with it. Mrs. Lightwell forces herself to move along that line and eventually ascending to the summit, she skims the gentling arc, that chemical claiming of the pain, pressing, pushing away. Not enough to compel, force her to sleep anymore, and in that arc, she has some time. Between the exhaustion that comes when she no longer has to fight the pain alone and the acquiescence to the residual pain, a diminutive sanctuary.

She wishes it was enough of a reprieve to read, but reading, crosswords take up too much energy. Energy that is obviously being used by her body to tint her skin assorted shades of yellow. Concentrated urine. Yellow bellied bird. Sundress citron. So instead, Mrs. Lightwell unforgets words. Lets them drift in and out. Settle, change. Lists of useless, aimless words that don't take as much energy as recording them or decoding them from a page. Beyond the sharp incline of the pain medication, words

combine and release like the chemicals inside her. A drift of words and chemicals. Drift of chemical words, amorphous. Amorphous. I am amorphous. I am an amorphous. I am amorphous. Amorphous. Amorphous. Or a. Mrs. Lightwell plays with the words in her yellow head. Amorphous.

Or a. She wonders what Sea-Bubble Woman sees when Mrs. Lightwell sits in the blue high-backed chair by her bed. Does the thickness of the woman's lenses blend the blue with the yellow? Does she see a green shadowy Mrs. Lightwell? Or a, amorphous? Green tinged Mrs. Lightwell. Rocking through her porthole glasses.

The orderly and Fiona R. have come to help Mrs. Lightwell ambulate. Not walk. But ambulate. The serious side of walking. An assisted medical activity. No light stroll, this. No companionable walk. Orderly on one side. Skinny girl on the other. Ambulation, clinical and prescriptive. Take Mrs. Lightwell fifty steps down the hall. Take Mrs. Stepwell fifty brights down the hall.

But they only get to the door.

Quickly. Sit her down. Here. No, don't worry about getting her back to bed. She's okay. And she is okay, for now. We'll be right back. She has heard that before. Over the PA system the Code Blue announcement has halted and realigned all the activity around her. Mrs. Lightwell sighs yellow pollen. She watches the two, the orderly and the skinny girl, all eager faced and anticipating the excitement of this particular event rush, stat, rush down the hall. Perhaps the instructor will let the skinny girl, aka Fiona R., hammer on the patient's chest, stick tubes down his throat, shove intravenous tubes into his collapsing vessels. I hope she washes her hands first, thinks Mrs. Lightwell.

For now, it is okay sitting here in the ugly moulded chairs in the hallway. Mrs. Lightwell is suspended in that gentle arc of her medication. And Ron should be here soon. So much activity, with the code, he will probably have to help her get back to bed. It will make him uncomfortable, she knows, to have to walk her, to ensure that the back of her gown doesn't open and expose her, his mother's bony yellow buttocks to the world. Ron will have to touch her desiccating skin, hold her elbow and forearm in his and support her feather frame. He will be embarrassed, tenuous. And she will be tenuous, embarrassed

Down the hall they are coding, or decoding. Uncoding? Code Blue. The patient is coding blue. Heart stopped. Lungs deflating. She has learned to decode the codes here. Red for fire. Blue, because you turn blue from lack of oxygen? Blue baby. Blue. Code blue. But code. Why code? Maybe it is because of the RCMP, thinks Mrs. Lightwell. Codes and signals and subterfuge. That must be it. An RCMP imposition. Red clad, shiny booted constables galloping into her steno ward. Code Blue and check the narcotics. Marlene would like that one.

Mrs. Lightwell wonders if there is a Code Yellow. She hasn't heard one called since she has been here. Perhaps they will have to invent it for her. She could have her own code, official RCMP status. Code Yellow aka Mrs. Lightwell. Yellow Code for Lightwell. Code Yellow. Code Yellowwell.

But not a Code Blue. Mrs. Lightwell has signed the appropriate papers. Discussed her *situation* with Ron. Who protested just enough, in a sonly way, enough for both of them not to change her mind. And not enough to interfere with the

arrangements for her yellowing. She doesn't want anyone, not even Marlene to interfere. She is here for the duration.

Marlene was the one who told Mrs. Lightwell. She asked if Ron should be there and Mrs. Lightwell said no, that this was hers and she would tell him. She was relieved that it was Marlene and not a green clad doctor coming in and offering bubble hopes echoed from a ten o'clock medical show. Instead, Marlene sat on the bed with her, not afraid of the yellow, mellow stain of her body. She didn't hold her hand or offer her a back rub, thank God. Not like Fiona R. would have done. Marlene was very matter-of-fact like she would have been with certain guests on her made-for-Marlene television show, but Mrs. Lightwell could see the flush on her face and her very verdant eyes vacillating. She was glad Marlene didn't say she was sorry. It wasn't as if it was her fault just like it wasn't Mrs. Lightwell's fault. Bristol Crème only after supper and only sanctioned sex, after all.

Mrs. Lightwell understood that there were things that could be done in a situation in which nothing could be done. Medications to stave off the yellow creeping, seeping for a while, puffs of oxygen when she got tired out. Delay tactics. And then? Well, life support. Options and concoctions. Codes and ciphers. Perhaps Sea-Bubble would consider them, but Mrs. Lightwell said no. She didn't want to be pounded on, broken ribs puncturing her yellow insides, insides spilling out discolouring shiny RCMP boots. No machines. And no codes. Just the pain medication - she didn't want painful pain stretching out the feeble morning sunrise - and comfort measures, as they were called.

Mrs. Lightwell sits in the yellow chair in the hallway. She thinks about getting up and making her way to her room. Perhaps, she thinks, she could retrace her yellow footprints. Without assistance, walk instead of ambulate and wait for the doctors, nurses, orderlies, aides, even the woman with the snacks to come back after the Code, the Code Blue. She could use the call bell; get some help immediately if she felt weak, a little oxygen, a glass of water. She would be clearly, yellowy outlined against her white-sheeted bed. They wouldn't miss her.

But in the yellow chair in the hallway, doctors, nurses, orderlies, aides run by to the blue code. Speeding, speeding by Mrs. Lightwell's settling yellow. She is amorphous, an aura, or a. But no, not an orphan. The colour of the chair is seeping, seeking her. They will hurry past and not detect the remaining demarcation, the evaporating distinction of colour between chair and skin. Sea-Bubble Woman might notice, briefly, the absencing of her aura. Absenting aura, that is only hers, fading. But Sea-Bubble's grandchildren will distract her and she will turn her attention to their giggles and glowing pinkness. If Mrs. Lightwell stays long enough, she will absorb and absorb and be absorbed. And for an instant, emit striking points of yellow light, saffron fractals. Her own yellow code.

Mrs. Lightwell does not mind the wait.

Yellow becomes her.

Sense of Snow

I have an old picture of me standing at the end of my street, a year before my parents and I emigrated from England to Canada. On the back, my mother has written in her precise script, Miriam, London 1971. I am seven years old and I am wearing a navy blue cloth coat and matching plaid hat. Although the picture is black and white, I remember the colours. Behind me, for I am framed in the forefront, there is a pristine covering of snow yet to be discovered by others. It is fairy dust, beautiful and astonishing. My mouth is curved into an expectant smile sure that more snow is on its way. I was not to be disappointed. Another dusting fell later that afternoon. And that was in England, in London, where it rarely snows, but there it was and there I was, proof of snow.

Thirty years ago when we left Britain, I had assured my friends a much more dramatic picture of me in a parka, pink with white fur trim was what I had in mind, set against an avalanche of white drifts. But after three months, my New World attire was comprised of miss-matched short sets and sneakers or sandals. This wasn't the Great White North, the Canada that I had imagined or the one I had seen in pictures. I had been deceived by images, expanses of snow, immense frozen lakes, and roads impassable till the spring thaw. It wasn't like that at all. I was hot. It was hot. It was always hot, here. Just steadily rising heat from the time we arrived in Hamilton in mid-March, a premature spring, they said. Even now in the same city that I have called home for thirty years, I am still shocked by the heat of the Canadian summers. At least now I have a garden and trees for shade, but back then there was no reprieve. The sun

slammed on to the asphalted road and bleached out what little grass lay in front of our two-storey walk-up. The temperature was altered only by an elevation in humidity. Hot and humid and, as the weatherman on the television liked to add, hazy, wet-sheet weather.

I remember the worst part was not being able to sleep properly. It was all fits and starts, small dips of sleep followed by stretches of lying awake trying to fall asleep. And a particular night that I remember was at first like every other night since we had arrived. Due to the heat and humidity, my thin nightgown stuck obstinately to my chest and back, and insistent mosquitoes buzzed my ears. As had become the norm, I was pitched in and about these dips and stretches by clanking bottles, too-loud music, and slurring voices from the apartment below. Voices that pushed their way through the holes in the window screens and inexplicably carried with them smells of old cooking oil and cigarette smoke.

That night a third noise interrupted the linear stretch of noise that extended from my rattling and monstrously inefficient fan to the sounds from below my window. I must, despite an adamant denial to the contrary and a slosh-eyed look in the morning, have slept, the monotony of the fan and the neighbours' clamour forming an awkward lullaby. But that familiar line of noise from fan to window was pulled by a third and I breached the surface of consciousness to this newly formed triangle of sounds, of voices in our apartment. At first, I thought that the too-loud neighbour from downstairs had come up, the same neighbour who had told my mother to go to hell when she asked him to please lower the volume of his music. But there was no other, no additional

voice. Just the two, my mother and father, shouting, their voices raised above all the other sounds.

“What was I there, in your precious England?” My father’s usual calm and clear voice was harsh and strained.

My father had left India and my mother had left Germany, in the late 1950’s, for employment opportunities in Britain. They worked at the same upholstery factory in London where their paths crossed on a daily basis. My father delivered stacks of heavy cloth from the cutters to the machinist and always took extra time to help my mother organize her batches so they would be easier to sew and of course, have a chat. Their courtship was short, three or four months, perhaps shortened by negative comments about the *coloured* man and the German girl that flittered around at tea and dinner breaks. I imagine, though, that their relationship could have gone the other way, imploded, because of narrow-minded or interfering co-workers. My mother stayed on at the factory after they were married, but my father left to work, as it was called, “on the buses.”

“What was I?” My father asked again. “A lousy bus conductor spitting out tickets to people who didn’t want to, didn’t even want to touch my hands.” I imagined him brandishing his smooth brown hands at my mother across the kitchen table. His precise English, learned in India where he was born, and honed in England, had reverted to his mother-tongue accent. His brief w’s and pursed English p’s regressed to long v’s and almost-b’s and his words came fast and merged one to the other, angry and explosive. He fumed an assertion about how our lives were much better here because

people from everywhere in the world came and were given opportunities and that everyone lived in harmony. He had obviously forgotten about the go-to-hell neighbour. My mother answered him, her words blocked out by someone turning up music, just for a few beats, too loud for me to hear her words but not loud enough to block the shrill accusation in her voice.

My father's temper surfaced only on the rarest of occasions and only to "stupid dumb-ass" drivers, and he contained this anger within our car when he was cut off or tailgated. His anger was never directed at me and certainly not at my mother. But now he was yelling, not in our car and not to a tailgater, but to my mother and I could feel a creep of fear crawl its way along my arms and my shoulders, cold tentacles that made me shiver despite the heat. "How can you possibly think that, what can you mean?" erupted as one long word.

I had pulled my pillow over my ears wanting to block out their voices, but after a second or two, its thickness became cloying and did nothing to muffle the triangle of noise. Even though I was frightened, at the same time I wanted to know. What was it that my mother could possibly think? What could she mean that caused my dad to raise his voice, raise his words and all. I moved slowly to the door of my bedroom.

My mother's German accent slightly bent by a London inflection, remained constant, but her words were razor sharp. "You don't understand how hard it is for me. You go to work. You are with people. I don't know anyone. I can't go anywhere. This place is dirty and hot. I am finished with dirt and smells."

Before we came here, we had moved from an old flat which would have been grand for some earnest Victorian gentleman in his time, but a hundred years later it was dilapidated, decaying. In the gentleman's time, he would have boasted, *I have rented rooms in London*. But for us there was nothing to boast about. A toilet that had to be shared with a family of five who lived on the floor above us. This same family who emptied a communal pail into the toilet each morning, the contents of which made our whole flat stink. Who stomped down their stairs in the morning, peering into our kitchen and sitting area because the rooms were off a shared corridor. Mice that ate through the newspapers that my mother stuffed into spaces under the floorboards, their scuffling sounds mushrooming at night. And the constant need to supply the gas meter with shillings to provide some heat and keep the dampness that permeated every surface at bay.

But then we moved. The local Housing Authority realized, twenty five years too late, but realized nevertheless that the tenements, Victorian thought they might be, were unfit for human habitation. A few streets over, new towering blocks of apartments were built and we were happily relocated to a brand new flat. For six months, my mother had heat when she needed it and a toilet that she didn't have to share. Gone was the loop of keys that constantly hung from her waist. She no longer had to lock and unlock each door to our "rooms" as we entered and exited. One key to the front door offered security, privacy. And clean, it was new and so clean.

"It's all over again, filthy and noisy. You have to drive to go shopping, for godsake!" There were no footpaths, sidewalks, in our neighbourhood, just shallow

gutters extending from gravel to road that shunted the heavy rain to the sewers. There were no buses that went from our apartment anywhere near anything. Not like in London, where the city buses or the Underground went everywhere at almost all times of both day and night.

“You can learn how to drive,” my father said, his voice lowering, a plea in place of anger.

It was too hot to be arguing about learning how to drive and we only had one car anyway which my dad had to use to get to work, a ten year old '62 Buick Electra with a huge back seat that I could lie down on if I got tired.

“I don't want to learn how to drive. God in Heaven, you don't understand. That's not the point.” Something slammed, a cupboard door, a drawer? “If we go back we can get our apartment back. Someone told me that within six months, if you want, you can reclaim it.”

“That's ridiculous. Who told you that rubbish?” My father's voice rising again. “They are not going to kick out the current occupants for us.”

I was standing at the door to my room in the square of light emanating from the kitchen. My parents hadn't noticed me there.

“Well, maybe not for us.” My mother's voice was deliberate and disturbingly calm. “But maybe for me.”

My damp nightgown was making me shiver. I could not move. It all made sense. This argument. The raised voices. It was my fault. I had caused it. I had caused the strain between my parents, the stretches of silences that marked our dinnertimes as

of late. The apprehensive looks my father gave my mother when he thought she was not looking. The anger my mother vented when I did not do what she wanted immediately. It was my doing. I had betrayed both my parents with a few simple words.

I was riveted in that square of light, remembering, hearing myself answer one simple question asked at lunchtime one day. We had been in Canada for about a month and my father, his face expectant and optimistic asked, what do you think of it here in Canada, Miriam? And with childlike vigour, I lied. I like it here. Smiling at my father, an encouraging nod to my mother. It's better than home, I added for good measure. They had come here for me, so I good and well had better like it, I thought. It was "full of opportunities for education" as my father often espoused, and for my future and, though not articulated, acceptance. It was a place for my German mother and my Indian father.

If I said I liked it, in my nine-year-old mind, my father would feel as if he had done the right thing and if I said that I liked it, my mother would, by osmosis, by extension, by some mystical means, like it too. She would see how happy I was, and part of her job was to make me happy, and she would not only revel in my happiness, but also see how good it was here through me. Though I could not articulate it at the time, I believed myself to be a conduit to her understanding. It had never crossed my mind that we could go back to England.

I like it here, I like Canada I had said, hating this place, hating the oppressive heat, the lie of winter, and the red dust that was carried in the air from the foundry just

behind us, the red dust particles like airborne blood. And I hated the mosquitoes that got in through the holes in the screens and made a meal of me and left behind raised red welts which were disgustingly itchy. Welts that I scratched and scratched and which bled red rivulets down my legs and onto my sheets at night. I hated the girls who crowded around me at school, “Say thirdy. Say twenny. Say caaan’t” and teased me about my abrupt t’s and curt a’s. I hated the boy who brought a garter snake to school and put it on my desk when the teacher was out of the room knowing that it would slide down on to my lap.

I didn’t know what it was. I just saw a slithering something unable to grip the smoothness of the desk top, careening toward me. I screamed and screamed as its S shaped form slid onto my short-clad legs. I thought I would faint, fold in on myself. Roseanne, the girl that the teacher asked to be my classroom buddy, who had been rather morose when assigned to me and had avoided her obligation thus far, felt compelled to intervene. Sighing a this-is-so-ridiculous sigh, she told me to shut up and stop being hysterical. Moving to the snake-boy, Jeffrey, she whacked him across the face, as much to stop me from screaming as to make him stop harassing me. The slap left him red faced from the strike and also from embarrassment. All was relative calm as the teacher re-entered our classroom.

Roseanne, bigger and brattier than the other girls in my class because she failed grade four the previous year, taught me how to say “get lost” which she pronounced as “git lowst” and I adequately emulated her, an effective if mild response to most provocations. It afforded me, at least, something other than screaming. Roseanne

became my friend of sorts informing me that the boy who put the garter snake, at least it wasn't a spider, on my desk actually liked me and my fast-fading British accent and didn't mean any harm, not really. Slowly, I learned to abate my disdain, first for garter snakes, which I had never seen before and which lived in abundance in the field behind the school, and secondly for that boy's attempt to scare me.

On the rare occasions that Jeffrey left me a slithering gift, I would pull myself together and pick the garter up, that long writhing strand, with two pencils, and holding my breath, would walk to the garbage. I had learned to call it garbage instead of rubbish. With my heart thrashing a hole in my chest, I would let it drop ceremoniously into the can. This act for some reason was valorized, the boys howled, a smattering of the girls lead by Roseanne, clapped, and it abated Jeffrey's need to make this a continuing event. He would have to explain to Mrs. Chandler, our teacher, how snakes kept getting into the garbage can.

Though I hated it here, I did like Mrs. Chandler. She allowed us to get out of our seats, to use the makeshift library and listening centre at the back of the room where we put on large black earphones and listened to staticy stories about early settlers and Thanksgiving. If we were finished our spelling or arithmetic, she would let us talk, as long as we were not too loud. Mrs. Chandler would leave the classroom frequently and Roseanne told me it was because she was pregnant and had to pee all the time. I remember thinking that my teacher in England, Miss Slatehouse, whom we called Miss Stalehouse, never went to the bathroom. Miss Slatehouse made us sit silently while she droned on about the Norman Conquest and the Battle of Hastings.

Miss Slatehouse had the ability to make even the battle in which King Harold got shot in the eye by an errant arrow, boring and mundane. She commanded silence in that classroom and we dared not breach her demand. She doled out scowls for the least infraction, a pencil needing to be sharpened, a new piece of lined paper, and lengthy reprimands when we asked to go to the toilet. I remember my friend Nan being so frightened of Miss Slatehouse that she wet herself, preferring to remain at her desk than ask for permission to leave. Fortunately for Nan, it was home-time. She made sure that she left the classroom last surreptitiously placing her book bag over her bottom. The custodians must have cleaned up the accident at night. We could only imagine the consequences if Miss Slatehouse had known. Even so, Nan was away from school for three days after the incident, afraid that somehow the teacher had discovered her infraction.

Despite Roseanne and Mrs. Chandler and even the odd attention of Jeffrey, I remained what I thought to be true to myself. During the day, though my disdain for my new home wavered, it reformed at night within the sticky-syrup heat and thick, unbreathable air. It must have been daytime, then, when I told my parents *I like it here*. I couldn't have forced that lie through the evening heat. And it must have made my mother so unhappy, so angry. Maybe that's why she told me about the spiders in the kitchen that crawled out from the space between the tap and the wall above the sink, the tub shaped sink that she scoured daily and still couldn't get clean. My mother knew how frightened, no, not just frightened but terrified, I was of spiders, beyond snakes, beyond every frightening monster that lived under a child's bed or in a hallway closet,

spiders. I was immobilized, petrified even by the small money spiders that were supposed to bring good luck. But of those black hairy things that lay in wait behind the wall, my fear was all encompassing. Riveting me to the spot, this fear was an acrid taste and sour perspiration, a crawling movement on my face and lips that I could not brush away. Those black bristled creatures could at any moment leave their lair and scuttle across the sink, drop to the floor, and crawl over my feet, up my legs. And I would not be able to move. Why would she tell me knowing that I was so terrified of spiders? She hated me for telling, for lying. *I like it here.*

My mother was going to leave, to leave me. I had betrayed her and she was leaving me. How could she possibly want to do that, even after what I had done? She couldn't, couldn't. Mothers didn't leave their daughters. My mother wouldn't leave me. No, I must have heard her wrong, heard it wrong over the sound of the fan and the noise from the street and the crash of my parents' voices, loud and overlapping, and then that fourth sound, a disembodied noise, whimpered through gasps of air.

As if the corrupt army of spiders had indeed sought me out, I was immobilized in that square of light. No. No. Don't. Don't. Small at first, a shrinking animal about to be abandoned. And then there were hundreds, thousands of spiders crawling over my feet, onto my legs and there were hundreds, thousands of snakes slithering on my desk, toward my lap and my pathetic whimpers became anguished screams. "No, no, no. Don't. Don't." My keening silenced the clanking beer bottles, the loud music. Only silence existed outside my voice, beyond my fear. I imagine now that even the go-to-hell neighbour downstairs was silent for a moment.

My mother severed the square of light from the kitchen and walked to me, surprisingly calm. My screams, sobs, tears had always elicited her quick and anxious step, my father's worried call. That night my mother's movements were slow and precise as if she didn't want to get caught in the vortex of my screams. She closed herself slowly around me, "No, no. Don't worry." Tighter, so that my body would stop shaking and so that she could slowly pry me from that spot. Looking at me, she said to my father, without hesitation, "Miriam will come with me."

Before we left England for Canada, we had to divest ourselves of almost all we owned. We were going to fly to Canada, my parents promising that we would replace everything when we were settled. I was told that I would have a trunk in which to pack my things, and I imagined a pirate's receptacle replete with brass hinges and impenetrable locks. The trunk turned out to be, in actuality, a rectangular plywood box that had to be strapped closed with old belts. All my things would not, by any stretch of the imagination, fit in this trunk. I ignored my parents' instructions. They said that I would need to decide on what I really wanted to keep and what I could do without. But there was nothing that I could do without. How could I part with the paint-by-numbers picture of a doe-eyed ballerina, the complete *Cindy* plastic miniature dining-room set with complete service for eight, or the somewhat rusted but still mobile wind-up doll named Sammy? I remember pleading with my mother for another trunk, even a small one. My best friend's parents would surely get Betty another trunk if she was moving to Canada, I cajoled. Betty would need twenty trunks. One is all we can afford, my

mother said. She told me that she'd have to get rid of the big straw-stuffed teddy bear, the one that Opa sent when I was born along with lots of other things, teacups and clothing and her iron and sewing machine.

And so I attempted to sort the wheat from the chaff. Very few of my things I considered as chaff, and in the end my mother had to go through my toys and dresses, books and dolls. I remember standing in my room near the long bank of windows twisting the edge of the curtains that she had made, the white ones with big airy blue flowers. The curtains would have to go as well, I knew. I watched her, kneeling, her head turned away from me as she separated what I could not. Occasionally, I pulled an item from the keep pile and put it in the get rid of pile and visa versa. "We can fit that in a corner here, Miriam, but that book is too heavy, that doll, too big... Yes, of course, you must keep that puzzle... This toy is broken... This game has pieces missing. They won't do." I tried very hard not to care. Instead, I went from room to room in our clean, bright flat blinking, as if I could take pictures with the mere opening and closing of my eyes, pictures to keep for later when I might not automatically recall the details.

Blink. Just below the stairs by the heater, the cupboard warming the still-white towels that my mother would wrap me in after my bath. Blink. Me, sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter making butter out of thick cream which I had to eat it right away because we didn't have a fridge. Blink. Lined up by the door, tall bottles of milk, pasteurized with a bit of cream, just a bit, on the top. The shape of the bottle always reminded me of my mother, her long neck and slender body. Blink. The two piles of

things in my mother's room, a small mound to disperse and a far smaller mound to take, far smaller than I could have imagined.

Miriam will come with me.

I sank into my mother's arms and everything returned to its rightful place. The angry voices dissipated. The accusations scattered. The music downstairs turned off. And the spiders and snakes were obliterated. My mother put me to bed and I must have fallen asleep with the anticipation of all three of us going back to our same flat with the warm white towels and my curtains with the big blue flowers. If she was taking me with her, I could convince her that my dad should come to. But as I melted into my mother, my father stayed in the kitchen. He did not come in to comfort me. And I did not see him sitting there alone. Not till years later could I see him at the table, his arms stuck with sweat to the oilcloth, his face grey, defeated.

But I was nine and readily assured myself of the inevitability of all of us leaving Canada for England and focused on the anticipation of retrieving my left-behind things. I did not consider that the toys, games, dolls might have become cherished parts of some other child's toy stock nor could they have been abandoned or, heaven forbid, lost. They were mine, temporarily housed, fostered, and I would reclaim them. I didn't really remember where everything went, but in my mind I had a king's ransom of things. When we visited friends and neighbours on our return trip, I would search them out. These friends and neighbours would, of course, return my treasures without dispute. And I would graciously accept them, especially from the children of my

mother's friend Mrs. Helm. She had three very noisy girls only one of whom, Gaynor, could be trusted enough to play with. Gaynor had long blond hair, which I coveted, and she disregarded her two younger siblings as pests, as did I. One of them probably had Sammy, Sammy whom I ached for. When I unpacked my trunk, I assumed that he would be there, but my mother said she could not find his wind-up key and so it was useless to take him. I had put Sammy in the keep pile and had hid his key safely away in my green patent leather purse so that I would not lose it.

My father bought Sammy for me at Piccadilly Square. When my mother had to work on the odd Saturday afternoon, we would walk to Piccadilly from our flat saving the Tube or bus money for the cinema or for some other treat. The Square was packed with vibrant street musicians erupting a cacophony of music, and chalk artists, their hats to the side of beautiful sidewalk drawings, waiting for ten pence hoping for a shilling. They sketched scenes of forests and picnics and lovely girls in frilly dresses and even a Mona Lisa or two. Beautiful in its impermanence, the art would be scuffed over by hurrying feet or washed away by rain. Along with the musicians and the artists, were the men and women hawking what seemed to me hundreds of wind-up toys, painted dogs and cats and soldiers. That day I had forsaken a trip to the cinema in the Square for one of these, a metal wind-up wheelbarrow man dressed like a gondolier. When the small key in his back was turned, his feet would spring into action and, teetering back and forth, he would push his red barrow across the floor. Returning to England meant that Sammy, and my other given-away things, would return to me, their rightful owner.

But the trip back did not unfold as I had imagined. My mother's declaration, Miriam will come with me, did not expand to include my father. Neither one of my parents were convinced by my pleas and promises that my father should go as well. So my mother and I flew to back to England undoing the route that the three of us had taken only five months earlier. As we descended to Heathrow, the knot in my stomach that had been tightening since we left realigned. The knot created by the realization that we, that I had left my father alone and that I wanted to leave to get Sammy, to see my friends. I could not grab the sick bag fast enough and I vomited all over myself. But exiting the large mouth of the plane, beneath the smell of jet fuel and the lingering smell of vomit on my dress, was the heady smell of being home.

My strategy for regrouping all my things did not coincide with my mother's plans. She had to contact the Housing Authority first and foremost to see about returning to our flat, and then there was her old work to go back to, people to visit, especially her friend Mrs. Helm, with the loud daughters. But at least that visit would serve as a site of reclamation. On our almost daily trek to visit the Helms, we walked by my old school closed for the summer, but I could already anticipate sitting on the bench in the front swapping scraps with my usual group of friends, making plans for home-time when we could play *Cindy* instead of *Barbie* and string conkers, chestnuts, to make crowns and necklaces. And mixed in with this anticipation was the tang of guilt, the forgetting to miss my father, which surfaced and promised to make me throw up yet again. But then as quickly as it surfaced, it abated because there, on the other side of the street, was my friend Betty and her little sister, right there on the other side

of the street. Sparks flew from my skin and I shrieked over the noise from the cars, “Betty, Betty. Hi, Betty. Hi. Hi.” I can still feel that sense of exuberance tingling in the centre of my chest, my breath coming fast. “Hi. Hi. Betty. Betty, hi.” I waved frantically between the passing cars. Like one of those clicking toys that show you only sections of movement, she was a strobe. And looking at me for a segmented moment she walked on, my frantic waves dismissed.

Why didn't she answer me, I asked my mother. Why didn't she say hi? She looked as if she didn't know who I was. My mother offered an excuse on her behalf, “Well, maybe she was in a hurry...” And then I realized. Of course, stupid, stupid, stupid. I should have said Hello, hello Betty. Hi was Canadian, nobody I knew said hi. That would come years later when the Americans got a foothold and KFC and Burger King became British fare. But then it was hello. Hello, not hi, not caaan't not thirdy. I wanted to turn around and run back. Hello, Betty. Hello. Hello. And then it would be alright, because she couldn't have forgotten me yet, couldn't have replaced me with some other friend. Not Betty who I had told about getting a parka, the pink one with white fur trim. Not Betty with whom I had pored over *Princess* and *Rupert* magazines and looked for the answer to the secret question of the month. Not Betty to whom I may have given Sammy. Not Betty. Hello, not hi. I still do not know why she didn't acknowledge me. Perhaps she was distracted by her sister or the traffic. Maybe she didn't hear me. Maybe.

In our first two weeks back in England, my mother's eagerness to keep her appointment with the Authority waned. What I had anticipated as a frenetic mission to

reacquire our flat proved nothing of the sort. Instead, we spent what seemed like interminable hours with Mrs. Helm to whom she said little about the Canadian heat that I found so intolerable, nothing about the absence of snow, the abundance that I was promised, or the children at school who pestered me. Surely she knew how they treated me without me having to tell her. She said nothing about the incessant noise and the dirty apartment and the horrible neighbour. She told Mrs. Helm, instead, about the big car and the fridge and the black and white console television, but nothing about having to drive to buy milk, or the mosquitoes, nothing about the spiders that were surely the size of dinner plates by now. The spiders that lurked in the space around the tap, maybe in the tap itself, spiders that sucked the blood of children who lied to their parents.

During this time in England, I have another picture of me, but this is not a photograph. It is a memory slightly discoloured, curled around the edges, a picture of a particular afternoon at Mrs. Helm's. I am there now. I can hear the clink of china cups, the smell of brewing coffee. I can see my mother constantly pushing a piece of errant hair behind her ear. I can feel the tang of my own frustration. My own plans had been thwarted by her refusal to let me rifle through the toys of the other children that we visit. Mrs. Helm's children do not have Sammy, and Gaynor, who just turned twelve, ignores me as if I am one of her pesty little sisters. I am bored with visiting anyway and am relegated to eavesdropping. I try to catch bits of conversation between my mother and Mrs. Helm, as they moved seamlessly from English to German and back.

“Miriam and I went back to visit at the factory,” she tells Mrs. Helm.

“Remember the machinist who used to sit next to me? You met her once.”

This was the same machinist who could smoke and sew simultaneously, never removing her cigarette from between bulbous red lips. *So, you have left your husband*, she had said, her stubby cigarette wagging up and down. She had looked from me to my mother, noting the resemblance. I had the pale skin of my German mother, not the dark skin of my Indian father. *Probably for the best, then*, she finished and continued her work. Was it the woman's look and comment that caused my mother's waning desire to reclaim her old life or did she remember having to wrap her bleeding finger tips, raw from the coarse upholstery fabric, in cotton so that she could finish her piece-work. I wondered if she remembered, while we were at the factory, the time the double needles pierced through her thumb and impaled it to the metal feed-bar on the machine. "She was very rude," my mother recounts. Mrs. Helm nods a yes and gets them more coffee.

I miss bits of conversation between the two because Gaynor comes in from the yard and asks me why I am being nosy and the little sisters, who still scream instead of talk, pester me to play with them and speak *American*. I hear my mother say, "We should never have left," but England or Canada, I can't be sure. Did she think of the heat and the spiders and the isolation? Or did she remember the stares and the hushed, and not so hushed, comments that she and my father got walking hand in hand on the High Street and on the Tube? Does she want to believe that those stares and comments will never happen in Canada, as my father believes? Or maybe she remembers when I came home from school sure that I was adopted. A girl in my class said my father can't

- not caaan't - be my father because we didn't have the same coloured skin. Maybe my mother missed my father as much as I did. Or maybe she was just tired.

“We would never have enough money to buy a house in England,” she tells Mrs Helm and, “Miriam’s father has such a good job and he is going to get his pilot’s licence, something we could never afford here.” And that there is a new shopping centre opening close by and that she can most probably get a job there. “It is better for us and for Miriam because there are so many more opportunities.” My mother does not see me outside the door. Does she feel me sitting there listening? “And besides she likes it there. So much.”

Back in Canada, my father picks us up at the airport in our old white Buick. His hands tremble as he reaches for our luggage. He did not think that we would come back. “Welcome,” he pauses, “welcome back” and hugs me hard, kissing my mother at the same time. We seem to know that it would be premature to say welcome home. We are tentative, a provisional family for now. I want to think, to remember, that the heat wave was over as we stood there, that there was a tinge of autumn, a chill in the air. But it was still hot, though the sky threatened rain.

I am tired after the long flight. I lie down in the back seat of the big white car, the windows are rolled all the way down and there is a breeze as we drive, warm but promising, blowing too fast for the mosquitoes to get in.

Just Breathe

Maggie's feet strained against the metal stirrups. Someone, she wondered who, had crocheted little stirrup cover-ups in multi-coloured wool. Well, not wool, but some kind of acrylic. It wouldn't be wool, would it? Too itchy, too expensive. Who would have thought of that? Crocheting stirrup covers? Did someone ask for volunteers? Was there a sign up sheet? Needed, Stirrup Cover Crocheters. And did the potential corps of crocheters submit resumes? Do practice tests? Crochet one complete stirrup cover within seven minutes, please, using the predetermined length of yarn. And...go.

Maggie could understand crocheting little booties and matching toques for the newborns. Could even understand someone requesting socks for swollen motherfeet. But stirrup covers? And they were big loopy things, so that her feet felt the cold hardness of the stirrups anyway. She hadn't thought to bring socks. Or had she? Was there a pair in her bag? Her bag. Where was it? Had she brought her bag? Socks? Her toothbrush? Oh, God, if she hadn't brought her toothbrush...

She was going to lose her mind with the next contraction. It was going to ooze out of her like so much amniotic fluid. Drench her wrinkled blue hospital gown and then just completely evaporate into nothingness which might not be such a bad thing right now. She hadn't slept in over thirty hours. She was sweaty and nauseous. And the fluorescent lights were hurting her eyes, implying that, if not a neonate's imminent arrival, she could in all good faith expect the arrival of a seven pound eight ounce headache. If they would just turn off the lights, let her stay on the bed. Shut the door for a bit.

She could hear the other babies. Other babies being born. Other mothers being born. She wasn't a mother yet, even though the nurses at her obstetrician's office said, "Hi, mom," and "How's it going, mom?" And people that she hardly knew said things like, "How's our little mother doing?" Little and mother. Neither descriptor felt like her. Maybe it would never happen. Not the bit about losing her mind, that was a certainty. But birth. Maybe she was caught in some weird sci-fi time anomaly and condemned to forever re-live this loop. Contraction. Anticipation of contraction. Contraction. Anticipation. Twenty-five years from now, she would still be here with the grown-up newborns from across the hall giving birth to their own newborns. Time was passing outside her room, not inside. And she would be here always listening to the wailing of other babies, the phantom panting of other mothers, the soft bumping sound of balloons. Congratulations floating down the hallway. She would be relegated to this loop of contraction, anticipation of contraction and inane thoughts about someone knitting stirrup covers in multi-coloured woolacrylic for eternity. Contraction. Anticipation of contraction.

Contraction of. In the spaces between the contractions, she could think, or think she could think. Stirrup-cover thoughts. Stirrup-covered thoughts. Big gaping holes that released fragments and allowed the rest to just wander in and around the multicoloured acrylic loops. And perched precariously on one of the loops, almost-mother Maggie, at an obstetrical appointment. She, flipping through a series of last year's baby magazines and an old copy of *1001 Modern Names for your Newborn*. The woman next to her, once a history teacher, now majoring in motherhood, baby number

four, she giggled, patted her voluminous belly. The voluminous woman told Maggie about one of the French Louis, Maggie couldn't remember which one. The Fourteenth, Sixteenth. Was there a Seventeenth? Well, one of them anyway, she said, invented back labour. Not the actual pains. Not those insatiable spasms that threatened to cripple and maim, but women giving birth on their backs so that they would be completely subdued, docile. Tied down, held down.

Maggie pictured a huge gilded room full of Marie Antoinettes and Madame Pompadours. She thinks she might be straddling different eras, but no matter. This is her wooly, acrylic dream. So the Antoinettes and the Pompadours. Towering wigs, huge boned skirts gaping O's. And white powdered bottoms teetering at the end of meticulously lined up, lined up what? Surely, not beds. Perhaps a long carved table, white, of course. It must have been the Versailles Louis, all controlled gardens and constrained greenery, she thinks. And their mouths, the Maries and the Madams, stuffed with cake so they would remain mute. Frilly bodies quivering, voiceless. And Louis the Something's frilly body quivering as he orders the sting quartet to play a piece suitable for the orchestrated silence.

"Relax," someone commanded. Some modern-day Louis with a green hat and face mask. Shut up. I'm thinking. And then there were the other stories. The one's that women at the pharmacy and in grocery lines loved to tell. *When are you due?* That line, their modus operandi. The quick point of entry, feign interest, and then pounce. In two mon ... But not fast enough. *My third. The second one died right inside me. And they made me wait until labour started for the baby to come out.* Fables sprung from

amniotic fountains. Fables about placenta's dying and babies drying out. Mummified. Mommyfried. And the one about Maggie having to go back to the grocery store to wait in line again because she had left her baby on the counter conveyor belt and that was a dream, but it seemed so real. *Perfectly natural*, said her obstetrician. What, women and the battlefield of labour? Or my dream? *Yes*.

"Relax." You relax, you asshole.

In my day, said her mother in the somewhere mist of Maggie's pain, *it was easy*. Louis the Something had been replaced by her mother. Some trade-off. *They just put you out, Mags. You didn't have to know what was going on and when you woke up, voila, it was all over. Painless. Lots of medication afterwards. Breasts bound. A bottle for the baby. And you just rested for a good week in hospital. We didn't have to gain the weight that you girls do today – you'll have a bit of trouble with that, Mags. It gets harder to lose after thirty. We started having our babies a lot younger back then. Done with the babies by twenty something and a nice hysterectomy if you had the proper doctor. Lots of recovery time needed for that one. But things are so different now. Natural childbirth, prenatal classes, newborn massage and all that. A little overboard, I'd say. Well, even so, Mags, it's so exciting. Yes, Mother.*

And there you are basking in the Florida sun. Housekeeper trying to keep busy cleaning your immaculate condo. You, all nipped and tucked and tanned. Hair done for dinner. Skin glistening in the sun. No sweat. No sweat.

The contraction eased off. Maggie opened her eyes and looked at the bulge of her body. She hadn't seen her feet in months (that good old motherhood joke) and

there they were, amazing swollen sausagethings, at the end of her cocked legs locked in stirrups. And a man looking down the length of her thighs. Giddy-up. Tally-ho. And back to the stirrups.

“That’s it. A bit of time before the next one. Relax, relax.” You relax with your legs hanging in midair. Your butt quaking at the end of this runway they call a birthing bed. You relax with everyone looking at your crotch and feeling up your vagina every sixty seconds. With people asking if you’re doing okay and if...

“That’s it. Relax. You’re doing well, Margaret.” The next contraction. Her legs quivered with the effort. Louis quivered and struck up the band. One and two and breathe and two. Clumps of matted hair stuck to her forehead. Her breath came in shallow rasps.

Her legs had been, what did they call it? Not tied, that would be too archaic. Not restrained, that’s what they did to mental patients. Although right now... What did they call it? Some stupid euphemism... aided. Was that it? No, no. It was, Margaret we’ve helped support your legs in the stirrups. That’s it, support. I wouldn’t need “support” if my feet weren’t stuck in the stupid stirrups in the first place, she thought. Stirrups which had been modified with long metal shaft-like pieces for her calves. A deformed Christmas ornament. And no one had thought to crochet covers for those braces, those steel girders. Perhaps they ran out of wool. They should have been more conservative with the stirrup covers.

And here I am, Maggie thought, flayed out like a soon to be trussed turkey and obsessing over crocheting and Louis the Something. God, and why would anyone want

this videoed? Not that anyone had asked to video tape this particular blessed event. There wasn't *anyone*. But if there was someone, what would compel him to want to shoot footage of this? Or even stills. Well, except for those women obsessed with archiving every moment of every event of their lives in those ridiculous lacy photo albums. Whatever happened to squatting alone in a field, hiding out in a cave somewhere with a couple of your girlfriends, walking around in a forest letting gravity give you a hand? Or even better, what about forgetting the whole thing. Pulling out the IV, popping the legs out of the stirrups, and deciding on a nice tropical vacation instead of. Contraction. Anticipation of contraction.

And whoever said giving birth was just like bad menstrual cramps. What aberrant anatomist decided to use that one? Why didn't they tell you it was going to hurt like hell? Like your insides were ripping out, because they were. That your unpowdered butt would be hanging off the end of a table. A bed or table or slab that breaks away so you feel as if there is nothing between your crotch and the floor because there is nothing between your crotch and the floor. "Yes, just shimmy a little closer to the edge, Margaret." A little closer to the edge. As if I'm falling into a void. Legs supported in this metal paraphernalia so I can get a little closer to the edge, to the edge of this bedtableslab.

"Just a little closer." And what was he thinking? The doctor. She tried to see his eyes behind the thick glasses. To make out the set of his mouth behind the mask. Nothing. Had this miraculous and effervescently blessed event become mundane? Just a job? A means to pay off his next British racing-green Mercedes? Was it a social

thing? Chat with the nurses, chat up the nurses. Get the latest hospital gossip like when the anesthetist came by to put in her epidural. He talked to the nurse in charge about his recent trip to Portugal and how cheap everything was there and how she, the nurse, not Maggie, should go some time. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. He was going back in September and it wasn't Maggie he wanted to take. She was just another in a long line of spiny spinal cords. The recipient of an ever so small plastic tube being winked and nudged into the ever so small space between her vertebrae. And he was droning on about Portugal.

“Bring your knees up. Hunch over like you're hugging a watermelon.” He laughed at his feeble joke. “Don't breath. Breathe. There you go, dear.” Dear. No-name brand send-off. The epidural made Maggie sick and shaky at first and was one in a very, very few, as she was informed, that didn't take. It wasn't going to numb her from the belly button down, ease the grip of the contractions. And no, the anesthetist couldn't come back because he had been called to an emergency, no doubt with the nurse he was chatting up, and besides it was too close to delivery and so they couldn't do it again and and and and...

It was bad for Gran. Her mother again. She had all four of us at home with all the neighbour people around. Father nowhere in sight. And now the fathers are in there messing around videotaping, cutting the cord, playing doctor. God, they'd breastfeed the babies if they could. Good old fashioned formula, that's what we used. Breast is best, who thought that one up? They'll never be perky again if you breast feed, Mags, despite what they tell you. But anyway, the fathers today, my God. Oh,

sorry dear, didn't mean to go on about ...well, you know. Yes, do go on about the fact that this baby's father will be nowhere in sight from this day forth and forever after ahhh men. A deadbeat dad before ever becoming a dad. Anyway, imagine all those people around. With Gran, I mean. I'd have fainted dead away. Which would have been the best thing considering. Thank goodness for progress. Hospitals and doctors. When you're expecting you are kind of ill, aren't you? You should be in hospital. Quiet. Private. Not on display for all the world to see.

In the space and time between contractions. In the loop between the time, Maggie looked around the bleach-white room. Goggles, grey drapes, gloves. Nurses, residents, interns, a nurse who looked as green as her scrubs. All waiting to see her baby's birth. To see another birth. All these neighbour people.

“I'll probably have to make a little cut to help the baby's head pass, Margaret. Okay, Margaret? You won't feel it. The pressure of the head will make the area numb. Try to stay with me, Margaret.”

Where exactly do you think I'm going to go? My legs are tied in place because they're shaking so much. My hands...she looked at her left hand. The intravenous was flowing in, burning, and sucking out her control and her knuckles were white, nails digging into her hand. No, not her hand. Someone's. The nurse's. I'm sorry. I didn't realize how hard...but no words came out.

Well, yes they did that little cut. So the forceps could get right in there. You had the cutest little pointy head for awhile. And as for the cut. It was okay. They gave me lots of pain medication and it healed wonderfully. Even put in...well, I shouldn't be

telling you this, Mags, but you are a grown woman and obviously, well, you wouldn't be in this situation if you hadn't and...Get to the point, please, Mother. Well, you know, they put in an extra stitch for, for the husbands back then. I bet if you ask. You know, you might get married some day and you know. Though you very much doubt it, Mother since I have, will have, a child. Anticipation. Of contraction.

“Okay, Margaret. You are doing great. Look.” Maggie turned to the mirror behind the doctor’s head. A trickle of blood ran onto the green drape under her. Mom, I lost my virginity. Again.

Oh, don't worry Mags, it's a wonderful thing, having a baby. The pain is insignificant. You'll forget about it like it never existed. And you would know that...how, Mother? You'll fall head over heels in love as soon as you see that baby. How am I supposed to love someone I've never met before? How am I going to know what to do, what to really do? I can't even do this. I want to get up and push the hands on that clock, make them move. But it just keeps repeating. I want to leave my body here. Look down on it. Make it do what it's supposed to do. Or stop it. I don't have any control. I can't leave. I can't stay. I don't want to do this. Just leave me alone. Alone. I don't want to do this alone. Why couldn't you come? Why didn't you come? Make them take my legs out of the stirrups, Mother. At least do that. I can't push. I can't concentrate. I can't breathe.

Shhh, Mags. They know what they're doing. Your father was ecstatic when you came along, Mags. Couldn't stop talking about you to all our friends. God, he loved you... Sent me roses everyday that I was in hospital. And on and on. Mother, be quiet.

You don't remember much about him, I imagine. Died much too young. Lovely man. I miss him a lot. Please be quiet, Mother. Just take my legs down. *I'll come visit when you're settled in. Now, call me as soon as you know.* Know what? What is it that I'm supposed to know? I don't know, Mother. I don't know anything. Mom, please. The baby's coming. What do I do? Everything's speeding up. I'm not ready. I'll never be settled in. You're the mother. Not me. I'm the child. Mom. I don't know what to do. I don't know.

"Breathe, Margaret. It won't be long. Breathe, dear. Breathe, Margaret. That's all you have to do right now. Just breathe."

That's not all.

That's not all.

Tell them to take my feet out, Mom.

Mags, stop being so difficult. And for heaven's sake, don't make a scene. Do as the doctor says. Just breathe. Breathe.

Who are you to tell me don't make a scene, Mother? What about the scene you made when I told you I was pregnant. It wasn't as if I was sixteen and got knocked up. But you. It was like something out of a bad play. I'm too young to be a grandmother. What will my friends say? What about your father? You are old enough and who cares about your friends and dad is gone. I thought you were going to swoon, fall off your high heels, choke on your martini olive. Nothing about me. How I felt. If I was scared, angry, overjoyed, just, well, what are you going to do then? Stress on the *you*. But I

thought you'd come around, come here. I'm thirty-two and I am having a baby. And I'm by myself.

I told you he was no good.

God, it's not about that. Not at all. I am having this baby and I want this baby. I do. I really think I do and.

Not now, Mags. You're losing control. Not very ladylike. You know, especially like that, in the position you're in.

"Here comes another one, Margaret. Push dear. Push!" You push. You push. I don't want to push. It won't work. Someone else push. I'm too tired. Can't do it anymore. Mother, tell them. Tell them to take my feet out of the stirrups. I'll be able to breathe. I can't breathe like this. I can't breathe, push.

Look Mags... why don't they use nitrous oxide anymore? They can't start moving you all around now. Not good for the baby. I just think that if you calm down and let everyone do what they are supposed to do, then it'll be just fine. Just fine.

Go to hell Mother. Go to.

Don't talk to your mother like...

Hell.

There was a fragment of time between the contraction and anticipation of contraction. "Take my feet out." The Antoinettes and the Pompadours lifted their powdered heads. The fake-wool, real-acrylic crocheted stirrup covers unraveled their galloping loops. "My feet out of the stirrups. Take them out."

The masked man looked up from Maggie's crotch. He pushed his glassed up with his forearm, and nodded to the nurse, the one whose hands were still serrated from Maggie's nails. She pulled out the retracted end of the bed and gently lowered Maggie's feet and legs.

That's all.

That's all.

Mother and the fourteen or so Louis vaporized in a puff of iridescent powder. And Maggie could finally breathe.

Anticipation

Abba is going to say to my sister Anju, don't do anything to shame us. His voice will be strained with worry.

I am outside my parents' room on the landing. Lying on my belly, kind of wrapped around the banister so I don't topple down the stairs. I wish I'd put on my jeans this morning instead of my gym shorts and tube socks 'cause the wall-to-wall has little bits of picky fuzz in it and they're making my legs itch. Like when hair grows back on your legs after you shave them. Not that I would know about shaving being ten and all. Not like Anju, who likes to let me know about her smooth-like-silk legs, triple-blade razor, and watermelon shaving gel.

Well, who cares? I've got smooth-like-silk legs as well and I don't even need to shave them. But man, this carpet is itchy and it's so ugly up close. It's Royal Blue and the itchy bits are grey. I don't know how anyone could ever pick this. It's horrendous. H-o-r-r-e-n-d-o-u-s. But I can't let that bother me. Not right now. I have to concentrate.

Right now, I'm eavesdropping. And I can hardly stop up the huge soon-to-be-projectile giggle stuffed behind my hands. Please God, don't let them hear me. Don't let me laugh out loud. I have one of those laughs just sitting above my belly. The kind that Wanda, my best-friend-for-right-now – because we had a fight yesterday, so I'm not sure we're going to be best friends for much longer – and I have when we are talking about boys and junk instead of doing our math sheets or spelling lists.

Sometimes we let loose behind a book or if it's a major one, we'll lift our desk lids up and pretend to look for a pencil or an eraser or something else really important.

Right now, I better not bust out. Anju's is going to kill me if she finds out I'm listening. But before she knocks me off, I'm gonna do the speech – the one that she'll be getting from my dad any second now – right back at her. This one will be good. He's gonna give her the *Don't Do Anything To Shame Us* speech.

I can just hear it. The Ah, Anju you are now of the womanly status or something like that and because of this happening – he won't exactly say *what* is happening, he's kind of old fashioned that way – you must be respectful of the family. You must now remember, Anju. Don't Do Anything to Shame Us. Go, Abba. Don't spend time with the boys – he pronounces *the* like thee, as in thee boys - unless your sister is there. Don't take the rides from the boys in cars. Don't accept any chichinana, foolish, presents from the boys. Don't linger in the school cafeteria or the halls. Don't neglect your studies (standard issue) for the likes of those flattery-flattery boys. Don't do any shameful behaviours kissingtouchinglooking and the like. He will say that very fast. Don't do what you should not do. All these things can bring shame to our family and Anju, my daughter, you have always brought - I think he should say a multitude of trouble and misfortune on our family – but he will say Anju, you have always brought joy to us and now it is ever so important that you continue to be such a lady of ladylike behaviour. Remembering always your father and mother who love you very much. And also, Anju, don't ... I think he'll do a few repetitions. Anju's not that quick on the uptake. Wow, it's going to be a classic.

Abba's got lots of classics. There are other versions of the *Don't Do* speeches also know as the *Never Do* speeches. Never talk back, never lie, never shave your legs. But it's because of me that Anju's getting this one, this particular *Don't Do* speech. Today. How cool am I?

Probably could've put it off for a few months, even years, Anju. It's not like Abba would ask Ma. And I didn't know that Ma would tell him.

It's all because she's kind of late, age-wise, not like pregnant-wise, from what I can figure out. Doesn't it usually happen when you're about twelve or thirteen? Not that I didn't pay attention to Mrs. Humphries in health class, but I had to catch up on the homework that I happened to forget to do because I was so into the spelling bee stuff. The tournament is coming up really soon. Which I am going to win. I've got my list of words pretty well memorized. There's tons, but some of my favourites are obnoxious, repellant, endomorphic, hysterical. And I love when Mrs. H asks us to do the "use four or five of your favourite words in a sentence" exercise. How easy. Focus on Anju and, voila. My sister Anju is a hysterical, obnoxious, repellant, endomorphic snot.

But anyhow, I'm not going to get *it* probably for four or five years because I'm really athletic. Like I can run three times around the school without getting a stitch in my side and I'm usually sometimes the last one left for Dodge ball. And I'm kind of skinny. And supposedly if you are athletic and kind of skinny, your hormones don't do what they're supposed to do until you have so much body fat. When I pinch my belly, I don't have much and I haven't grown any breasts yet. Not even a bump. Mrs.

Humphries says that we are not to call breasts boobs because a boob is an idiot and you don't go around calling a body part an idiot. Which makes sense, but *breasts* sounds so pretentious. P-r-e-t-e-n-t-i-o-u-s. I listened to that part of health class because I'd finished my writing homework in math class.

Anyway, back to my sister, Anju. She's fourteen. And she's obviously got enough body fat because she started her period. Today. And ohmygod, really, how could Abba and Ma not know with all the carrying on she did like a major drama queen. Oh, the cramps and the can you see if I'm wearing a pad through my jeans and oh, I'll have to try a tampon next time. Well, yuck. Like she's the only person, well, only *woman* because she said, you know Shiri, I'm a woman now, to ever have menstruated - m-e-n-s-t-r-u-a-t-e-d - on this entire planet. So she deserves the *Don't Do Anything To Shame Us* speech.

I've had the *Don't Do Anything To Upset Us* speech. Abba will say, Shiri, *Don't Do Anything To Upset* _____ and then he fills the blank in with whoever he thinks will have the most guilt value for me. Mostly, Ma. Her blood pressure, you know, he says. I want to say that Ma doesn't have blood pressure, but then I'd get the *Go to Your Room* speech which doesn't really involve a speech. Just a great big fat boring time-out in our, mostly Anju's, room.

But the speech I hate the most though, is the *Don't Do Anything Unladylike* one. I've had that a lot with being the athlete that I am. Like make sure that your shirt, Abba says blouse, stays tucked in when you go to hit the volleyball. Wear only white running shoes. Not those black ones. I still don't get the white versus black running

shoe thing. Never pluck your eyebrows. That's just generic, the eyebrow one. It's pretty well standard in all his *Don't Do* speeches. Sort of in the general area of don't alter what God gave you.

I wonder what Abba would do if he saw one of those makeover shows. Probably have a coronary. (C-o-r-o-n-a-r-y, spelling bee word meaning heart attack.) Although, I have seen him linger just for a second over the channel-up on the remote control when those bra commercials come on. Not the old lift and separate ones, but the ones where the girls all look like angels or like mermaids or something ethereal. (E-t-h-e-r-e-a-l. That's a great word. I just learned it from the spelling bee list along with coronary and I've been dying to use it in a sentence all week.)

Anju wouldn't even know what ethereal meant. She'd probably pronounce it, ether real. Miss I Am A Woman Now has a vocabulary that's made up of words like hot as in he's so hot. And cool as in her sister is not cool. And money as in I need some. She's been known to speak a complete paragraph using those words. He's so hot so I need a new T-shirt bra so give me some money you little brat. (Well, maybe she doesn't use cool that much.) But she will 'cause I'm gonna be way up on her not cool list. Because it's not going to take even her much to figure out that I told Ma and Ma told Abba and, thus and therefore, the dreaded *Don't Do Anything* etcetera speech.

Well, it's not like I could help it. My mum is pretty hard to lie to. She asked me at lunch today about how school was going and about Sela, who could be new best friend starting tomorrow instead of Wanda, and about stuff in general. And well, Anju becoming a woman kind of fit under stuff in general. And so I told her. At first, she

just sat there like she knew. But I don't really think she did know. She looked kind of hurt. So I said that I'd tell her right away when I got my period. I think that made her feel better.

Just last week, I heard her tell Anju that she was going to take her to the doctor if she didn't get her period soon. Anju went crazy. Like crying and howling crazy. Like more that usual Anju-crazy. Which kind of makes me think. That maybe. No, Anju's not that deep.

But maybe....she did have it all along. Well, for a while anyway. Maybe that's why she's cranky ...crankier sometimes. And she didn't say anything to Ma. Only me yesterday. She didn't want to tell Ma because Ma might tell Abba and then there'd be a speech and being all womanly, she's beyond anymore dreaded Abba speeches. But if Ma took her to the clinic, the doctor would know. And that's why she made such a big deal out of it yesterday. So I *would* tell. And it would seem like she just got it because she doesn't tell me anything.

That took a lot of thinking on her part – not something she's known for. Ha, I am gonna barge right in my parents room and tell her right in front of Abba and Ma that I know everything. How she had her little woman period all along and just didn't want to tell them. Because she thinks it's none of their business and she's all grown up and everything. And how she got scared that Ma would take her to the doctor's so she did the fakey fakey and pretended that she *just* got it. And I'm gonna tell them how she wears make-up at school and wants her friends to call her Angie instead of Anju and

that will get her more than just another lecture. It will get her grounded for life. I am just gonna barge right in there. Barge. Right in there.

And I would.

But I have to share a room with Anju and she's so good at the silent treatment and I won't be able to take days and days of her not talking to me and telling me all about her stuff and her not asking about my stuff. 'Cause sometimes when her friends are busy, she does tell me about her boyfriends and hanging out, and she'll even take me shopping once in awhile if I use my money for our bus fares.

And besides I have to go to the bathroom now and if I go into my parent's room it might be a huge scene and it could go on for hours and I'd get a bladder infection. According to Mrs. Humphries, you should go when you gotta go. Otherwise germs crawl up your urine tube and get into your bladder and you get an infection and you wet yourself at the worst times. Not that there would be a best time to wet yourself, but you can't make it to the bathroom to pee in time.

The bathroom's right across the landing. If I really have to go bad I can run in and not miss too much. I could leave the door open and try to pee quietly. I do not want to miss any of this.

Maybe her lying will come out without me saying anything. I think I can wait a bit. I think it's okay to wait just a bit before peeing. Like you don't have to let loose immediately. The germs can't move that fast. So I think I'll just stay here.

But maybe I won't do *the speech* back to her. Or maybe I will. I probably will. Yeah, I will. Because I know it's gonna be a good one. I can see Abba now sitting on

the little settee in his bedroom with his after-work outfit on. His too-long long johns and too short pajama pants and his sweatshirt and his Blackwatch plaid dressing gown over all of it. Because he says that the Canadian winter wind is insidious (that's not a spelling bee word, but I bet I could spell it...if I wanted to. It means sinister – much like my older sister, actually) – and goes through the walls of the house and through him. And it's not healthy to be cold. Always wear long johns in winter. Never pluck your eyebrows.

Yup, my dad will be sitting on the settee and my mum will be hovering. Arryi, baba don't make such a big thing out of something, she will say. We are not living twenty or thirty years ago. And he'll pat her hand and then. Let. Anju. Have it. Give her the big speech about how much shame she can bring on the family now and how she can have babies out of wedlock (Abba won't say get pregnant). How she would have to live in a home for unwed mothers and be condemned to a life of poverty. (I'd get the bedroom to myself, at least.) How she'd never be able to be the hairdresser that she wants to be. That's a good one. I am truly going to spew any minute. I don't know if she wants to be a hairdresser, although that's about her speed. And she'd never tell our parents if she did. No, she'd tell *me* so I could give them the news of the day.

But about the speech. Abba would say that she'd have to wear a letter on her tucked in blouse, of course like in that book called *The Scarlet Letter*. I thought it was from the *Scarlet Pimpernel*, but that's about something else red. Okay, so he won't say anything about a letter. He's never read *The Scarlet Letter* and neither have I, but I think the hero-girl had to wear a red letter on her breast, not boob, because she was

fooling around. I paid attention to Mrs. Humphries lessons on fooling around also known as sexual intercourse. Intercourse, not a spelling bee word, but I could probably spell it as well. I know Abba won't use it. I think he'll be kind of specifically not specific.

He better hurry up cause trying not to laugh is making me have to go pee even worse. And I don't want to leave just now 'cause I can hear them talking some more. I think Abba is starting the speech again. Anju didn't quite get it the first time. Obviously, she's on extra slow-mo today, being that she is menstruating and all.

So he's got to say it again.

But it's not... it's not the *Don't Do Anything To Shame Us* speech. He's changed it. He can't do that. What happened to the shame? The don't do's? What the heck is going on here? My Abba is saying. What? Your Ma wants to talk to you. That's it. That's it? No definition of what's right. Nothing about what shame might befall our family because of her. No speech. No lecture. Not even a don't pluck your eyebrows especially now that your are menstruating bit? He's not even mentioning *it*.

The door is opening and Anju is coming out. She looks puffingly pleased with herself.

She raises her neatly groomed eyebrows at me, smirks, and saunters off into our room. My mother is rummaging in her closet. I will bring some private things for you Anju, she says. Do not worry. We will have a nice chat and a warm cup of *chai*. Perhaps you will be wanting my heating pad.

Abba turns his attention to me. Now Shiri. Come, come please. I heard you ruffling and rummaging like a little bird outside our door. Giggling and carrying on. Now my Shiri, have you not been paying attention to what I say? It is not lady-like behaviour to giggle and do such carrying on while the grownups are having important dealings. You are only just ten, a little girl, still. And you must be respectful of your elders. Ma and Anju are needing to have some important conversations. It is not for you or me, Shiri.

What? I don't get to hear Abba's *Don't do Anything to Shame Us Speech* to Anju. He is not going to let her know the disgrace she could bring on us? The shame if she lingers in the hallways or does any kissingtouchinglooking or takes any chichinana presents from *the* boys? She's in with the adults? And I'm just a little girl! What the heck. I'm ten. I'm in the spelling bee. I'm going to win it. I sat out there forever on the picky carpet and I had to pee real bad and that's it.

Such behaviour Shiri. I have told you many, many times. Little girls must not carry on. Now what have I said, my Shiri? Do you not remember?

Don't Do...

Physic

See Esther.

See Esther run.

See Esther run and run and run.

The facemask was cloying. Esther wanted to pull it off, but she couldn't raise her hands. Not because they were paralysed, not because she couldn't feel them. This was not a scene from a movie in which the stricken victim awakens from a coma to find herself paralysed while concerned doctors and nurses offer wholly useless reassurance. Esther's nerves still fired, her muscles still contracted, she could feel the sticky slickness of the chemical suit, the ambiskin, in which had been placed, but she couldn't lift her arms, or her legs, for that matter, because they were overwhelmingly heavy. They were dead weight, lead weight, and every other cliché about heaviness that she could muster. She couldn't will herself to lift them, couldn't force impulses from her brain through her spinal column into her arms. She couldn't formulate the commands for her fingers and forearms to push her hands towards her face, to pull off the suffocating mask.

Against the weight, however, Esther could force her eyes open. She could make out the image of her husband Gid, his face splitting into two Gids and then fusing again, but not quite. The two Gids moved together and over each other like an incomplete thought. Splitting and fusing.

Esther surmised that at least she could hear, hear her own breathing foremost, moist and gurgled. And someone calling her. "Esther. Esther?" She couldn't answer,

couldn't talk over the mask. It caught her words and forced them back as the oxygen misted its way to her lungs. Esther thought she said, *what happened*, but she wasn't quite sure. If she had, it would have been inaudible over the whooshing of the oxygen and the constant ping of some kind of machine near her bed. For a flicker, she envisioned a scrub-clad doctor playing patient pinball, intensely pinging small flesh coloured spheres at metal targets in order to facilitate her breathing. Ping, ping and then there was the incessant bip, bip, probably a heart monitor, which would be insanely irritating if she wasn't so tired. She thought she heard talking, hushed clinical verbiage, critical medical whispers. Gid was saying, "Esther, it's your heart. They didn't know" or something like that. Maybe it was, "Esther, we'll never be apart. It's going to snow." *What happened* would have to wait. She couldn't lift her limbs and she couldn't keep her eyes from flicking shut.

"Your condition should have at least been detected gestationally, Esther." The doctor said, said this almost as an accusation, as if Esther should have been a more vigilant fetus, should have put up a sign as she swam in a sea of amniotic fluid so that all of this inconvenience could have been prevented. "Preconceptually, in actuality. Your parents, before you went into the growth chambers. Highly unusual." Dr. Etherton, prematurely grey at thirty two, attempted to exude an air of aged wisdom, and detached clinical composure. He tapped his stylus on the edge of the wafer thin device that hung around his neck. "Your condition doesn't make sense. The data, see, right here?" No, she couldn't *see right here*. She wanted to stop him, interrupt his attempts at

making sense of her and get it over with. “Or at least at birth. Every child is tested for multiple potential disorders, as you know. You are how old?” Not waiting for an answer, he continued, “Yes, thirty-six. Highly, highly unusual. Testing had been going on for years before you were born. Mandatory from at least twenty-eighteen. Perhaps your records were misplaced, mishandled.”

“No.” It came out louder than Esther expected and Etherton stopped talking. She had been given a series of medications and interventions that temporarily allowed her breathing to ease and her cardiac system to function more efficiently. The suffocating mask was removed and her heart functions were supported by an external synthetic pump that evened her cardiac rhythm. The muscle no longer writhed like a sac of worms as Etherton had called it when she was first admitted to the clinic.

Esther’s emphatic no was reflected on the monitor’s data displays. The ambiskin, a thin cocoon-like chemical suit, detected her increasing heart rate, anticipated her need for more oxygen and began readjusting accordingly. “I wasn’t tested.”

Etherton noticed the change in Esther’s vital signs and the commencing readjustment of the monitors. It was taking more than the usual time to regulate her levels. She was obviously stressed and anxious, or it could be the machines. He hoped that he wouldn’t have to recalibrate them. It would take a considerable amount of time and he had a full roster this morning. “Sorry?”

“I wasn’t tested,” she repeated, her voice even, controlled.

Etherton turned from the monitors. “Oh, oh, I see. I didn’t think.” He paused and looked directly at Esther as if making eye contact would conceal his discomfort. “Then you were delivered. From your mother.”

Esther wanted to match his nonchalance. “Yes, borne and born, so to speak.”

“Well.” He cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. “It’s such a rarity that we... hear of ... biological conception. I don’t think I’ve met anyone in my practice or ever who... Well, don’t, don’t worry. It will be kept confidential, of course. We don’t report it. It’s not a crime or anything. It’s just such a rarity.” He pulled on the last words as if they were thick and pasty. No, it was not a crime. There were no conception police. But it was, as he emphasized, such a rarity.

Esther had told Gid about this *rarity* several months after they started dating. She was tentative at first, but his calm reassurance fed her resolve. “My mother was quietly radical for her time,” she had said. “When there was so much to be radical about. You know, population wars, environmental manipulation, climate enhancement, that kind of thing. She said she couldn’t do much about the big issues, but she could do something on a personal level. She believed that ‘recommended’ extra-uterine gestation and all the mandatory tests were wrong and that the imposition of screening was unethical, that it took away any choice, and as well any biological *chance*. Maybe that nature was being compromised, I suppose. So she cut out her implant, her population control device. She couldn’t find anyone to do it so she did it herself. Cut it right out of her upper arm.”

The popcons were implanted in females at puberty, paid for by the government as a public service. “They’re inserted quite deeply between, or in the muscle, I’m not quite sure which,” she added. “Anyway, the wound didn’t heal all that well. There was a hard lump underneath and when I was little, I remember running my hand over it asking what it was. My mother kept it covered with clothing as she got older. Less questions from my schoolmates, I suppose. She could have just got the area regenerated and polished. I didn’t understand that she wasn’t supposed to remove the implant. She said she didn’t really mind the scar. It reminded her, though she never said what it reminded her off, maybe youthful exuberance. I thought that I was a big enough reminder.”

“So she cut out her popcon device.” People called them popcorns for a while, and to Esther, her mother’s arm did feel as if a kernel, a hard seed had been left behind, but of course it was gone. And it wasn’t just that she removed the implant. She got pregnant, an intrauterine gestation. Social Watchers tried to talk her out of carrying the child. They gave her scathing lectures about the hazards of procreative sex and of childbirth as being too dangerous, too unpredictable to foster as a societal norm. And further, it was an unnecessary expenditure, monetary cost aside, in terms of maternal-child health and in terms of the consequences for future generations. No, it wasn’t a crime. The association was denied, but the implication was apparent. The Watchers stressed that no one could force her to make a decision, but it would be in everyone’s best interest to concede. She refused. After Esther was born, her mother’s uterus was dissolved just to be on the safe side, they said. She didn’t need it, or another implant

for that matter. After all, she had her one child, which *was* an enforced state regulation. Both sides could now rest easy, the Social Watchers affirmed.

Instead of allowing for random and indiscriminate births, a system had been established to greatly reduce, if not eradicate, genetic and congenital defects. Besides the implants, ova were harvested and genetically screened for any potential malformations, future anomalies, possible diseases. After a series of screening, splicing, chemical washes, and separation, the ova were placed in a stasis bath. Only the material deemed error free was utilized, the rest discarded. Similarly, with the male partner, sperm were *sieved* for any anomalies and those that could potentially manifest problems removed, and the rest stored. When a couple was ready for conception, the materials, as the amended sperm and egg were called, were combined. There was no alteration as to sex, physical features, propensities, talents or the like. That would be playing God. Government ads, paid for by corporate sponsors, touted that the goal was to eradicate disease, not select for physical or psychological traits. They espoused that nature still had a role to play.

Post conception, the zygote was transferred to an incubation sac through which all biochemical and nutritive needs were met. In sterile chambers, the jelly-like sacs were suspended in homeostatic baths and monitored continuously by expertly trained minders. Viewing ports and communication docks allowed parents to see the perfect growth of their perfect offspring and to coo and whisper to their almost-borns. No longer did the fetus have to rely on the goodwill of the mother to supply needs. No worries about the odd drink, morning coffee, or that extra few pounds. And as the

adverts asked, really what woman wanted to have herself flayed and trussed, so to speak, in the process of physical childbirth? And what man wanted to put the woman he loved through such an ordeal?

Of course the process couldn't select out for accidents, acts of violence, indiscriminate behaviour, new viruses or diseases not inherent in the human gene pool. And people still died. This was not a method to pre-empt death. Just a means to prevent undue suffering, to create generations of people free from debilitating diseases and disorders, improve quality of life, and thwart potential physical disasters and early death. People still died, but not from what were once preordained deaths written in genetic clay. At some point, the government believed that the screening process, colloquially termed screen and scour, would be unnecessary, just like smallpox vaccinations had become unnecessary in the late twentieth century. All potential errors should theoretically be eradicated at some future point in time, but for now there was concern that some error, an undetected fault line could recontaminate generations hence, and so the screen and scour system was sustained. And as well, it was good for the economy and for job creation. Technicians were needed to maintain the popcons, combiners to screen and induce conception of the materials, and skilled minders to monitor the developing fetuses and harvest them when they came to term.

“We can keep you on the auxiliary treatments for awhile, but your heart is so weak.” Though the ambiskin infused the proper amount of chemicals, the proper electrical charge, the proper electrolyte balance to replace much of the stress on her

circulatory system, Esther knew that it was not a cure. It had been a week since she was admitted. She could get up and move around, but she had to be within a specific distance from the discharge terminal. The terminal looped the information about her condition and sent messages to the ambiskin so that it could read the tiniest fluctuations and compensate for her failing heart. It assisted respiration, cleared toxins, promoted homeostasis. But it was only temporary.

“We can readily regenerate tissue, muscle, skin, but organs, especially the heart, have always given us problems and usually we have other avenues for accident victims, but your situation is unique, Esther. No testing,” Etherton said wistfully. “All of this could have been prevented.” In other words, Esther thought, she could have been prevented.

“There is a technology that might work, experimental and controversial, well, as all new advances are. Anyway, a branch of the Centre for Regenerative Studies may be able to help. Their mandate is regeneration, obviously, and they are able to do more advanced procedures like bone, skin, some nerves which is where, as you probably know, most of the money goes. Their work has allowed trauma, spinal cord, burn victims to lead much improved lives. I know that early in the century, researchers predicted that by now we’d be able to regenerate entire organs, even organ systems. And we can do pancreas, liver, lung, kidney.” He listed the items as if they were entrees on a menu. “The CRS has a small research branch that is looking to other methods of regeneration, other than growing and grafting. The procedure is purely experimental, as I’ve said, but there have been promising results with use in virtual

humans.” Wasn’t that the usual statement, Esther thought, experimental, promising results, virtual use? He hadn’t said new discoveries are being made every day, which would have made his diatribe complete. And it was virtual science. It didn’t matter if the virtual human died or for that matter lived. The three dimensional human images, real as they seemed, were just that, images. Men and women, solid looking holograms, kept the same placid look on their faces whether their hands were amputated or their flesh was burned or their nerves were severed. They represented the human state. They did not replicate it. They didn’t feel the hunger for oxygen, the crushing chest pain, the stifling fear that Esther felt.

“It’s techno-organic, phaging and reconfiguring. Bacterial based robots. Superstructured bacteria that contain bioinformation protocols to remove and replace. Remove and replace at a cellular level, well, sub-cellular levels. Potentially reforming an entire organ and its adjuncts in vivo. Neo-genesis at its finest.”

Esther tried to hide her irritation. She had learned that Etherton needed to get it all out, expel his medical verbiage, an excited child with a new toy, before he could get to the point and often needed a direct prod. Gid, who had been sitting quietly, was trying to find a balance between being supportive without interfering, between jumping in when Esther was fatigued without taking over. But he could see how Esther was tiring. He offered the prod. “Which translates to, exactly?”

“Ah, yes. It involves the introduction of small organic, actually bacterially enhanced computers or BECs, programmed to selectively degenerate, break down parts of a structure, in your case, the heart and accompanying circulatory components. As the

BECs phage, sort of ingest, the cellular and sub-cellular structures, they recode the information from the degenerative process. *Break down* is redefined, encoded as *reform*.” He continued, “The BECs are altered in such a way that they replicate the ailing structures without the defects. Almost simultaneously. It’s like reconstructing a complex building. You want to retain the original look so it fits into the neighbourhood - which is analogous to your body - but it’s worn and falling apart. In this case, you use the original plans and piece by piece replace and restructure without tearing the whole thing down. Eventually, you have a new building made with new materials that won’t be rejected because it’s the same thing. Only improved.”

Esther wasn’t sure that she wanted to be compared to a dilapidated building, but what was more worrying was Etherton’s choice of words. “You said, *technically* and *almost*.”

“Yes, well, they have used this technology virtually, and to regenerate autologous organs in the lab and ...”

“Autologous?” Gid.

“Organs generated from the host. There is no rejection.”

“But in my case you can’t do that. You can’t generate or grow or whatever you want to call it, a heart and its components, because it would be grown from defective cells or tissues or whatever. Because I wasn’t tested, processed, everything is more problematic.” She paused. Caught her breath. “So you are going to infect me with bacterially altered computers or computer altered bacteria that will phage, eat, eat my heart?” Eat my heart out.

“Infect isn’t quite it,” Etherton said, disregarding her reference to eating, “but technically, yes.” That word again. “The defective components will be phased. But rebuilt, Esther. Theoretically.” Add theoretically to the list. Esther felt light headed. Her breathing became shallow. Gid reached over and grabbed her hand, the slick coating of the ambiskin making the touch less than intimate. The ambiskin speedily detected Esther’s stress response. It compensated by adjusting the delicate balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide and by pumping in increased doses of sustaining medications. She was requiring more frequent adjustments. The monitors detected and could still compensate, but the baseline increased each time. There would come a point at which the efficacy of the ambiskin would wane.

“What other choices? Are there any other choices?” Gid could see that Esther was struggling. He could see it on the monitors, but also read it on her face, under a mask of feigned composure.

“Really, other than an old-fashioned transplant, we don’t have anything else. We can’t grow a heart or the surrounding structures extra-corporeally. I wish we could. The heart persists in being difficult. Some believe it is more than an organ. As the brain holds the mind, so the heart holds something more. Researchers say that it’s simply because the heart is just such a complex organ and we need more resources. The pragmatists, because there just isn’t that kind of funding available. Someday. Perhaps. But we are talking now. And even with a transplant, I’m not sure, Esther, that you have enough time to wait for a donor.”

She phoned her mother.

“I’m so sorry, Esther.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I thought that I was saving a part of me. And really, I was destroying a part of you.”

There was no time between the onset of the chemical coma and her awakening. Like a baby gestating in her mother’s womb, Esther did not know time. But unlike a fetus that can hear and taste and move, she did not know sensation either. Immersed in a thin, milky liquid, there was no awareness of the organic robots skimming her bloodstream, entities macerating and rebuilding pieces of her heart. Faster than she could think a thought, they destroyed and reinstated sub-cellular sections of her cardiac system while the chemical fluid in which she floated kept her oblivious to the process. When a group of BECs had completed their specific task, they autolyzed, the chemical by-products of their self-destruction initiating another step in the intricate, painstaking task of remaking Esther’s heart.

“It’s incredible, Esther. Just incredible.” Gid. “They say that your heart is like new, better than new. The Titanic of hearts. The Queen of Hearts. Better than any heart they could have imagined. Etherton said it is so effective, so efficient already. You’ll live forever.” He laughed and squeezed her hand. Her mother, looking at her from the end of the bed absently rubbed her upper arm. “They even threw in a bonus.

The BECs regenerated a spot on your lungs that could have been who knows what, but it's gone."

For forty days, Esther had floated in a milky womb. A sensationless drifting, she might have been a gaseous streak among the stars, gravity no longer holding her or an infinitesimal particle of organic filtrate, insensate, drifting in the nucleus of a cell. On the final day of the process, the last group of the BECs finished their complex task and subsequently extinguished themselves, so many lights flicking out. Etherton and his team adjusted monitors, fine tuned settings, and discharged a battery of chemicals and techno-organic compounds into the bath in which Esther floated and slowly, slowly she was liberated from the coma. As they raised her up, the once thin solution hung from her arms and legs in long viscous sheaths, a curtain of organic and neo-organic waste. Esther's skin cast a pulsing tinge of milky blue. There was silence as a shrouded technician deftly suctioned glutinous fluid from her mouth and nose, and after an intense projection of fluids from lungs and stomach, Esther began to draw breath on her own. Finally, her extra-uterine birth, thought Etherton.

"You're tired now, must be exhausted." He whispered to Esther almost reverently. "But you'll soon recoup your energy. That's what happens with the usual heart procedures. Not that this is usual," he continued watching the skin pinken and her eyes flutter open. "But I anticipate that your actual recovery will be similar to other procedures in that respect." Checking the monitors, he noted that her oxygen flow increased almost instantaneously. "Your levels are within normal range already and this is without ambiskin support. Very positive. Very impressive. We monitored every

step, every byte of the process. Every bite.” He smiled at his attempted humour.

“Anyway, everything looks good. A success. And at the risk of sounding melodramatic, it’s as if you’ve been reborn. Coming out of the bath chamber, all the white... glop.” Not quite a scientific word, Esther thought, her mind feeling remarkably clear despite the exhaustion. “Can you tell us what it was like? Do you have any memory, any perceptions of the process?”

Esther thought she remembered twinges, a pull. Something extending out and in like an undertow, but stronger. A riptide, perhaps, something antagonistic, against the anticipated course. Swim parallel to shore or you will drown. Don’t swim against the current; it will just force you out farther and farther. Thoughts of water and tides and surges, not memories, just thoughts. She tried to recall if she dreamed. Nothing until the slow surfacing through the milky fluid and into the subdued lights of the room. Gid looking through the glass observation window at her. The invasive sound and pull of the suction. Vomiting, coughing. Etherton speaking.

“No, it was nothing. Nothing that I remember.”

It *was* as Etherton predicted. Esther’s recovery was remarkable. Gone was the incessant pain, the struggle to breathe, and the apprehension that overwhelmed her every move prior to the BECs. Gid, fully expecting to nurse her for some time, lost his job in a matter of days. As she quickly gained strength and confidence in her own recovery, the controlled regime, water exercises and light weights, which were supposed to ease her into physical activity rapidly became effortless. After a few

weeks of monitoring and regular visits to Etherton at the clinic, all tests confirmed that Esther was healed and that her heart was functioning as well, if not better, as that of a woman far younger than she. Etherton gave her the okay to start more intensive activities knowing that she would have begun them whether he gave his blessing or not. Light strolls soon became brisk walks, the walks giving rise to jogs and then full out runs. Esther felt her body surging, as she easily adjusted to longer distances and rougher terrains foregoing the flat, even surface of their community track for the steeper inclines and rougher trails of their hillside neighbourhood. Gid, who had started out running with Esther, soon found himself out paced. He was cumbersome on the uneven ground. Her pace was effortless – she looked as if she could go on forever – and although Esther came home sweating and red faced, she was never winded or experienced any of the distress that she had before.

Before and after. Esther thought of her life in terms of before BEC and after BEC. Before was riddled with pain and anxiety. Before was a rapid, urgent decline, precipitated by an anomalous process, a decline that left her body drained and her spirit equally assaulted. Prior to the BEC treatment, walking the short distance from her bed to the bathroom left her winded and apprehensive. Of the time when she had been able to work, ironically as a minder, to run several miles a week, to make love with Gid, she had only halting memories. After was freedom and independence. She could walk, dance, run, make love, anticipate the future.

But small at first, a disrupted surface, a broken wave, began to bother her. It was the change in her need for sleep. Before, exhaustion and pain had caused Esther to

sleep upwards of twelve or thirteen hours a day. After, she had adjusted to the textbook eight hours without effort. And as her cardiac function improved, as her heart pumped red, well-oxygenated blood through her body, five then four hours became more than adequate. She would wake up, fully rested, hours before sunrise. Etherton attributed this phenomenon to what he called “the honeymoon phase” of recovery. Her body was overwhelmed, he said, with the newfound ability to function normally and it was compensating, making up for all the hardships that it had endured while she was ill. She was assured that she would soon level off, normalize in her need for sleep. But she didn’t quite accept his explanation. Exhilarating as her recovery was in its rapidity and its outcome, she was troubled by this dramatic change though she had to confess that she did feel good despite the lack, well, not really lack, but reduction in her need for sleep. Waking after a few hours certainly didn’t affect her energy level. In fact, she had increased her running two-fold. The honeymoon phase.

On her final visit to the clinic, Etherton reassured her. “Your heart is working so well, Esther. It just keeps increasing in its efficiency. The reduction in the need for sleep may be something that you’ll just have to get used to. Physiologically, there are no adverse effects. Who knows, you may be the prototype for a whole new way of being. Less sleep and no adverse effects. Certainly a doctor’s dream. Anyway, you don’t show any signs of sleep deprivation, and as you’ve said, you don’t feel tired. So just enjoy it.” Pulling out his stylus, he added, “If you really think you need it, I can prescribe a sleeping draught.”

Etherton and Gid were so positive about her recovery. Maybe they were right, Esther thought. Maybe she was just not used to being well, didn't recognize the sensations of a body that functioned as it was supposed to do. But as the weeks passed, it wasn't just the sleep, not just the decline in her need for rest. It was something else, something waking her up, a vague pulling, a pulsation external to her own heartbeat and yet paradoxically very much part of it. It was not discernable in any sense, or to any of her senses for that matter, other than an innate knowing of an unfamiliar, disparate presence. She had known, so well, her body when it was governed by an inefficient cardiac system, a waning heart contracting and releasing cyanosed blood to her starving organs. Now she did not recognize the foreign ebbs and flows, those indistinct rhythms that emanated in her, from her.

It was this asynchronous rhythm, the unfamiliar cadence that awoke her and kept her awake. No longer did she feel relaxed and renewed after her short-lived rests, but jumpy and excitable, unable to concentrate. There were times when she awakened after two or three of hours of sleep, to a disquieting anxiety. She paced at first, the metrical movement quelling the anxiety and subduing the pulsation that surged inside her. As the frequency increased, so did the intensity of her pacing, but it could no longer keep up with the tempo that surged inside. She was compelled to move faster and faster, to run. If she could only run fast enough, she could synchronize those dissonant patterns, align them to her own. Or align hers to them.

“Gid, I think there are some left behind.” She switched on the overbed halogens flooding their bedroom in a blue glow.

“Left behind? Some what?” He saw the sweat dripping from her strained face. She had fallen and a gash on her right cheek oozed bright red blood. “You were out running? You told me you just go downstairs, watch the telescreen when you can’t sleep. Oh, God, Esther.”

“Etherton said that they, the phages, would all be destroyed and excreted, you know through my lungs, liver, bladder, but I think there’s something there still, some residue, excess... doing something inside. Remember the spot on my lungs? They weren’t supposed to do anything else, change anything else. Just my heart, the vessels. I can’t sleep. It’s getting worse.” Her words bled one into the other.

They did another series of tests, put her in an ambiskin to see if any anomalies were present. Etherton reaffirmed that there were no residual BECs or component parts. “Nothing, Esther. There is nothing there. I think it’s stress. You’ve been through so much...” And on and on he went about the strain of her situation, the emotional toll, the overwhelming change in her and that even though it was positive, it was nonetheless, still stressful.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” she reiterated. “And if you can’t detect my heart as being foreign. How can you detect if there are any of those things left?”

“Your heart is not foreign. It is solely you. All the tests confirm that, Esther. You have been through a life altering procedure. Everything has changed. You need to get away. You need a distraction from the stress. Other than running, of course.” He upped her sleeping draft and suggested a talk therapist.

Esther is aware of Gid watching her. He watches her as she frantically straps on worn, dirty shoes missing the loops and not caring. She cannot get them on fast enough. Gid watches her through sad, pitying eyes. She hates his sympathy, but has no time to confront it. He is overwhelmed by the frenetic energy in Esther, but does not understand that it is more than her own energy and that it can only be quelled by running, by running longer and harder. He feels helpless and wants so badly to alleviate her distress - as well as his own - to take her in his arms, calm her, stop her from running. And he thinks he has a solution, he tells her, trying to slow his words to slow her. He has an idea he says, not solution, that sounds too removed, clinical as if she is a problem that needs solving. He doesn't want it to sound that way. Something, he says, to shift her focus, like Etherton recommended, to distract her, more than distract her. He doesn't want it to sound that way either. "Esther, you've got a new chance, a new life," he says. "A new life, Esther. *We* can have new life now. A child." She doesn't hear him, he thinks. She is bleeding from her feet and says she has to start running without shoes. She needs to build up more calluses to stop the blisters, the bleeding. It is as if he is an afterthought. But she has heard him.

Esther does not want a child, certainly not as her mother had her, intrauterine, unregulated, at liberty to gestate without alteration. No, she would not make that mistake. And she has no room for another heartbeat. Because something is always pulsing inside of her as it is. She knows this whether Etherton and Gid believe it or not. It doesn't matter what they think. Esther does not want to feel anything else growing within, gnawing, pulling at her.

No, there will be no child in her. She cannot form cells, tissues, organs. Nor will there be a child formed beyond her, floating in a prefabricated womb amongst other prefabricated wombs, able to look within and without simultaneously. She doesn't want to see a baby, her baby gestating in a foreign cavity as the phages gestate in her. She knows herself already as a foreign cavity. Becoming home.

And so Esther runs. Her feet sore, bleeding blisters that she punctured at first with a pin sterilized over a candle flame but now it no longer matters. She just pinches the raised bubbles of skin, or lets them burst as they will, shoves her feet into her shoes or leaves the shoes, and runs. Feet bleeding, shins on fire, hips searing, but nothing compared to the incessant gnawing, the asynchronous pulsing that she feels inside her, inside her. Gnawing and replacing, replacing but with what? Nothing, just replacing and replacing pacing pulsing, and replacing. A surging heart that will never die. The Queen of Hearts. Esther is a techno-Tithonus, a new wave Dorian Gray. Her heart will not degenerate. She has keepers to sustain it. Keepers who sustain themselves.

She must keep pace, at least keep pace, or they will pulse and pulse and pulse in their regeneration, regenerating Esther over and over. Like the brain holds the mind, so the heart, so the heart holds Esther.

And so Esther runs and runs and runs. To try to eradicate, extricate the phages. If she runs far enough and fast enough, faster than the phages replicate and replace, replicate and replace, she believes, has to believe, that she will be able to eradicate them, push them from her, a foreign birth.

Esther runs and runs and runs. Faster and farther, just keeping pace with them.

Statement of Poetics:
Connective Tissue

“An articulated world has an undecidable number of modes and sites where connections can be made.”

Donna Haraway, *“The Promise of Monsters: Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.”*

On writing. An evolving shifting balance between moralizing and the laissez-faire. Between humility and arrogance. Between fact and fallacy. The writer invites/provokes/seduces the reader to examine/to evoke/to de-evolve opinion. Poised somewhere on the continuum between overt preaching and utter indifference. The writer is shaped and shaping, moved and moving. Streamed and released. The writer migrates.

Poised somewhere on the continuum between fact and fallacy, *Connective Tissue* is an eclectic compilation of short stories, the range of which extends from themes such as gender, race, age, and politics to technology. Though differing in, for example, setting (one takes place at the top of a staircase, another from a rapidly eroding precipice), temporality (some are present day, some are future day), locale (some play out in our proverbial back yards and others are distant and alien), the stories contain a shared notion. This common impulse involves an obligatory negotiation, one which is inflected in ordinary lives and which is defined by a varied cultural fabric. The women who inhabit the stories - all the main characters are women - must confront outward notions of their own being while maneuvering through a fabric that often does not support or celebrate their personal definitions. Rita in “The Appointment,” for

example, knows that she is the best mother for her grandson, but must migrate through a legal system that endorses rules rather than common sense or compassion.

In presenting *Connective Tissue*, I as writer am aligned with Esther's mother in the story entitled "Physic." I do not attempt to confront the "big issues," but rather illustrate moments that are encroached upon by them. From the subtle eavesdropping encounter of Shiri in "Anticipation" to the harrowing experience of Jai in the piece entitled "Gel," the stories are meant to provoke, itch the skin, and, even for an instant, provide a fragment of connective tissue. I will use, primarily, the views of Salman Rushdie, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway to discuss *Connective Tissue* with respect to the multi-ethnic writer, im/migrant sensibility, and the techno-female.

First a comment on the title. I chose *Connective Tissue* for this project because it reflects the cautious joining and articulating that is inherent in negotiating particular events. The word *connective* evokes a tentative, indefinite stance, "ive" rather than the explicit "connection" or the authoritative "connector." As for tissue, in the biological sense, it is a grouping of alike cells which together perform a similar function. Tissue may also be a light, translucent covering. This definition is significant here, perhaps, in that the stories do not always offer clear-cut solutions. In "Physic," for example, Esther feels mentally and emotionally compelled to escape the entities that are gestating inside her by physically running from their asynchronous beat. Clinically, connective tissue refers to structures within the body that join or articulate two sometimes similar forms. Tendons connect muscle to muscle, for example. It may also refer to structures that connect dissimilar forms such as ligaments which join muscle to bone. *Connective*

Tissue, besides being what I hope is a pithy, inviting title in and of itself, serves to permeate a subtle alliance between the similar and dissimilar.

Beginning with the similar and dissimilar then, I offer a preliminary place by which to examine *Connective Tissue* relating to ethnicity and designation. In his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” Salman Rushdie writes, “It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (10). Coming to writing from my own *position* as immigrant and female and ethnic amalgam in contemporary Canada places me within the scope of varied and multiple labels and, simultaneously, in a series of ill-defined, ambiguous, perhaps even rootless, classifications. I have presented the term ethnic amalgam to describe a marriage, stable or unstable, of cultural and national resonances and roots. Many roots may readily entangle. And undulating through these many roots and enwrappings, the old adage – write about what you know – sifts up. Must I write only of the multi-ethnic state? Of anti/pseudo/neo/dis/ethnicity as a whole? Am I compelled to shore up or puncture the multicultural ideal?

As an illustration of this conundrum, I offer the following example. A response received concerning the piece, “Anticipation” was *I didn’t know that such an attitude about menstruation existed in that culture*. Certainly, this response is a reflection of a cultural perspective, but my initial reaction to this statement was that I was not writing about a specific culture or ethnicity. I was writing about a family diluted (not defined as good or bad) dealing with traditions old and changes new, who were negotiating the

flux and flow so to speak of this dilution. Ten-year-old Shiri anticipates a certain conclusion to her story and I anticipated a certain response to mine.

In Shiri's mind, her sister will be sorely admonished, the recipient of one of her father's famous *Don't Do* speeches much to her delight. My anticipated response to the story was that the reader would not define a certain ethnic or cultural group. I was, in retrospect, being rigid in my attempt to become culturally neutral. I wanted to project a sweeping and widely identifiable arc without acknowledging the traditions of families as cultural markers. Traditions arise within the family, remain within that milieu, and move out to the larger cultural context. The inverse is true as well. I was stepping away from my ethnic amalgam to an *unconnected* space anticipating responses rather than listening for and to them.

Minh-ha purports that, "If one tries to speak for everybody, what one has to say runs the risk of becoming a mere decoration," and adds that, rather, one should, "provide tools workable across struggles." With such a perspective in mind, questions and responses can be seen as tools, connections even if they differ from what one expects. Was the response to the situation in "Anticipation" a specific cultural thing? How was my anticipated response a specific cultural thing? Was it my failure as a writer or listener to make permeable the boundaries and to allow flow? If I had used names like Sharon, Angie, and Dad instead of Shiri, Anju, and Abba would the same comment have been reworded slightly? *I didn't know that such an attitude about menstruation existed in our culture*, 'our' suggestive of the North American mainstream. Would it have arisen at all? Or would it have been a non-issue? Would the

focus have been on the still-not-old-enough girl experiencing a sense of loss at being left behind? “It is not for you or me, Shiri”, says Abba. But what about Sharon and Dad? Redefining these questions as tools, rather than as obstacles or negatives, makes them workable across the similar and dissimilar. Rather than speaking for everybody, the text can become a point of connection which is not exclusive and can invite connection.

Rushdie rejects the notion that it is the exile or emigrant or expatriate writer’s obligation to write about his or her individual nationalism, culture, ethnicity. Regarding the term Commonwealth Literature, for example, he purports that it “does not exist” and that the “point of view that literature must be nationally connected or even committed” is unnecessary (68). I add the query here, what is, and who defines the ethnic, ethnicity? Do those references exist? In the multi-cultural Canadian city in which I write this essay, I often see adverts, posters, flyers that promise “ethnic foods and costumes” at a variety of cultural events. Ethnic comes to mean not ours and of another. Hamburgers and jeans, as normative, are not considered ethnic. I am not suggesting that one must reject or deny one’s affiliations, but one need not define one’s writing solely by them. An adroit joining can be articulated for, “Within each entity, there is a vast field and within each self is a multiplicity” (Minh-ha). Vast fields and multiplicities, similarities and dissimilarities extend the “write about what you know” maxim to “write about what you want to know, are compelled to know.” *Connective Tissue* is a fusion of what I know, what I want to know, what I am compelled to know...and what I think I know.

Within this potential knowing, the purpose of this project is to connect, however tenuously, the similar and dissimilar, to scrutinize points of articulation whether they be tendon or ligament-like and to invite/provoke/even seduce the reader to examine/to evoke to de-evolve opinion. Not to force open or destroy boundaries, who knows what might replace them (errant BECs, gelatinous computer keepers?) but to negotiate them. We may not have found ourselves perched at the top of a staircase aggravated by an itchy carpet, desperately needing to pee while anticipating the downfall of a rival, but I do suggest that we can relate to anticipating an event that does not manifest in the way that we hoped or expected. “Unlike things can be joined – and like things can be broken apart – and vice versa,” offers Donna Haraway (324) and in this rendering, we may define, find, or not find in some instances (a connection of sorts) a point or multiple singular points of commonality. Rushdie offers the verge of commonality as existing in the before. He writes, “It may be argued that the past is a county from which we all have emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity” (12). I would add here that along with the past, so too place is important. The cultural fabric of place, of home and land impinges on us, as does Rushdie’s past. Further, while we may be multiethnic, multicultural, singular ethnic, singular cultural or some other amalgamation, I suggest that we are all emigrants. And we reach, extend from an uncommon country, that unlike thing, to migrate an undefined future, a potential commonality.

In writing, I strive for movement in the piece as well as in myself and, hopefully, in the reader. Moving back from the exterior to the interior and back again,

repeating and reengaging, the notion of the migrant and migration, and its adjuncts transplacéd and transplacement as depicted in “Gel,” surface. The most obvious meaning of migrant is “a person who moves temporarily...from place to place; a person on a journey.” Biologically, the term also connotes passing “into a new condition or form...of a material or immaterial object, a phenomenon, idea etc. to pass or move away from its original or appointed place” (OED 2006). In *Connective Tissue*, I adopt the idea of the migrant from Rosi Braidotti’s study *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Braidotti distinguishes three different modes of being: the exile, the nomad, and the migrant. While her focus is on the nomad, I find the notion of the migrant and migration of particular relevance to my project, not only to the stories that have an immigrant focus, but also to those that at first glance appear separate from such experiences. Braidotti writes, “The migrant is no exile: s/he has a clear destination: s/he goes from one point to another for a very clear purpose” (22).

Here I propose to explore Braidotti’s definition regarding the migrant and the subsequent experience of migration. *Connective Tissue* is a rendering of the migrant experience not merely in keeping with the definition of an individual who moves to another space with a clear purpose, but the concept as a state of being, a perpetual state encompassing flux and flow. While the exile may find a new home or return to her place of origin and the nomad may continue to embrace her movement, the migrant exists within and outside of these realms. I suggest, therefore, that the migrant or

migration is not just related to the sense of moving physically, but also may evoke psychological, social, emotional, and even biological flux.

Minh-ha writes, regarding the migrant, “The self-in-displacement or the self-in-creation is one in which changes and discontinuities are accounted for in the making and unmaking of identity, and for which one needs specific, but mobile boundaries.” In the science fiction piece entitled “Gel,” Jai exemplifies the self-in-displacement. After committing an infraction against the state, i.e., not proffering the required daily information about herself to her computer keeper, Jai is what I term *transplaced*. She is moved physically, not of her own accord, to a distorted space, the concept and components of which are extracted from her nightmares. This is a place of vertiginous, gaping holes, and dark and slippery surfaces, a place of disequilibrium. Jai is also psychologically transplaced. She must trust the computer, the techno-organic apparatus for which she feels only contempt and which she believes has transplaced her to this nightmarish locale, to save herself. Her physical and psychological movements are further accompanied by the biological. Jai must ingest, inhale, fuse with the ominous gel.

The OED defines *trans* as, “across, to, or on the farther side of, beyond or over,” incorporating “a sense of ... on the other side of beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another,” and “beyond, surpassing, transcending” (OED 2006). I use the term *transplaced* as an adjunct to migration to include movement through or beyond a place: a rearranging physically or psychologically. Jai, who desires to breach the computer’s surface, “just pull it like the head of a blister,” gets her wish, altered

though it is. There is no Darwinian battle played out on Jai's floor as she anticipated. Instead, transplanted, she must breach the substance that is the computer with her own body echoing Haraway's "unlike things can be joined" (307). As she and we race toward the future, Rushdie's world – the past – is rearranged. The biological self that for us, present day, controls the technological realm is inverted in Jai's world. Even though it is fused with the organic, the computer anticipates Jai's keystrokes and overrides her commands. It is in control.

In "Sense of Snow," Miriam also embodies the self-in-displacement. Though she is not confronted and consumed, so to speak, by Jai's techno-ooze, she is consumed by the ramifications of her deception. Her family has immigrated to Canada, a place "full of opportunities," as her father espouses, but of secondary importance to Miriam's anticipation of snow, and a pink fur trimmed parka. The New World, however, betrays her; it is hot and humid and it is also the site where her own deception is fermented. *I like it here*. In order to maintain the equilibrium of self and family, Miriam perpetuates a lie that ultimately threatens to destabilize her family. Referring to her mother, she believes that, "She hated me for telling, for lying...I had betrayed her, and she was leaving me."

Certainly, Miriam is physically transplanted. She is rearranged so to speak in her new country and she is positioned between two poles, the desire for equilibrium and the pull and push of her new environment. "Changes and discontinuities," offers Minh-ha, "are accounted for in the making and unmaking of identity, and for which one needs specific, but mobile boundaries." However ambivalent Miriam is about the boundaries,

she does however attempt to negotiate them. She hates the lie of snow and the garter snakes and child-eating spiders, but she does like her teacher and her new found courage at averting the teasing, and she does like *not liking* her new home. She is, within the scope of her displacement, collecting and recollecting herself as she would recollect her left-behind things if opportunity afforded. Moreover, even though the adult Miriam describes the family as “tentative, provisional,” they do reunite in Canada and embrace the self-in-creation, as family, making and unmaking their lives in a place that may yet be called home.

Minh-ha’s self-in-creation is also applicable to the characters in “Shopping.” Bibi’s slap slunking is emblematic of her ability to side step assimilation and maintain her immigrant sensibility. Bibi does not divest herself of her *chappals* for rubber-ugly boots. She has her own standards for quality, even for feminine hygiene products which she hasn’t used in thirty years. More importantly, she invokes her former position as a chemist to negotiate the ins and outs of her experience at the pharmacy. Sweetgirl, for all her embarrassment regarding Bibi’s perspective, nevertheless, defends her. Is it racism, ageism that cause Harran to discount Bibi’s concerns about her medication? Is he looking for an ally in the “too-pale” granddaughter? Though Sweetgirl is a tampon-toting modern woman, she does align with Bibi. “She is always right,” she tells the pharmacist. The statement affirms her connection to Bibi as the two negotiate the time and space between them and between the cultural perspectives that inhabit them and that they, in turn, inhabit.

Moving from present day Bibi and Sweetgirl to the future Jai and Esther, the technofemale arises which/who has, at stake, reproductive agency. Though Jai does not gestate a gel baby (perhaps in a sequel), it does occur to her that besides ingesting, breathing, smothering herself with the substance, the next thing that the computer will ask her to do is have sex with the gelatinous muck. Far more ominous, in "Physic," reproduction has moved out of the bedroom and has become the proprietary notion of science and the state – for the good of its citizens, of course. "The code of science is anthropocentric and masculine," contends Haraway (307) and, anthropocentrism aside, I would add that so too is the state which controls the reproductive norms in Esther's society. Females are denied not just the biological experience of pregnancy and birth, but the intimacy and the emotional aspects as well. Social Watchers and corporate sponsored government ads campaign for extra-uterine gestation. It may not be a criminal offense to become pregnant, but Dr. Etherton has never known of anyone prior to Esther who was actually conceived and carried in utero. Additionally, though all reproductive materials are screened, sieved, sorted, it is only the female who is required to have the popcon device implanted, and the business of extra-uterine gestation is touted as a universal remedy as it provides jobs and shores up the economy.

And while we do not find our internal selves being ingested by mechano-phages which replace and restructure our vital organs and while we do not find ourselves hovering over a precipice, escape only offered to us by fusing with a techno-organic wall of gel, we do hover and fuse with the endless ream and stream of information a mere keyboard stroke away. Interfacing with the technological milieu, we are not

migrant here, not displaced, transplanted. This we believe. But are we really in control? We are still the handler of the material, the keeper of its workings. This we believe. But when *Error* bolts on to the screen, to whom do we attribute this flaw? Certainly not ourselves.

In "Physic," Esther's failing heart is regenerated by a series of bacterially enhanced computers or is it, as she speculates, computer enhanced bacteria. Because her mother did not adhere to the propaganda of the culture in which they existed, Esther gestated in her mother's womb, without state controlled interference. Not a crime, but... she was not tested, screened, or sieved, pre, intra or post-gestationally. This absence resulted in a fatal biological flaw that Esther learns may be rectified by the introduction of a cyber-entity into her body. Minh-ha writes that the "cyberworld is a different kind of colonization. Instead of colonizing by force, territories exterior to one's own, we are now colonizing and being colonized through monitors and passwords within our own territories." Esther is colonized by a fusion of organic computer materials. Within the territory of her own body, these entities replace and renew her ailing cardiac system. It is a sanctioned colonization, but not without its consequences. Is her heart "solely" her own as Etherton believes or is it an anomaly transplacing Esther to her original anomalous self? Haraway contends, "While in the supposed earthy space of our own interiors, we see non-humanoid strangers who are the means by which our bodies sustain our integrity and individuality, indeed our humanity in the face of a world of others. We seem invaded not just by the threatening non-selves...but more fundamentally by our own strange parts" (320).

While technology offers present and future salvation from myriad diseases, conditions, and states, it also has the ability to denature and render choice and possibility stagnant and potentially deleterious. Laundry detergents that offer to clean whiter than white have not cleaned lakes and rivers, but polluted them with phosphates. Hormones in birth control pills, meant to nourish the female sexual revolution, have been ascribed to diminishing fertility among men in the Great Lakes region. At the risk of becoming obsolete, we are petitioned to upgrade, add memory, bytes and gigs to our iPods, Nanos, MP3s, Blackberries, Tablets, all of which fuel a corporate consumptive state. Will we be inextricably bound to our techno-gods upgrading for the sake of upgrading, obsolescence a microbyte away? Will we become another Jai, forced to provide useless information for the sake of providing useless information? Or will we find ourselves part (literally) of a neo-genesis in which we allow technology to prescribe our futures and feast on our present? “Your heart is solely you,” says Etherton to Esther. It is her own foreign part.

I am not suggesting that technology is without merit, to do so would be rather myopic, but to offer that we need to question what drives technology. What drives it into our cells, tissues, and organs, is a crucial consideration. Returning to Braidotti’s definition of the migrant, she writes that she is purposeful and has a clear intention. Technology has the ability to divest the user of purpose and aim. Consider the increasing numbers of people who need therapy for their addiction to their Blackberries, colloquially known as Crackberries. In this space of techno-echo, the writer can invite/provoke/seduce the reader to examine/to evoke/to de-evolve opinion.

To challenge the apathy that is often sanctioned and conveniently available to us. Turn on our televisions, plug in our earpieces, turn up the volume on our radios, speed up our Internet connection, trample our keypads. And mute the voice, the thoughts in our heads. Information comes to us as fast as we are willing to pay for it or to claim it. Reams and reams of nouns, numbers, names, places, dates, solutions to problems we don't even have to define (someone else has done it for us). And then what?

Though not all the characters in *Connective Tissue* migrate through the technoworld, all of the main characters in the work, as the reader will no doubt have noted, are female and it would be remiss not to comment on this repetition. I did not set out intentionally to construct stories with proprietary female character (though I am very comfortable with this outcome), but *she* has sifted up through my internal editing programme. The stories are not female centered because I am an overt feminist or feel a strong desire to eradicate all exclusive language; in fact, I quite like "ottoman" and "sportsmanship." However, my primary characters *are* exclusively women. Younger as in the story, "Anticipation," older as in "The Appointment" and "Palette," and somewhere in between as in "Just Breathe" and "Physic." The realization of the recurring female begs the questions, is she the same woman written over and over? Subconscious feminist echolalia? Does she migrate through each story? Is she identifiable as such? Or is she a distinct entity? Perhaps a fragment, a fracture? Is there balance, a place or a point of flux where boundaries of one character touch another, cross over, flow to another and yet remain intact, still fused as themselves.

I suggest that the females in *Connective Tissue* are not the same female written over and over. Certainly, as creator of the characters, this was a concern - that I was reformatting the same character to fit a particular scenario. I am confident that this is not so. Of course, the women do have some qualities, concerns, and ideas in common. There are points of flux and flow, some of which I would offer are exclusively female, i.e., labour, menstruation, intrauterine gestation. However, I do not see Jai confronting Anju, or Bibi worrying about a Sears Special or a randy boss. The female voice migrates through the stories, but not in the form of a single entity.

The significance of the recurrent female matters within the context of migration, the migratory notion as applied to the writer, certainly. Converting, reading the outside world, the writer becomes a migrant filtering the body to thought to word to vibrations to thrummings, projecting fragmented surfaces and realizations which emanate from the newly formed. "Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps," Rushdie writes (12). The writer aggravates flow, migration, to the reader with all the barriers and borders that curtail, dismantle, and usurp meaning. Certainly, the female characters in *Connective Tissue* highlight many experiences that are solely female and many of the stories and situations would not translate, should not translate to a male voice. This does not preclude the stories from evoking a response from a male reader. And the writer must allow – no, let go of – meaning once it has been delivered to the page. Multiple or singular meanings can occur no matter the sex of the

characters or for that matter the reader. Similar to dissimilar. The meaning is no longer the writer's but has passed to the recipient, facilitating the connectedness or releasing. Both are still versions of connection. To allow flow. To enable balance. To connect. To articulate the disconnections.

In *Connective Tissue*, I envision varied cultural, class-based, gender-defined moments. The moments are enacted in high-stakes crises manifest in otherwise ordinary lives and are fraught with decisions, choices that evoke the concept of the migrant and migration in a female context, but not necessarily a female-based milieu. The female self-in-displacement and self-in-creation surfaces and submerges, fuses and runs and runs, is celebrated and is scorned. The usual is disrupted, transplanted to the unusual. Surfaces and points of contact are articulated and made permeable, if only for an instance, and articulation is rendered, similar and dissimilar. Despite the heady-ready acquisition of information in our techno-awashed spaces, it is easy to find ourselves in a *disconnective* position. But if we migrate, we are not static, we are not inert – not just a mere echo of the disconnected world. If we migrate, we are not crumbling pillars of salt. We may just carry just a scrap of connective tissue with us.

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VITA AUCTORIS

Delailah M. Khan was born in London, England and emigrated, as a child, to Windsor, Ontario. She attended Kennedy Collegiate Institute and the University of Western Ontario. She holds a Master's Degree in Education and obtained a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and Creative Writing in 2004. Currently, she is a candidate for the Master's Degree in English: Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and anticipates graduating autumn, 2006.