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Learned Helplessness: A collection of short stories (Original writing).

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UMI®
LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

a collection of short stories

by

Scott Randall

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

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1998

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First Impressions

Yesterday was the last day of April, and as I was driving from the post office to the grocery on my weekly errands excursion, I noticed that the bulb behind my tachometer had burnt out. It was no problem, really - just another small errand to add to my day. And so after cashing my GST cheque and exchanging the last of the American money left over from a weekend trip to Detroit, I drove to the Volkswagen dealership.

Haruki smiled a smile as soon as I came in the door.

"Mr. Zwaigenbaum, it is, as it always is, a genuine pleasure to see you."

"Good afternoon, Haruki."

"Surely it is not yet time for another oil change?"

"No, no," I assured him. "It's just that the bulb behind my tachometer seems to have burnt out."

"I am sorry, Mr. Zwaigenbaum. There really is no reason for such shoddy workmanship. No excuse at all. We can give you a full refund for the car right here and now if you wish."

"Goodness, no, Haruki. Let's just replace the bulb, shall we?"

I saw no reason to cause a fuss; Haruki wasn't entirely to blame and it is, after all, a random universe. Nations
crumble, new civilizations rise and bulbs burn out. This is just the way of the world, I told myself as I took a seat in the waiting area.

The dealership never fails to offer a broad range of reading materials. The newest of Newsweeks, New Quarterlys and New Womans were all right there on the table before me. I chose the Travel section of the weekend Globe and Mail and readied myself for an enlightening article on Brazil, but found I could not concentrate.

Something was wrong. A feeling, a sixth sense, bad karma, vibes — call it what you will — but I couldn't get over the uneasy sensation that no one was looking at me. I put the paper down, waited a moment and was certain. I'm not being watched, I told myself absolutely.

A quick glance behind the counter got to the bottom of things. Someone had hung a calendar of French Impressionists next to the warranty guarantee "We Will Give You A Full Refund For Your Car Right Here And Now If You Wish." That Manet fellow's "Bar at the Folies-Bergere" was pictured above the twenty-nine blocks of February, and sure enough, there was that blasted barmaid with her eyes, eyes that didn't seem to follow me where ever I moved.

This won't do at all, I shouted to myself. Here it was, nearly May, and someone had let that barmaid stare out condescendingly since February. Something must be done, I thought, and I'm just the man to right this wrong.

I stood firmly in front of the counter, cleared my throat
and brought Haruki over with a two-fingered wave.

"I am sorry about the delay, Mr. Zwaigenbaum. Perhaps it would be more convenient to simply replace the car for you. We can give you the newer model and throw in air conditioning, of course."

"Haruki. That doesn't concern me right now. What does concern me is the calendar hanging on your wall."

He looked over his shoulder, turned once again to me and apologized.

"You disapprove of the French Impressionists, Mr. Zwaigenbaum. You are right; it is an eyesore beyond forgiveness."

"No, no, Haruki," I interrupted. "Once again, you have misunderstood me. Although, I must admit, I'm not overly enthusiastic about all that brush stroke foppery, what's troubling me at present is the fact that someone has neglected to turn the pages of your calendar. I mean, what happened to March, for goodness sake?"

At long last, understanding swept across his face.

I returned to the waiting area satisfied. I mean, if it hadn't been for me, April, too, would have been ignored. Who knows how long that barmaid would have been allowed to lean on the counter waiting impatiently with that blank look of boredom all over her face?

Twenty minutes later, I departed from the Volkswagen dealership with a new bulb behind my tachometer, satisfaction, and a fresh understanding of Brazil.
That was yesterday.

Today, I must admit to myself that I was, essentially, being dishonest with Haruki. Today I sit in my brown vinyl armchair, I replay the entire event in my head and I am not at all satisfied. When it comes right down to it, I was being dishonest with myself. I was being dishonest with myself throughout the whole ugly incident and that, like burnt out bulbs, will not do.

The truth of the matter is that I've had an inner quarrel of long standing with that barmaid. You see, whomever Manet modeled this barmaid after bears a striking resemblance to a young lady I fancied, once upon a good many years ago. Her name was Annie Price and I fancied her from the first moment I saw her with a scalpel in her hand. Annie was my lab partner in undergraduate Biology, and she and I dissected good many a frog together. And mice? Oh, we went through our fair share of mice too. Our lab coats matched, there was fire in her eyes and by third year, we were vivisecting and poking pigs, calves and snakes.

Only later did I discover that she had been conducting rabbit tests with a second year Chemistry student all through our courtship. Only later did I learn the smell of formaldehyde had misled me. Only later did I learn that women, like first impressions, were not always to be trusted. I was shamed, yes, but I didn't let her adulterous ways interfere with our roles as lab partners. Twice a week, I continued to read anatomy aloud from our texts while she
lifted and prodded the innards of several species, but the wonder of it was gone. My head didn't thrill when she passed me the scalpel and our arms touched; I was, I must admit, just going through the motions for the sake of formality.

At the end of the semester, we parted ways and I haven't since seen the likes of Annie Price.

And so, I probably wasn't being fair with Haruki. He really is a fine fellow - sends me birthday, Christmas and Canada Day cards ever since I purchased the car three years back - and he had no way of knowing that the sight of the barmaid would keep me from sleep for a whole thirty-six hours. Thirty-six hours of rehearsing what I would say to Annie Price the barmaid if I ran into her today, fifteen years after we cut into our last specimen together.

Would I tell her I never married? Well, it would probably come up in conversation, but I wouldn't want to open with that information. I could just look at her sadly and say "Annie, I think we should see other people." That'd let her know that I was over her, but that the pain she caused me had turned me bitter and unpleasant.

No, I wouldn't want to give her the satisfaction.

No.

What I would do is walk calmly up to the bar and sit myself in front of her. I'd make sure to stride directly towards her at a confident, unhurried pace and I'd make eye contact with her as soon as I entered the banquet hall to ensure that she was looking only at me.
Where is the Bar at the Folies-Bergere, I wonder. In fact, where is the Folies-Bergere? I must remember to look this up in an atlas at some point. I'd like to exactly locate Brazil, too.

Anyway, I'd sit myself down in front of barmaid Annie and keep my stare steady until I saw that wrinkle of recognition form on her forehead. I'd lean forward and brush the bangs from her eyes softly.

"Annie," I'd say in victory.

Her puffy eyes wouldn't reach tears, but she wouldn't be able to hide the redness there, either.

"May I get you a drink," she would suggest as she tried to swallow down her regret.

"Ah, yes. Please do," I'd reply, but I wouldn't name a drink. No, I'd wait the five or six uncomfortable beats until she was forced to break the silence.

"And what may I get for you?"

I'd wait another couple beats and then toss off "oh whatever." Ha. How do you like that, you filthy trollop? Do you know how it feels to squirm now? Ha, ha, ha.

Ha.

And then I'd drink down whatever beverage she placed in front of me in one swift motion, bid her good evening and walk to the exitway of the crowded banquet hall. Once there, I'd stop, standing with my back to her and then I'd glance over my shoulder for the briefest moment. I'd show her that I could still smile sadly and I'd leave.
Now that I've fully played out how the scenario will go, I feel much better. I have gotten over her and I feel much better. Tired, yes. One cannot go without sleep for thirty-six hours without a little fatigue, but I now feel that I can finally get some peace in sleep. I won't dream about her and she won't be my first thought upon waking, all because Haruki and his coworkers failed to turn the page of a calendar. I really do owe that Haruki a debt of gratitude. Tomorrow, I will go and thank him in person.

Right now, though, I'm going to sleep; I'm going to lay my head down in my bed and today will turn into tomorrow as easily as February turns into March, March into April and April into May. I will sleep and when I awake, I will seek out a travel agent who will sketch out a trip to Brazil for me. I will be off to somewhere I cannot locate on a map and I will only once look over my shoulder with a sad smile.
Two Ends Of Time Are Neatly Tied

I was at the kitchen table filling in the square boxes of the Saturday crossword while I waited for Maggie. She'd called around ten to ask if we'd being going out that evening and I'd responded that I was still too sleepy to make any kind of decision. This was a lie, mind you. I'd decided to break it off with Maggie earlier in the week. I was stalling the news until I could come up with a suitable explanation. There was a tangible reason behind my decision, you understand; I just hadn't thought through the matter fully yet. Couldn't put my finger on it.

Music from an apartment somewhere above mine made its way through my kitchen window. It was some chamber piece that I couldn't identify. That isn't to say that I can identify many chamber pieces. In my neighborhood, all of the buildings are plotted right next to each other, so you can eavesdrop on the lives around you as much as you want just by sliding up a window. I don't care so much for the shouted conversations or the flat discussions, but I like picking up the sound of strangers' stereos. It's an odd pleasure listening to this stolen music, like receiving a generous compliment from a casual acquaintance, I guess. Maybe that comparison doesn't
explain much for you, but I like it.

Although I wasn't horribly anxious waiting for Maggie, the music had a calming effect. I remember thinking that I should track down the composer's name and pick up a copy for myself. Never did, though. Finding the exact source of the music would have been near impossible, and what would I have done even if I could figure out whose stereo I was listening to? It's not as if I could just walk up, knock on the door and request this information from a complete stranger.

I gave up on the crossword and got up for more coffee. Maggie was, as was her habit, later than she said she'd be. She wasn't ever late, really. She was just later. She'd make it for the dinner reservation or the movie, but she rarely left enough of a window for drinks at the bar or coming attractions. Was that sufficient reason for breaking up with someone? Probably not, I guessed. No, that would have come across wrong. I'd have seemed shallow and uncompromising. I really liked the coming attractions, though.

I'd read in the Globe that tardiness was telling of one's character. Apparently people who are constantly late on you don't think too highly of you. I wondered whether or not citing this article to her would help.

Just as I was thinking this through, the phone rang and it was her. She was at the delicatessen downstairs getting us a bit of breakfast. Did I want a cheese bagel or an onion bagel? There was a lot of loud activity in the background: couples picking up their weekly groceries and kids crying to
their mothers for ice cream. Maggie wanted to know if I needed anything picked up while she was there; although I was low on cream and I had almost no milk, accepting her offer at this point seemed wrong to me.

When I think of Maggie now, what I remember strongest are her attempts to save time. Her call from the delicatessen, for example. There were better examples, though. Once she wanted to learn American Sign Language and Shakespearean sonnets, so she tried to acquire both at once. Patiently, she would look up every word and practice the sweeping gestures of "when my love swears that she is made of truth" and hundreds of other lines. Another time, she copied out the Declaration of Human Rights with her left hand. These dual lessons were practical only in theory, of course. In the end she hadn't learned either task well.

On our second date, Maggie the Timesaver told me about her seventh grade science fair project. She told me she had constructed a papier maché volcano and filled it with coke and pennies. Although I have no good reason to doubt her, that memory always strained plausibility for me. I wondered how crafted my own memory stories from that second date were and why we were telling childhood memories at all. It was frustrating, really. I'd spent many second dates with many women reciting childhood memories and I didn't rightly know why that would be.

When Maggie did eventually make her way upstairs, I managed to avoid my news for quite some time. We finished the
crossword together and nibbled on breakfast. We smoked and 
listened to my neighbour's music. It was late afternoon 
before my thoughts betrayed me and I explained my need to 
split. I told her about the floating coffin and the broken 
mirror.

the floating coffin

The priest at my Grandmother's funeral made a thoughtless 
remark. My father didn't hear it and I never repeated it.

Grandmother had turned senile in such a short period of 
time after Grandpa died. It was as if his passing allowed her 
mind to just slip. The senility must have been there for a 
while, but it was death that opened the gate in her head. 
We'd get phone calls in the middle of the night from the 
police. They picked her up window shopping at three in the 
morning. She had wandered into a breakfast diner without 
shoes and was demanding service. One patient constable had to 
use the identification in her purse to track my family down 
because she couldn't or wouldn't provide even her name after 
she was arrested for shoplifting a carton of bubble gum.

Following that incident, she lived alternately with my 
family and my uncle's family. Dad and his brother were 
looking into a retirement home half-heartedly. There were a 
series of court dates to go through and waiting lists to wait 
out. Seizing control of another person's life entails a 
considerable amount of red tape.
My dad treated his mother with kindness and patience. In fact, our whole family did. Dad had lost a brother while he was in his teens and he had lost a daughter, my sister, when she was only eight. One grows to accept a certain amount of sadness after a while, and we were well prepared for looking after the senile. There was no point in getting upset just because Grandma let her dinner run down the front of her shirt. Dad wasn't dramatic about changing his mother's diaper. Don't get me wrong, we weren't at a point where we could joke about these things, but we could muster resigned smiles for one another while she screamed profanities across the dinner table.

One evening while I was watching her, she put her hand through the mirrored glass top of an end table. I'd parked her wheel chair towards the television and sat on the couch to watch with her. There was some show that I'd been looking forward to, but I can't remember what it was. I flipped the channels during commercial breaks and set grandma off. She reached over the side of her chair, grabbed a lamp by its neck and brought it down heavily. Her arm went through the glass top along with the lamp and the shards of mirror caught the lamp light as they fell. The noise brought Dad into the room; he grabbed her wrist tightly and examined all the cuts. There was a great deal of blood, but she hadn't hurt herself that seriously.

Once he realized that Grandma wasn't in any danger, Dad allowed himself anger. The more he yelled, though, the more
he realized that none of what he was saying was getting through to her. His frustration eventually silenced him and gave her time to respond. "I hope all your children die before you." Dad unlocked the brakes of her chair and took her into the bathroom to wash away the blood. He sat with her in the guest room until she fell asleep and then he telephoned his brother.

The name of her retirement home was BallyCliffe. Dad went for an hour every day for the two months she was there and he made all the funeral arrangements himself. I was among the male grandchildren to carry her coffin from the funeral home to the waiting car and from the waiting car to the open grave. It's a strange role. You're expected to carry the body solemnly but without outwardly expressing mourning. At fourteen, I was the youngest of the pall bearers, so I followed the others' lead. I lifted, walked and tried to place my thoughts elsewhere.

This was in early spring and it had been raining for over a week. We six had to ignore the weather. Blank like Stoics, we conveyed our grandmother ahead to the priest at the grave side while our families mulled around the cemetery entrance, smoking cigarettes and trying their best to make conversation. We bent and placed the coffin on a pulley system of straps that then lowered her into the water-filled hole. Down inside the hole, her coffin floated on muddy water and drifted from one interior wall to the next. It bumped against a wall, changed course and then slowly came to a stop. I guess the
priest felt he had to say something to us; it wasn't a sight one sees everyday. He said something about the power of nature, but let his voice trail off before he finished the thought. I was grateful that my father didn't hear the remark and I never spoke of it to any of my family.

the broken mirror

I was actually out with Jeff closing a bar near the gym we went to, but my parents thought I was dead.

Jeff and I had bought discounted student memberships to exercise through our summer before university. His girlfriend lived in another city and mine had disappeared back in May. She had phoned one evening to tell me she wanted different things than I did and I hadn't spoken with her since. I suppose Jeff thought keeping me busy would help. We'd spend two hours pulling machines, pushing machines, lifting weights, rowing and cycling. Then we'd have a beer at the bar down the road. We'd do this every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

My body hurt almost constantly that summer, but I was grateful for the physical stress. It would have been very easy to confine myself to my room in the basement every night after work until September dragged me elsewhere. I remember feeling that this was all I wanted to do. In the room, I could replay my four high school years with her repeatedly, going through each of our days together in the smallest detail. The basement room alone held an infinite number of
memories.

It was a Wednesday when she called, two months into the summer and two months after she broke away from me. I was unpacking my work clothes from my knapsack and packing my gym clothes when the phone rang. Our conversation was strained at first. After all, this was the person I'd been thinking about continuously for two months and hearing her outside of my head was unreal. She claimed to just be saying hello and I didn't question my good fortune. Talk of summer jobs led to talk of family led to talk of books led to talk of movies. Had she seen such and such, I asked. No, she hadn't, but, in fact, she was going to see it that very evening on a date.

She was going out on a date and she chose that day to call and just say hello. I let myself tell her to have a good evening and I said good-bye. Afterwards, I checked my watch and wondered how I would ever fill the hour until Jeff came to pick me up.

My mother knocked on my door and asked if she could bring my laundry in. I had a habit of leaving my clothes in the dryer and taking out only what I needed. So if mother or father wanted to wash their own belongings, they had to first remove and fold mine. She saw that I was on the verge of tears, as she put it, and she wouldn't leave until we talked. Although her concern was well intended, relating the telephone conversation just made me feel worse. I declined her offers of tea, and mother left me alone with another half hour before Jeff's arrival.
I sat on the floor and looked at the telephone. I could have called Sophie back, but I kicked the phone instead. It felt good, so I kicked it again, amazed at the effect. I hit my wall and then laid into my bookshelves. The two months of building up the muscles in my arms and back were being put to full use. I punched the dressing mirror on my closet door, making a crack that ran its entire length. I struck again and again until the mirror lay in pieces on the floor. There was blood, of course. There was blood on the broken pieces of mirror and there was blood over my hands. I still have small scars across the knuckles of my right hand to this day. Most of my wounds, however, were just superficial cuts that bled a lot.

And then Jeff was there. As he usually did, he had let himself in through the side door and he had seen the last of my fight with the mirror. He smiled and asked if perhaps Sophie called. I knew how foolish I must have looked, so I laughed too. We decided to skip the gym and just go straight to the bar, so I hurriedly pushed the pieces of broken mirror into the closet.

Alcohol, talking to Jeff, and a flirtatious waitress further helped me realize how silly my reaction to Sophie's date was. We toasted Jeff's girlfriend, we toasted the gym, and I think we toasted the waitress at one point. After last call, Jeff dropped me at home and there was a police car in the driveway. My parents had found the broken mirror and the blood and assumed the worst. I understood that there are
worse things than losing your girlfriend at nineteen years old. I used the front entrance to the house and apologized.

Maggie asked if this meant what she thought it meant and I explained that I was sorry. I spend too much time apologizing, but then, there's a lot to apologize for. She told me she didn't want to see a movie with me and said she was going to leave. I nodded and apologized again. The truth of the matter is, I didn't want her to go and leave me alone with my thoughts, but I could hardly request this of her. She moved to hug me and I held her head in my hands close to my chest. Pulling away, she laughed and said she'd be fine, really. She'd call me in a week or so.

I ended up going to the movie, anyway. I guess I wanted two hours away from myself and away from thinking about the day. I got there well in advance of the trailers and the theatre was nearly empty when I took my seat near the back. There was a teen-aged couple in aisle seats up front, laughing and flicking popcorn at the screen. Three rows up from me, a young father was holding a toddler in his lap and speaking in a child's voice.

"Wha's tha? Is that you hat?"

He put the red wool cap on his own head.

"Oh. Who's wearing your hat?"

The toddler giggled and lunged for his head.

"You're just too smart for Daddy."

This went on for a while. He'd put her hat on his own
head, she'd grab it off and they'd both laugh. Occasionally, he couldn't stop himself and he hugged her warmly. I guessed he was in his late twenties, just a few years behind me.

As the house lights went down, a tall woman walked down the aisle. She bent over and made her way over to the father and child. After hellos in excited whispers, she sat and the infant climbed onto her lap.

The baby only made it about a half hour into the movie before she fell asleep. At the end, I stayed through all of the credits like I always do, and I watched the two parents gather their belongings. He pulled the red wool hat over his sleeping daughter's head and then gave her a gentle kiss. His wife watched, smiled and also got a peck on the cheek before the three of them left the theatre.

I took my time walking home. The movie hadn't made much of an impression on me and it was the baby that filled my thoughts. Awake, she had been all activity, but asleep, she was stillness itself. What kind of mother would Maggie make, I wondered. She'd probably slow down a bit. She'd have to.

My explanation to her wasn't fair, I knew. Like many things, I guess explanations are what you make of them, but no, my two memories probably weren't sufficient. What I was trying to express was something about passion, the kind of passion that I knew existed and I knew we didn't have. I guess whatever it was I was trying to say got lost in the two anecdotes, though.

I stopped in at the delicatessen in my building and
bought cream before I went upstairs. I'd sleep in tomorrow. That's what Sundays are for, after all. I'd wake up late, sit around in my night clothes, do the crossword and enjoy some coffee with cream.
Sunday's Routine

Tub toys bobbed and weaved past one another in a cloudy hot mist, never colliding in their furious activity. Amazing, David thought, amazing.

He stood leaning over the side of the bathtub and turned the hot and cold faucets off just as the floating Fisher Price daisy was being sucked under the waterfall. Activity slowed and the toys swayed calmer with the dying waves.

David Sherwood stared. The daisy, a plastic yellow Big Bird, a purple tugboat, a smiling killer whale, an octopus cup and a goldfish funnel. Quite a crowd.

What is it about a Sunday afternoon that makes one so pensive? He looked at his mirror reflection and rolled his eyes.

As Amanda was out of the house walking the baby, David had felt free to turn up the music in the living room as loud as he wanted. The two women in his life took an afternoon walk to the nursery by the park every Sunday afternoon, a routine David knew they enjoyed as much as he enjoyed these weekly bath musicals. The homemade compilation of Gershwin, Porter and Berlin hummed through the house.

What is it about a Sunday afternoon that makes one so
Nostalgic?

David sank down in the water until he and the toys were at eye level. Floats my boat, he thought to the opening underwater strains of "Let's Do It." Let's fall in love, indeed.

"Goldfish in the privacy of bowls do it."

By his right foot at the end of the tub, Amanda's unused purple bath beads sat in an unopened plastic jar. They were a wedding shower present from who knows whom, a small token from a friend of a friend to celebrate the end of seven years' dating. Amanda's roommate and oldest friend Terry was so overjoyed to see the engagement coming to an end she invited several guests Amanda hardly knew, acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances. Apparently the party was great over-crowded fun, pink roses of kleenex all over Terry and Amanda's apartment.

David long ago drank or smoked or spent all of his stag party gifts. All the guests had been to David's first stag, they all had known his first wife and they all had been to her funeral; all of which made the festivities less than festive. Pity the widower Sherwood who is kidding himself into replacing Diane DeSousa-Sherwood.

Oh well, David thought. Water under my bridge.

He stamped his feet on the bathmat and knotted a towel around his waist before leaving the bathroom.

"My story is much too sad to be told" started as David walked into his study.

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"Mere alcohol doesn't thrill me at all."

He poured out two fingers of the first bottle in his cabinet and grabbed a cigar from his desk top.

Back in the water with his rye and a Habana Banches cigar, David added straight hot water to warm up the tub. Smoke and steam drifted and mingled together.

Thinking about the arrival of Stacey thirteen months ago and the troublesome nine months before that made this bathing ritual all the more enjoyable. What other excuse could a grown man have for possessing and playing with bath toys? What easier way is there to love openly and without pause? David wondered what his wife and baby were doing right at that moment. Probably at the nursery by this time, picking up flowers individually and smelling each one. Yellow carnations, pink peonies, white tulips or, red roses for me?

He submerged the goldfish funnel and raised it above himself, splashing water on his stomach and laughing. An infant can change everything overnight; seven hours of labour and David found himself laughing at the smallest of wonders. Folding warm sleepers and nappies from the dryer every second day was a celebration, a tiny fistful of cheerios was immediate fun and clucking your tongue was the best joke ever told.

"But if, Baby, I'm the bottom, you're the top."

What else was there to be happy about on a Sunday afternoon? The bright flowers that would soon be brought for their kitchen table, a fresh centerpiece replaced week after
week. Amanda was great at small pleasant gestures right from the day they met. Hardcovers for no particular reason, newspaper clippings she knew he would find interesting, and sophisticated innocent jokes. His daughter's mother. David knew Amanda would never be anything less than honest with him. He knew she would always be fair and courteous and interesting and beautiful in so many ways, but convincing himself of their love was a strain. With effort, David was able to restrict showing the strain to Sunday afternoons. He knew he could hide sadness indefinitely, but thinking of it made him sink. She deserved better and she didn't even know it.

"A worthless check, a total wreck, a flop."

David sipped his rye.

Careful not to spill, he sat up in the tub and examined the bath beads. Not really safe to have around Stacey, he thought. This was also something new to his personality, the unspecified worry he started carrying with him thirteen months ago. If the baby's nap went longer than forty-five minutes, David would go check on her breathing. If the cat didn't eat his dinner five minutes after it was poured, David would lift the bowl onto the kitchen counter. If the Fisher Price monitor wasn't with Amanda, David had it strapped to his belt at all times. The adult human body is fragile enough, an infant's body is a twenty-four hour concern.

The back label of the jar read "Your lifetime is exciting and full, bathtime should be relaxing." Indeed.

Diane DeSousa-Sherwood never relaxed in the tub, bath
time was just another opportune location for passion. As was the tent in Mattawa, as was the Camaro in Whitevale, as was the gazebo in a public park. And after the physical? David remembered these moments just as easily - the tub became the site of comfortable debate and silly conversation.

"Too hot not to cool down."

He shook out a bead into his palm and examined the purple hazard. Violets had been Diane DeSousa-Sherwood's favourite flower, purple her favourite colour. David blew a cloud of Cuban smoke at the floating plastic daisy, propelling it away from himself.

Stay in the present, he told himself as he leaned over the side of the tub to the toilet and flushed away the cigar; the baby will be back in the house within half an hour. David remembered that first sight of baby Stacey, a full unashamed excitement that he associated with Diane DeSousa-Sherwood and that he hadn't felt since her passing. Fragile.

At the funeral there had been wreaths and arrangements and potted purple violets. All of the violets were from David.

"Should I order cyanide or champagne?"

Questions of that order were common for the year after the funeral; they came to him less and less after David met Amanda. Amanda and he dated, he thought this was a positive step towards moving on. Movies every Tuesday and dinner out every Friday evening. Soon one of them was cooking for the other every Sunday evening. After a suitable period of
dating, Saturday nights were spent staying over at his apartment and then came scheduled weekends away every four months. Throughout these routines, David thought of his first wife less and less; he became comfortable with Amanda. One must get past mourning, right? One cannot expect every relationship to be the same, one must not expect excitement twenty-four hours a day.

"And I stop before I begin."
Porter from the living room and David heard his wife speaking to his daughter.
"Daddy's in the bathroom. Go get Daddy. Take this to Daddy."
David listened to his baby walking and sank down in the water. Her round face peeked around the open washroom door and he splashed up.
"Pumpkin."
A red carnation was gripped in her pudgy fingers, held out for her father.
"Is this for me? I'm a lucky guy."
Once David had the flower in his own hand, Stacey's attention was diverted to the plastic toys she knew belonged to her.
"Daddy's been playing with your tugboat."
He leaned forward and blew bubbles in the bathwater.
"Dadadadadadadadada."
Amanda's voice came into the washroom before she did.
"What are you doing? What are you and Daddy doing?"
She entered and they began their conversation through the baby, a habit they had picked up thirteen months ago.

"Did you give Daddy his red carnation?"

"Yes. What a lucky guy Daddy is."

"Are you and Daddy having fun?"

"We're blowing bubbles."

"Did you tell Daddy all about our walk? We had fun."

"Did you and Mommy buy some flowers for the kitchen too?"

"We bought a pot of chrysanthemum."

"A gold flower."

Amanda smiled at her husband and paused. A gold flower, she held her arms out for Stacey.

"Come on, we'll let Daddy finish his bath."

Alone in the washroom again, David finished off his drink. He did love his wife, he told himself. Were the many sweet things he said during his second wedding speech true? Probably.

He patted himself down with a floral print towel, studied his reflection in the mirror and thought "Heigh-ho, alas, and also lack-a-day."
According To Hoyle

Bloody Knuckles

Although the play and rules of the game now escape my memory, I can vividly recall the consequences of losing at a hand of Bloody Knuckles. The number of points lost in any given hand became the number of times one's opponent was allowed to bash the less fortunate gamesman's knuckles. If Hoyle ever considered such a game, I'm sure that he'd limit the instrument of reward and punishment to the fifty-two deck itself.

"Align the pack," he'd say "into a tight tight tight pile and bring it down sharply upon the back of your opponent's hand."

The rules, as followed by my eight-year-old self, my older sister, and boys from around the neighborhood, permitted the use of any heavy object. Defeat could be administered with a sizable paperback of historical fiction from mother's bookshelf, a CCM bicycle pump, a metal precision ruler or any rock from our back patio garden. By far the most effective tool, however, was the kitchen knife.

And the best kitchen knife in our house was, by far, the Henkels carver that sat in its own wooden block atop our
kitchen counter. It had a lacquered hardwood handle and a long flexible blade, and it was my sister's favourite. Holding the very end of the blade to get as much bounce out of the metal as possible, June made me feel every foolish discard. The title of Victor has never meant more.

Mother would never have allowed her children to compete in a contest of this sort had she known the full extent of the rules. Despite what logic tells my memory, my father and I spent a Sunday afternoon carding and discarding on the back patio deck. Dad wasn't one to concede a point and he wasn't one to let a child win at a card game. He'd have thought purposely losing would have been bad form, a poor lesson for any son to learn. Every hand he won, he again and again jokingly went along with the punishment that was suited to the game. He'd hold the deck high at arm's length, bring it down quickly, and then stop just above my hand. The deck would barely brush the back of my hand for every one of his smart plays and my foolish plays.

By the fourth or fifth hand, he was going to lengths to demonstrate how little effort was put into defeating me. He discarded absently while commenting on the weather. He propped his feet up on a facing lawn chair and stretched out to get some sun.

I remember his feet. They were sitting right next to me, after all. His feet were small for such a large man, curled with rough soles. Pigskins, that's how he described them, proud of the toughness that came from an island childhood. We
didn't wear shoes, he'd say plainly. A framed photograph in our sitting room evidenced his claim. It was a black and white of Father and his three brothers, all dressed in their Wellington Elementary School blazers. The four of them were barefoot and I remember wondering what it would be like to grow up in such a place, in a place as different from Ontario winters as one could imagine.

Father's mind must have drifted because, at the end of one quick hand, I came out on top. As the victory was only chance and unlikely to repeat itself, I retrieved June's favourite tool from its wooden block on our kitchen counter. The impact of three raps with the full power of an eight-year-old arm left Father's right hand marked red.

Mother hadn't been paying much attention to the two of us up until that point. She turned at yelled at me in a voice that she usually saved for my father.

"What do you think you're doing? This is a game, for goodness' sake. What has gotten into you that you think it's all right to go about acting like that to another human being? How would you have felt if your father was silly enough to do the - "

Father's swelling hand gently patted mother's shoulder.

"These are the rules of the game, dear. He's well within his rights to hit me as hard as he can. We both agreed to play the game and so we both agreed to play by the rules. And now we're going to play another hand."

He shuffled the cards and dealt a new game.
Father controlled the hand, won, and won by a single point; he won, I lost and he was making a point. Mother's anger shifted away from me immediately.

"If you think I'm going to let you hit him, you're not simply mistaken, you're very stupid."

"We are playing by the rules, dear. Ronny knows the rules of the game and he knows what happens when you lose. Now, I am going to finish the game."

She shook her head and guided him into the house by his arm. They were gone for no more than a minute and I heard no yelling from either of them, but this was the way Mother operated, in a low voice that stated how things were and how things were going to be. By the time they returned, I was sure that I wouldn't have to endure the punishment.

The Henkels knife from the wooden block on our kitchen counter was in my mother's hand and father trailed behind her.

"Your Father's right. You were playing a game and you both understood the rules."

Father sat down across from me at the patio table and took the knife from Mother. Something obviously wasn't right. Mother was supposed to override him. She was supposed to come to my rescue.

"Put your hand on the table," he said.

I looked at my Mother for defense but couldn't read her face. Father raised the knife up slow and brought it down fast; he stopped before making contact and gently tapped.

She took the knife from him and told both of us that that
was enough cards for one day. Then she held out her hand for me.

"Why don't you come help me with the rest of dinner. Your father's going to go for a drive to calm his nerves."

**Euchre**

In this particular game, the king and queen of any given suit are of less value than the jack.

The evening that June and I sat down with our parents at the dining room table to learn this four-handed game occurred when she and I were fifteen and thirteen respectively.

With four players, there are three possible pairings of partners for the proper Euchre game. Father, however, refused to be on Mother's team.

She takes the fun out of it for me, he explained.

By this, Father was objecting to her lack of competitive spirit; if you're going to bother to play, you play to win. I do believe that Mother could have played well if she had cared; her thoughts were merely elsewhere. While dealing she would ask about June's upcoming Science Fair. While collecting the discards, she would wonder aloud about Christmas shopping. While Father instructed us on strategy, she would put the kettle on for tea. Under his breath, he asked why she was playing at all.

His own skill at the game was maniacal. He could mentally keep track of discards and could approximate which cards were in whose hand with near perfect accuracy. When
June was Father's partner, she won. When I was Father's partner, I won.

"I'm thinking of planting tulips along the outside of the back deck after the spring thaw this year," Mother said at one point.

"Spades are trump."

"They should come up nice. If the snow clears by late March, the yard will be ready for a barbecue by mid May."

"It's your lead, dear."

"Oh, I am sorry, what was called?"

"Spades, dear."

Because June and I were fifteen and thirteen, we wanted to win. We took turns partnering with Father and then complained about the predictability of the outcomes.

"Oh, what harm would it do for you to play with me one or two games? Let the children play together"

He grumbled, but agreed.

Luck, as it is said, runs in streaks and June and I won three games in a row.

Father got up from the table and went to the coat closet. He was going for a drive to cool his head, Mother said. The two of us sat drinking Orange Pekoe with Mother and chatted about Christmas break.

Hearts

If one has learned the rules and play of euchre, picking up this game is quick and easy. What one wants to avoid are
hearts and the queen of spades. The player with the least number of points, when some other player has lost by accumulating a hundred points, wins.

Father had lost all interest in a family game of Euchre, but he agreed to Hearts when mother insisted that the four of us need to spend this time together around the dining room table. Beneath the table, Jenny purred and nudged feet for attention. I was to play the role of scorekeeper, one of the many roles that Father was recently insisting I take upon myself. June, although two years older, had never been given the responsibility and I remember feeling embarrassed for her.

I wrote four neat columns across the top of the scratchpad: 'mum,' 'dad,' 'June,' and 'Me.' I was in control and I marveled at the pronoun that so pointedly placed me in control.

While Father went over the rules with June and me, Mother lifted the table cloth to pat Jenny.

"I don't know what's gotten into that cat, she doesn't want to do anything but cuddle all day. Never used to be so affectionate."

After three hands of play, Father predictably had the lowest score. Between hands he insisted that the object was to gang up on the winner and attempted to incite competition.

"Come after me or you're all going to regret it."

I doodled on the scratchpad while he dealt the cards.

"Ron, pay attention."

It was either June or Mother that noticed what was going
on under the table, I can't remember. Jenny, who had always been a heavy cat, was going into labour and making a bloody mess under our dining room table.

The game was, of course, forgotten. We gathered a cardboard box from the basement and lined it with a wool blanket. All four of us sat around the box waiting until Mother noticed the late hour and sent me and June to bed.

"I have no idea how long this will take and you two have to get up tomorrow."

Yawning, Father announced that he too was going to turn in. He said he'd see how many kittens were squeezed out the next day and gave my Mother a kiss on the cheek.

Unable to sleep, I listened for activity downstairs from my bed. I heard the sound of Mother walking up the stairs, a footfall that was quieter than my father's, and I stood by my bedroom door to listen. There was crying from my mother, followed by a muffled conversation and grumblings from my father as he made his way downstairs.

The next morning, Jenny had five of the smallest animals I had ever seen sucking from her tummy. Both of my parents had stayed up all night and the lack of sleep made them at once angry and sad. During breakfast, Mother told us that one of the kittens was born dead, a poor runt that was wrapped in a plaid dishtowel and placed inside a shoe box. Father had finished burying it just before we got up, a responsibility that I could tell he resented by his silence.

After breakfast, June and I returned to watch the kittens
feed while Mother cleaned up the kitchen and father went for a drive to clear his mind.

**Solitaire**

There are versions of solitaire that are so seldom played out one must conclude that they were designed for the player to lose. Still, they do help pass time.

June decided to continue her degree studies over the summer that year; she had visited Father's condominium once during her reading week and hadn't spoken to him since then. I became his only child and managed to pretty much fulfill my promise of weekly visits. Mother and her husband seldom asked where I was heading off to Sunday afternoons, but they knew enough not to hold dinner for me.

I remember the television was continuously flickering when I visited, often the only light turned on. Father didn't answer my knock that day, but yelled from his brown vinyl lazy boy. A game of solitaire was laid out on the ottoman and he held his hand to his chin considering.

"Hi."

"Hello, son."

"Good game?"

"I haven't picked up yet, just thinking about my options. Would you like a coffee?"

"Tea?"

"Don't drink the stuff and I don't have any in the house."

- 35 -
"Maybe I'll have a coffee later."

I recognized the game. The deck is spread down in eight columns of six cards, two face up and four down. The four cards remaining are an out if you can't move.

"I bought a paper on my way over."

"Check it yet?"

"Yeah, on the subway."

"And?"

"It's a four show, we have lots of time."

"Do you feel like a couple rounds of gin."

"Yeah, all right. Play out what you're doing first, though."

"I've already lost. Three of the kings showing and two aces at the bottom of the rows."

He swept the cards up in seconds and shuffled.

**Poker**

Stag parties for grooms over the age of fifty are pretty much limited to poker and alcohol; as host, this suited me just fine.

The games of poker played at a stag party are also limited. One can play five card draw or one can play seven card stud. What one cannot indulge in are the more social variations of the game - no "Idiot", no "Christ On The Cross" and no "Running Baseball." As Father put it to Ray, a coworker and a guest that evening, "Let's not fuck about."
Natural Light

The booth farthest from the door is occupied by an older fellow with heavy hands that shake slightly. A few minutes ago he was lighting a cigarette and he paused to watch his own tremor. It looked like he was trying to control it and, for a concentrated moment, the match flame settled. Then he blew it out and studied the matchbook cover.

I'd guess he's nervous about something. That's his third cigarette in about twenty minutes and he's read the matchbook cover twice.

Because his booth's in front of a window pane, all the smoke is visible, a thick cloud that fades the further it drifts from him. Natural light plays strangely off people; what it chooses to brighten and what it chooses to shade can seem completely random, but it actually falls in a planned geometry. I can see the hair on his forearms because the sunlight falls straight onto the table top where he's resting his elbows, but I can only guess that his face has the strong lines of age. It's a weathered face that is nonetheless soft, I'd say. He probably has the type of face you'd expect kindness and apologies from. I'd have liked to be the daughter of a man like that, the daughter of a man who
couldn't hide affection.

My waitress hits the tabletop and sends a vibration through my whole meal - it's the rude gesture she uses to get my attention. The first thing I notice about her is the apron around her waist. It holds numerous ball-point pens and only partially hides the tummy bulge of child birth. She's got a coffee pot which she lifts slightly higher. Do I want a refill? I nod and smile. She pours and doesn't.

The coffee here's good, but the staff is, more often than not, quite short on patience. Regular customers seem to think they're appreciated by waitresses, but I've seen eyes rolled behind backs. We are tolerated as the acceptable cost of doing business, but I don't suffer from the delusion that I am liked.

I'm being hard, I know. Sylvie, who's off today, is actually quite kind. She touches my shoulder lightly to get my attention and she signs thank-you. I'm certain that the entire staff knows the sign, but Sylvie is the only one who uses it.

My waitress today - Tanya, by her name tag - is over by the older fellow now, laughing comfortably while she refills his coffee. He's probably the kind of man who puts everyone around him at ease. With his face turned, I can see that my assumptions were more or less right. He's in his early fifties and wrinkles hang solidly under his eyes and down around his mouth. I wonder if he has a wife? I wonder what he does for a living? And I wonder where he has traveled in the
world? A body can see many parts of the world in fifty years, but a body can also be born and die in the same county. My own parents stand as two saddened examples of the latter. Given a child that needed vigilant protection when they were both in their early twenties, they never felt they had the right to stray far from me. Dad's as unlike the stranger as I could imagine - thin, pale and nervous.

But it's easy to see one's own parents in a unfavorable light.

I once dated a man who was both deaf and blind and communicated entirely through touch, through symbols and letters drawn upon each other's hands. At first, the contact seemed unnaturally intimate and I imagined that his whole childhood must've been filled with this warm physical sense of feeling. I assumed that a life which necessitated touch would automatically be loving. The truth of the matter was that he injected bitterness into nearly everything he was able to communicate and had nothing but bile for the two bodies that had raised him. There's a sign for the word 'cunt' and he used it more than once near the end of our relationship, so I suppose there are worse things than two parents who are afraid of holding you too close. I cannot fault Mother and Father for insisting upon independence, but I cannot help but think there's something better.

The old man at the booth would hug large. He'd hug long and hard and with passion. His oversized hands would pat heavily on a daughter's back and would rub soothingly strong
and would grip shoulders tightly. He would hug with substance and size. Does he or did he have a happy marriage, I wonder. I hope so. I've often thought that overweight men are more comfortable in their bodies, relaxed and able to chat with anonymous strangers even when they are not themselves happy.

Tanya is just now leaving him, after a good five minutes of chit-chat, and she's still smiling. Whatever he's said has brightened her day.

Once again alone with his thoughts, he's turning the matchbook over and over between his hands. There's a cartoon teddy bear on the book cover; I know because I have several such identical matchbooks at home in a desk drawer. I keep them around to light candles in my apartment. Electric light always seems too cold and I prefer the unpredictability of a dozen flickering flames.

He places the matchbook down on the table top and hurriedly lays his cigarette in the ashtray. A coughing fit shakes his whole body for a few moments. Once recovered, he pinches the bridge of his nose between his eyes.

A red-haired man about my age enters through the restaurant's door and looks around the restaurant. We regard one another briefly as his eyes pass over all of the customers. This is the person the old man's been waiting for. They're quite obviously father and son, a relationship that even the most casual observer would pick up. This was what the older man would have looked like twenty years ago, thinner and healthier. Yes, now I can see the small flecks of red in
the old man's hair. He would have been freckled and active when he was young. He's quickly stubbing his cigarette - I bet his son disapproves - and he's straightening the ends of his jacket.

After waving the waitress away, the young man speaks slowly to his father, explaining an apparently serious matter. He nods and utters short responses to his son, listening as if to understand and saddened by whatever was said. They haven't yet touched one another. No hug and no pat on the back that would signal the close relationship I expected.

The somber conversation seems to end with the older man firmly nodding his head one more time, and the young man signals for the waitress, an abrupt call that seems to embarrass his father. Tanya has the coffee pot, two pots of tea and a bowl of creamers on a tray with her. The old man smiles and shakes his head, politely declining a coffee refill. The coldness I had more than once expressed towards my parents comes to mind, all the short impatient sentences I've expressed to prove my ingratitude. I suppose I'm more like the young man than I'd like to think.

Over in the far booth, the mood has lightened. The father asks his son a series of smiling questions and nods happily at every response. He's over-compensating, grinning stupidly and I look away, embarrassed for him and for myself.

I try to read and it occurs to me that I have no idea what my parents read. Many of my earliest memories are of the three of us sitting around the kitchen table, each of us with
a volume in our hands or spread open on the tabletop, but I cannot remember ever asking about titles, or authors, or subjects. They must have known that passing on a love of books would help me far into the future; they must have foreseen that a bookish quality would be an asset later in life, but I've never given it much thought before now.

I turn over the opened volume and lay it face down on the tabletop. If I were closer, I could, at least, lip read half of what was between these two beautiful men.

Tanya brings me my check along with the coffee pot and again holds it up with a questioning look on her face. I nod and, after she pours, I scribble an invisible sentence through the air with a request on my face. Her mouth, after a moment, jumps into an "oh" and she hands me a pen from her collection. For some reason, I feel I must thank her and have her accept my thanks properly, so I write out the words on a napkin. She reads, nods and smiles, and I'm pretty sure I got through to her. I return the pen and watch her walk over to the storefront. She opens the door for a pregnant woman.

The woman wears a plaid blouse, untucked and hanging near to her knees. The material hangs loose except over her stomach and I wonder at the stress her body must be under, swollen, stretched and changing her whole center of gravity. The sweat on her face catches the light as she makes her way over to the far booth. Both of the men stand to greet her and my older fellow leans awkwardly forward to hug this enlarged woman. She touches her hand to his and the three of them
stand for a moment without their lips moving.

The two men make a bit of a show of shifting the booth's table so she can sit, jokingly pulling it too far to the one side. To this, she just smiles and slides in beside her husband.
Object Permanence

This is a story about a chair.

***

I believe grandfather Glendenning bought the chair because it matched nothing in his second wife's living room. This is around 1975 and the chair was already a decorating mistake.

This chair is brown vinyl. Overstuffed with wide padded armrests and an ottoman. Years later the chair would have electric tape stretched across its arms to hold in the pushing foam, but it was once just pristinely ugly.

Grandmother moved the chair to various locations in the room in an attempt to assimilate it into her new antique furnishings, but a brown chair of this magnitude will always be the centre of attention.

No one was allowed to sit in it. That was the official ruling, but grandfather would brighten when he saw I had sneaked onto his throne. The whole Arts section of the Globe and Mail could be spread across the top of the ottoman.

"What are you reading about?"
I wish he smoked a pipe, a dark walnut pipe that let out clouds of spicy smoke. In my head he did, but I know this fact is merely embellishment.

I do remember a small dispute and grandmother standing her ground. A tea tray. Royal Albert tea service. Sugar bowl, the creamer, three cups and saucers and tea pot itself. The pattern was called "Country Rose," a design now discontinued.

"Mother, I was going to sit there."

"I'm hardly going to put this tray on my coffee table, Frank."

Did he actually call her 'mother'? Maybe. I know grandmother filled my cup half with milk. Barely warm and barely tea for a four-year-old boy.

***

Dad called it the rec room. My stepmother alternately referred to it as the basement and the family room, depending upon her mood. This room was in the basement, anyway. None of the furniture matched and so the chair wasn't out of place.

Lisa and I were allowed to use the brown chair whenever we cared to, and its charm wore off. It was still the best place to do a headstand, though. My sister could do a real handstand on the basement floor, against the wall or free-standing.

"So? So what?"
In the chair, I could sit upside-down and be counted as able.

We ate grilled cheese sandwiches from a tray on the ottoman. Ketchup wiped right off brown vinyl, but sometimes it got missed and hardened into clumps of red rubber.

On Wednesdays my sister and I easily shared the chair to watch Bill Bixby turn dark grey on our black and white television. Each week he would help out local people and then move onto a new town by the end of the show. Lisa and I sat and watched other shows and we did this for years; we did this until she was fifteen and I was thirteen and we weren't comfortable sitting so close to each other anymore.

* * *

Andrea had an affection for the chair because we were so cramped in it. Snuggling and listening to Tom Waits, we didn't get up to turn over to side b. My room in the basement was separate from the rest of my family and that let me know that the world now thought I was a grown up.

I believe this is around the time I had to start repairing the chair with electric tape. For some reason, the ottoman did not age.

My biological mother's mother from New Zealand sent me a handmade quilt and we used it to warm ourselves in the chair. With Orange Pekoe in mugs and no clothes on, we played solitaire together on the top of the ottoman. An impossible
version of solitaire that is nearly never played out. Sometimes Andrea touched the cards while I interfered and sometimes we switched roles.

"Nine, eight, nine, ten, jack."

"I can get six cards if I use the seven instead."

York University didn't place us in any of the same classes but we rehearsed together. Andrea was cross legged in the chair and I was cross legged on the ottoman; to memorize scenes we used silly voices. Albee's George and Martha in Scottish accents. George and Martha stammering. George and Martha on helium. George and Martha at 78 rpm. Repeated until we thought we knew our roles and couldn't not touch each other any longer.

Later I replayed these days in my head. I sat in the chair and watched movies we had watched together and I listened to Tom Waits. I rented Last Tango In Paris and felt cheap. With our seven-year photo album open on the ottoman, I made love to her memory.

The basement was renovated into an apartment with a separate entrance for Lisa and her husband Jeff. My room is their kitchen.

***

My high school friend James Phillip Simmons and I decided we wanted to be teachers. I went into debt and we signed a nine-month lease in Kingston. He had to be separated from his
wife and a new daughter for the eight-month school year; I still cannot imagine that strength of character. Me, I was on the phone to Andrea by the first weekend.

The apartment was temporary and pedagogy was on our minds, not home furnishings. Our bedrooms were full with books piled on the floor, compact discs in stacks around the stereos on the floor, and clothing from suitcases on the floor, but the living room/dining room was near empty. A couch left by the previous tenants and my brown vinyl chair.

We read the chapters aloud before the night of any Developmental Psychology exam.

"Object permanence occurs between four and eight months. Prior to the sensorimotor stage 'out of sight, out of mind' is literally true. Infants treat objects that leave their field of vision as if they no longer exist."

By November James and I realized that an Ontario Teacher's Certificate is an easy ticket to obtain, and we took our studies less seriously.

He taught me two-handed euchre and I lost many games played on the top of the ottoman.

I have a pleasant memory of reclining in the chair at four in the morning with a Habana Banches cigar. My feet kicked up on the ottoman. Top of the world, mom.

James's little brother Dave came from Toronto to spend a weekend. Medical students have the best drugs. After an hour of reflecting on women, we ate cold linguine and tried a game of crazy eights.
In March James got a telephone call from his wife. The baby girl had been going for a series of tests because her speech wasn't developing. This newest test proved that she was autistic and James got drunk. I got drunk with him.

He did not finish out the year and I was left with a two-bedroom apartment to myself. Andrea visited with the suggestion that we should make love one last time. We could be conscious of the final memory as it occurred.

"As much as I like the thought. And I want to."

* * *

My father's minivan was borrowed to move me back to Toronto and I had to carry box after box to the elevator myself. Down eleven floors and to the Chrysler Voyager by myself. I'd accumulated more things and found that the brown vinyl chair would have to be left for the next tenants. New people who may even have thrown it away before putting on a new coat of paint.

The super, Claire, examined the near empty apartment. She claimed the inspection was to ensure I hadn't forgotten anything, but I remember thinking that the real reason was to ensure I didn't lift any of the light fixtures and appliances on my way out.

"Everything seems to be in order."

"Yes."

"You don't want the sofa and lazy boy?"
"I haven't room for them."

"Fair enough. Can I get you to sign here please?"
Variations On Nailpolish As Foreplay

la

Stacey sat cross-legged on her sofa and waited for Dean's arrival. No, she thought, better for me to be on the love seat; his first sight upon entering the apartment shouldn't let him know I'm too anxious. She lay with her feet over the end of the love seat armrest. She sat up a little straighter and dangled one foot over the side. The ex-boyfriend Dean doesn't stand a chance.

Is this what I want, she wondered.

Oh, it's what I want. I want to be wanted.

I need to be needed? Possibly.

Checking her watch, she lighted into her bedroom and returned immediately with a bottle of lavender nail polish and Glenn Gould's "Goldberg Variations," remastered and reissued on compact disc. With the music playing, she gracelessly thumped off both her runners and let them fall to the floor. She neatly hung her white athletic socks over the love seat armrest.

Baby brush strokes brushed on the baby toe.

There was a soft knock on the door that she paused before responding to.
"Dean?"
"Hello?"
"Come in."

He entered and slipped off his sandals, an unnecessary gesture since he knew Stacey usually kept her runners on everywhere she went.

"Am I late?"
"I guess so. Hadn't noticed the time."
A fib he saw through but decided was better left unchallenged. Dean sat on the sofa as she turned herself in the love seat.

"I thought we could just have lunch here. Let me just finish up painting my nails."
"Sure."
"Would you like me to paint your toes next?"

Stacey went through her collection of nail polishes, shook each bottle one by one and then returned them to the refrigerator. Storing them in here was a tip she had picked up years ago in a Sixteen magazine; she thought of Dean and the first time he came across her bottle of violet mist polish behind the milk on the top shelf.

What year was that? Early in their five-year relationship, but not too early since he was going into her refrigerator. There is a certain point in a romance at which the partners feel free to do what they will in each other's
apartments, a benchmark of sorts.

With Dean set to arrive in half an hour, she was beginning to doubt the wisdom of inviting him over on the afternoon of his departure. It's just an emotional day, she told herself. No reason to think this feeling is the return of true love or anything of that nature. Nonetheless, she had bought him a going-away gift, an anthology of Canadian short stories wrapped in lavender tissue paper and sitting on the living room sofa.

The whistling kettle brought Stacey away from her nail polish collection. She shook a tea bag and dropped it into the purple sleepy bear mug that Dean had brought back for her from Stratford shortly after they had met. After two dates, he was bringing her small reminders of affection. Most days Stacey could make through. She could go to the record store, make her coworkers laugh, use her employee discount and not once wonder if she had made the wrong choice.

The knock on the door was pure Dean, just strong enough to let Stacey know he was there but soft and polite.

She checked her watch and walked to answer the door. He's early, she thought. He's early and he still needs me to be in his life. No, I can't stop him from taking the overseas job this year, but we can write to one another and speak on the phone. I'm still the same person, he's still the same person; this afternoon had to go well.
Stacey looked out the bay window of her third-floor apartment to the parking lot across the street and patiently waited for Dean's green compact. Playfully stepping one bare foot on top of the other, she let her mind wander to possible scenarios. Her jeans and white t-shirt in a rumpled pile on the floor by the love seat. Or her in the shower and Dean's hands reaching in through the rubberized curtain.

Goodness, celibacy can do funny things to your head. Still, Sunday afternoons were made for this kind of meeting.

The doorbell rang and Stacey muttered to herself. Shit, I really don't need a surprise visit right now. She tip-toed up to the peekhole and thought of ways to get rid of the unexpected visitor.

Dean?

Stacey stepped back to open the door and was greeted with a long warm hug.

They spoke quietly and calmly.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Missed you."

"I've been watching for your car for over half an hour now."

"I've been waiting for twelve months."

"Are we going to end this hug?"

Dean pulled back first and smiled sadly at his ex-girlfriend.
"The car's full of suitcases and boxes to be sent over with me. Didn't want to leave it out front."

"Are you going straight to the airport tonight?"

"Yes."

Stacey walked towards the kitchenette and spoke over her shoulder.

"Tea?"

"Please."

"Come and keep me company while the kettle boils."

The small walkway between cupboards and appliances didn't leave much space for two people to stand. Some sort of physical contact was inevitable. A brush against his shoulder maybe or a hand on her back reassuringly.

He looked down at his own feet and noticed Stacey's painted nails.

"What do you call that colour?"

"Sorry?"

"Your toes."

"Violet mist."

Stacey dropped two Orange Pekoe bags into matching green stoneware mugs, mementos from their weekend in Collingwood three years earlier.

"Maybe you'd like me to do your nails later."

"Maybe."

2a

In the driver's seat of his purple compact, Dean drummed
the steering wheel to the time of his chant.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit."

He'd been sitting here wondering whether or not he should get out of the car. Was it better to just drive off? He was taking a plane from Pearson International to Auckland that night at one in the morning. It'd be a shitty thing to do, he realized, but only as equally shitty as the way Stacey broke off their relationship a year earlier.

"Shit." He gave the steering wheel one last belt and got out of the car.

1d

Within ten minutes of Dean's arrival, Stacey felt she had traveled back in time to one year earlier. Well, not exactly one year earlier, that would be the date she stood him up on. Thinking back on it now, she could not fully believe she treated him that way. She imagined him standing under the repertory marquee lit up with the film title Zelig, rain pouring down on him and the two ticket stubs in his back jean pocket.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"I miss that question."

Knowing that Dean liked being playful, she crawled across the sofa, onto the love seat and into his lap.

"Goodness."

"No, I mean it. I miss that question, it isn't something you can ask anybody but a lover."
"Oh."

Well, that was a misstep. Careful with the word 'lover.' Stacey leaned forward from his lap, reached down to his feet and unbuckled his sandals.

"What's this?"

"I thought I'd paint your toenails."

"Oh?"

"Are you game?"

He laughed.

"What colours do I have to choose from?"

"Well, I'm wearing deep purple. I think we should match."

Fluttering between the open counter of her kitchen and the stereo in a living room cabinet, Stacey made tea and selected background music for Dean's visit all at once. Orange Pekoe in a plain white mug from Biway and Deep Purple in the cassette deck.

He was late. Unusual for Dean as she remembered him, he was punctual to a fault all through their five-month relationship. Many was the time that he would have to sit on the living room sofa while she applied last minute cover-up on her face and pastel purple polish to her nails. His punctuality should have tipped me off right from the start, she thought. Too needy, too loving. Still, he wasn't all bad.
her sun dress back into the red plaid pajama bottoms and ribbed undershirt she usually spent Sundays in. If we sleep together, I'll be that closer to undressed and if we don't, well, fuck him, I'll be comfortable.

2b

She's done this before, thought Dean. She's led me back to her and I've dived right in; over and over again, I make the same mistakes. Pausing on the third-floor landing, he looked out the window at the end of the hall. He could see his white compact from here, parked across the street in the pay lot. Stacey's bay window faced the same direction; she could probably watch for his car from her window. She probably would watch, he reasoned. She loves sporadically but truly and deeply.

Do whatever she wants to do, you can take the abuse and her happiness is much more important to you than your own peace of mind.

Dean knocked softly on her apartment door and she called from behind tears.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry."

"What's wrong, Stacey?"

"I can't do this."

"That's fine, dear."

Geez. Looking down at his feet, Dean thought of the time she left him waiting at Cumberland Four. She had been acting
she left him waiting at Cumberland Four. She had been acting oddly for a few weeks and that night instead of watching *The Purple Rose of Cairo* together, she simply decided to stand him up. After five years of loving her dearly, he was nothing better than a name and a phone number on a cocktail napkin.

Most days Dean could get through. He could go to the restaurant, make his coworkers laugh, use his employee discount and not once wonder what he did wrong.

Dean chewed on his pinky fingernail.

"Listen, Stacey? I'll get going and I'll write as soon as I get to New Zealand."

"Okay."

"You're all right?"

"Yeah."

3a

"Television is the worst on Sundays," Matt said aloud to himself. It was true, really; there were 57 channel options offered by Rogers Cable and he could not find a program for adults on any of them. He switched onto a purple and green dinosaur singing about love and let his mind wander.

He pressed the muting button on his Remote to better hear the familiar sound muffled through the living room wall of his apartment. That young woman must have brought home another Saturday night find, he thought.

Matt made a mental note to be more friendly with Stacey when they next passed in the apartment hallway and turned the
In her best Sunday dress, Stacey rearranged the furniture in her living room. The two love seats had always faced one another across her coffee table and she decided it was time for the room to have a more cozy feel. Perpendicular, was that the word she was thinking of? At a right angle, anyway.

What she wanted was difference. Dean had never seen this dress, it was bought at a seasonal sale shortly after she broke off the relationship. If I look different and the apartment looks different, Dean will see that I am different. How could I have treated him so poorly? She thought of Dean standing out in the snow the evening she stood him up. He called her apartment later that same night and apologized, assuming he hadn't gotten the plans right and went to Market Square instead of Canada Square. Both theatres were playing Crimes and Misdemeanors, he explained; she could understand his confusion, couldn't she? He was trusting to a fault and she stood him up.

All four of the men she dated for the twelve months they were apart couldn't begin to match up to him. Dean would never make a dick joke, she thought as she eased down the end of the second love seat. The thought wouldn't even occur to him.

Her watch read five minutes until Dean's arrival and he was always punctual. Stacey plugged in her tea kettle and lifted two mugs down from the cupboard, the green Kiwi mugs
from their trip to Wellington.

A soft knock on the door must be Dean. Stacey stepped back to open the door and was greeted with a long warm hug.

They spoke quietly and calmly.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Missed you."

"I missed you too."

Later they sat sipping too hot Orange Pekoe from their mugs and played footsies where the two love seats met. Stacey and Dean felt as if they had traveled back a year in time; the Sunday afternoon was going well.

"May I paint your toenails?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a preference colour-wise?"

"No."

"How about the same as mine?"

"Please."

She held his feet softly while painting morning green onto each of his nails.

Slowly she spoke what she'd been thinking.

"I still need and want and love you so dearly."

"Thank you."

Dean quietly cried while she pulled his t-shirt over his head. Certain of how to calm him, Stacey whispered apologies until both of them touched one another naked.

She slowly parted the quiet.

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"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking. I don't know. Yes and no, really. This is precious and I want this back. And I trust but I don't know that that's the smart move. Of two minds. No, I'm of too many minds, I suppose. With me leaving tonight. I don't know."

Stacey agreed with what he said but wasn't able to articulate that she understood.

"Why don't we put our clothes back on."
Spoken For

"No, no, no. That's not what I'm talking about. I do not mind that he acted that way because this is the way I would probably myself act in that situation."

"That doesn't make it right."

"No, but understandable."

"You don't think it calls my loyalty into question?"

"In a way, yes."

"Could you turn the radio down? I'm having trouble hearing you."

"Certainly."

"So what was I saying? My loyalty. Isn't it wrong to disregard the loyalty I've shown to him for six years?"

"Yes."

"But you're saying this is how you would act?"

"Yes."

"So you're saying you would knowingly act in a way that is wrong?"

"Call it a character flaw."

"It makes me mad, that's all."

"This too is understandable. The thing is, he doesn't know me. I know me and I know I would never do anything
untoward. You have known me for what? A year or so. And you pretty much believe I wouldn't do anything untoward. Hedley doesn't know any of this. He doesn't know we've sat around after a shift and chatted about him and about Sophie. Husband and wife problems. Hedley doesn't know that we've had too much to drink together when he and Sophie couldn't come to the staff parties. He does not know that there is - an understanding, or whatever, that we don't think about anymore. What the hell was I saying?"

"An understanding."

"I don't know where I was going with that."

"All I'm saying is that you and Phil were going to London. I need a ride to my mother's in London. He should trust my trust. And there isn't any reason to act that way towards you simply because you picked me up before Phil."

"Funny, though."

"Laughing didn't help."

"Well, it's pretty hard to feel intimidated when I know he's trying to intimidate me and why. So I laughed."

"Yeah. It's funny, Hedley didn't think about Phil at all. He didn't worry about a guy I'd never met before, he worries about you. I wouldn't worry about Phil for two reasons. The first goes back to trusting someone who someone you trust trusts and the second reason is that I know you'd do the right thing in the event of anything, as you say, untoward."

"I am flattered."
"Does he sleep through all of your long car rides?"
"That's my roommate."
"And does he have someone special back in Toronto too?"
"Nope."
"You see, I'd understand that bothering Hedley."
"If Phil knew he was going to sleep the entire trip, he should have taken the back seat."
"I do feel a little like a ten-year-old poking my head up from the backseat here. I'm ten years old and I'm trying to hear what secrets my Mom and Dad are sharing."
"I remember that."
"Do parents know, do you think?"
"Sorry?"
"Do they know that their kids are looking to them for something."
"For instruction."
"Yeah, for instruction about how men and women are."
"Together."
"Yeah."
"I do not know. I imagine so. Mothers and fathers probably want to instruct, but they may not be qualified to do so. I mean, just because they are parents, does not mean that their relationship as woman and man is any clearer."
"I'd like to think that something gets clearer."
"You've been with Hedley four years?"
"Yeah."
"I remember the story. He came into the restaurant as a
customer and sat in your section. Blah blah this, blah blah that, you two chatted while you were serving him and his friends dinner. Then he came in by himself and requested your section for a week after that until one of you broke and asked the other out."

"I asked him out."

"I love that."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm."

"And you started living together around the time I started."

"Yeah."

"How did you do tonight by the way?"

"Ninety after tip out."

"What did you sell?"

"Eight hundred or so. Eleven or twelve percent. You?"

"Sold a thousand and made seventy."

"Women are tipped differently than men. It isn't right."

"Yes, well. I'm not complaining."

"How much do you talk with your tables?"

"If they want to talk, I talk. If they don't, that is fine with me too."

"That's how I look at it too. But I find most want to talk."

"You're a woman. Again, It is not right but. Oh well."

"Does Phil work?"
"Nope, he studies and he sleeps."
"Fortunate fellow."
"Yes."
"How long have you and Sophie been going out?"
"Two years."
"Two years and you've lived in different cities for three months now?"
"Yes."
"And you're moving back to Toronto when?"
"April with any luck."
"A long distance relationship."
"This is why I kept my weekend job at the restaurant. I see her every week, work and drive back to school Sunday nights."
"And you met how?"
"She was dating a friend of Phil's actually. A group of people went out and we met."
"When did Phil's friend exit?"
"Sophie and I chatted that evening. We. You know, 'at first sight, yes I'm certain that it happens all the time.' We have a knack for talking together, it was immediate."
"Blah blah this, blah blah that?"
"Yes."
"So Phil's friend was out of the picture that very night?"
"No. There was an overlap of about a week."
"That's not very nice."
"Nope. But sometimes. Some things are more important than morality."

"Hmmm."

"I know it is wrong. Was wrong, anyway."

"But everything is going well now?"

"Yes."

"We're making good time."

"Another thing about driving back Sunday nights, there's no traffic at two in the morning."

"It feels very private."

"Doesn't it, though? Night driving, I love it."

"So what else about Sophie? You talk together well and she's cute, what else do you love about her?"

"She certainly is cute."

"Is that a big part of it for you?"

"I don't know. Yes. But there really are not that many women I don't find completely beautiful."

"Really?"

"Sophie's got that really great little nose."

"You find most women beautiful?"

"Yes."

"Do I fit into that category?"

"Well, yes. Of course. It's all right to say that, isn't it?"

"Now I'm flattered."

"You must know."

"What?"
"It always amazes me when women are unaware of how beautiful they are. I mean. I don't know."

"So how am I beautiful to you?"

"I don't know. You've got this great little mouth. Just tiny. And you smirk at the best times. Do you remember that night with the stag party in the back banquet room."

"Last summer."

"Yes, not this past summer, but the summer before that. And those bloody goofs are hassling me because they really wanted a woman server. They're giving me crap all night and I went to the bar to pick up a round. You smirked and said 'At least you're not one of them'. That little smirk made me feel. I don't know."

"You remember that well."

"Yes. Sorry."

"Hedley would flip if he heard you giving me that compliment. I imagine Sophie wouldn't much care for it either."

"No, she wouldn't."

"Complimenting is a dangerous thing when you're with someone. I mean, I'm with Hedley and I always want to be. But that means I'm not allowed to compliment a man like you without feeling like I'm being disloyal. You know. And I think very highly of you. Even receiving compliments from you feels wrong."

"I did not mean to make you uncomfortable."

"No. Sincerity makes it worse, though. I hope your
roommate isn't hearing any of this."

"I was just thinking that myself."

"He looks pretty sound asleep."

"Phil?"

"Nothing."

"You were saying?"

"Hmmm?"

"Sincerity makes it worse."

"Yeah, I just think there's a danger in being honest."

"We're just talking."

"Of course."

"There's a difference between talking and just talking, though."

"This is what I'm saying."

"Do you have to use the washroom?"

"Are we coming to a rest stop?"

"Yes."

"No, I'm okay. Unless you want to stop."

"I am all right."

"So tell me something about Sophie that'll prove how much you care for her."

"No pressure."

"There's the talking and the cute thing, what else?"

"There's many things."

"All right, that's a cop out. What's the first thing that comes into your head when you think about her?"

"Oh."
"Yeah?"
"It's kind of sexual."
"Say it."
"We're on vacation. This cottage outside Tweed somewhere that we rented for two weeks. There wasn't anyone around, the place was in this sort of inlet about fifty feet from the water. Completely private, we didn't see another person for the whole time we were there. We brought a trunkload of groceries. Ate and drank too much as much as we wanted."
"How is this sexual?"
"I'm getting to that. I went into the cottage and Sophie's there on the bed reading. She had no clothes on and was lying on her back over the comforter. That's the first thing I thought of, anyway."
"That's it."
"Well, yes. She just looked so. I just wanted to look at her and look at her and look at her. This urge to find a basement apartment we could move into right away and sleep in on weekends and not have to deal with anyone else. Just."
"I guess that beats my smirk."
"So what about Hedley?"
"What?"
"The first thing that comes into your mind?"
"Nothing comes into my mind."
"And you said I was copping out."
"Why don't we talk about something else."
"All right."
"Do you remember that night we sat around talking after our shift?"

"We sit around chatting all the time. Or at least we did before I moved to London."

"We were in booth eleven and Luke came by with some stupid remark."

"Yes, some gossip to the effect that we were having an affair."

"Yeah."

"People are going to talk like that. Who cares. We're both with people and so people assume something illicit. It doesn't mean anything."

"No, I don't care how it looks either. What I was asking was if you remember what you said to him."

"Something stupid I can't remember."

"You said 'in my dreams' and shut him right up."

"Oh."

"I remember thinking. And just for that one moment. Because I am very happy with Hedley and I hope I always will be and you're with Sophie so what we say is just us talking. I remember wishing that was true just for that one moment."

"This is dangerous conversation."

"Yeah."

"All right. We're just talking."

"Yeah."

"No, we're not just talking. We're talking."

"What?"
"I don't know."

"You're making some sort of distinction between talking and just talking. And?"

"The morality here is fuzzy. Is there a difference between just talking, talking and actually acting upon whatever."

"Okay, we're not going to act at all. So let's talk."

"All right. I meant 'in my dreams' sincerely."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Of course. Most of the time when I'm playing flirting with you I mean it."

"You do?"

"Yeah. And so I assume you mean it with me too."

"All right."

"I may as well tell you more. We've hugged twelve times and I can tell you each time."

"The first time was after the bubblegum."

"Yes. You show up twenty minutes after your shift is over with bubblegum just because I'm having a bad night and I hugged you without thinking."

"I remember one at a staff party."

"That was number three. You've forgotten number two just before my birthday."

"Well, it was your birthday."

"Number three was at the Halloween party. Your Sophie left early and my Hedley was working that night."
"We probably should not bring up their names or we'll stop talking."

"Okay. Four was a chance meeting at the bank. Five that night you had to serve that the stag party."

"Oh, yes."

"Six and seven were at table ninety in the bar, you had an argument with Sophie and were in drinking. I guess I took advantage of the situation. Eight was in the restaurant parking lot. Nine wasn't really a hug, I guess. That dance during the Christmas formal. Ten in the back of the house near the prep area, eleven at the end of summer staff party. And twelve was this past Friday when you came in."

"Hmmm."

"Indeed."

"Well, twelve hugs in a year and a half isn't horrible or anything. It's not like I'm a tramp."

"Yeah."

"My favourite part of the drive is coming up. On the left."

"The baseball fields?"

"There's all these kids when you pass by in the day. The lights are on no matter what time of night I drive by. The diamonds look so sad lit up with no one around."

"Empty in some sort of profound way."

"You have three small moles on your back in between your shoulder blades."

"Oh?"
"I noticed them during the Christmas formal. Red dress off the shoulders. You were leaning over and I couldn't help but notice."

"This was early in the evening?"

"Yes."

"We were both still sober."

"There's no excuse, I know."

"And when I asked you to dance. Would you have asked me anyway?"

"No. I couldn't."

"It's just a dance with a friend at a Christmas party."

"Well, I would have felt badly if I had asked. I mean, I'm so glad you asked and I got to do that, but if I had asked you at that point in time, after thinking what I had thought about your three small moles, some sort of line would have been crossed. I cannot stop myself from thinking the things I think, and maybe talking about these things with you is all right, but touching is something else."

"You have big hands."

"Yes."

"They felt huge on my hips. And the bottom of your back, I remember holding the muscle there."

"I stopped counting the number of times you've touched me."

"You kept count?"

"Initially, then I thought that these touches mean nothing. I mean, in addition to the fact that I should not be
thinking about that sort of thing at all. Some people are touch people and some people aren't. If I made you laugh and you put your hand on my knee, it didn't necessarily mean anything. If you were thanking me and held the side of my arm, it didn't necessarily mean anything. These things mean something to me, though."

"It isn't wholly imagined."

"Sorry?"

"Sometimes they do mean something."

"But."

"Yeah."

"It is probably a good thing Phil's here."

"I was just thinking the same thought."

"We should wake him before the next reststop. See if he has to use the washroom."

"How different our conversation will be after that."

"Do you think this conversation will be trouble?"

"We admit things, but it is still only talking."

"Not really."

"No."

"When we wake Phil, we will only talk. Work, school, family, books, movies. What else?"

"Your girlfriend, my boyfriend."

"Yes."
The Woman Who Works At The Cotton Ginny

I can blend into the surroundings at the mall. That's what scares me the most, I suppose. I'm sitting here in the food court and it's one of my least favourite places to be, but the shoppers, when they notice me at all, don't give me even a second glance. Just part of the scenery. A natural addition to the plastered cement columns that run all the way to the second floor ceiling and the potted ferns in full bloom. I'm as anonymous as the dozens of old men who sit at tables drinking their coffee and as faceless as the hordes of teen-agers who come here every day but never make a purchase. It's the old guys that make me wonder, really; the kids probably haven't got anywhere else to socialize, but you'd think the elderly would have something better to do than sip coffee all afternoon.

In the mall, I can't relax. I can't think straight. I'm a bad bundle of bad nerves trying to get comfortable amid the department outlets, the clothing boutiques, the shoe stores, the craft shops and various knick-knack stands. Not to mention the arcades, brightly lit store signs and a multiplex with nine screens. Such assured success everywhere. Nine screens, just imagine. How could I possibly belong here?
Maybe it's like this for everyone.

Even scarier yet, I'm starting to feel this way everywhere. In my house, in my car and with my wife. What did I do to deserve a two-storey detached home? My car is under warranty for four more years, but I'll be able to afford a whole new automobile in two years. I look at the pictures of my wife on the mantle and her beauty only points out how undeserving I am.

The woman who works in the Cotton Ginny can't be any more than seventeen years old. She's about five-eight, slender with long arms, delicate hands and blonde hair. Obviously not naturally blonde hair. I mean, you can see the brown underneath when she pulls her hair and ties it in a bun or ponytail. The long strands of brown and blonde run together well, though, creating this smooth, textured look. She's got this impossibly light pink skin that comes so very close to white but holds back just one shade. It makes me think of those swatches of paint from Colour Your World. Each gradation of colour is slightly lighter than the last, until you can hardly recognize the last swatch as pink at all. I mean, the swatch looks white, but deep down, you know it's pink. That's the colour of her skin.

Colour Your World is a clever name for a paint and wallpaper store.

Her skin is soft too. And clean. She may have had one or two blemishes at fourteen, but there's no trace of scarring
anywhere on her chin, cheeks and forehead. The chin, cheeks and forehead make up a cute face. I wouldn't say a perfect oval, exactly; the face is a bit too round, I suppose. Not chubby, mind you, just a bit round. You can tell that her face still had baby fat as early as six months ago.

So she's attractive - there's no arguing that - but the truth of the matter is that she looks like any number of young women who work at the mall. She's almost identical to all the other women at the Cotton Ginny. And at Suzy Shier. And Club Monaco. Dynamite, Fairweather and Smart Set.

So why is it that she has come to mind so often during the pauses in my day? Why when I bend down to empty the lawn clippings from my mower's side bail into a transparent plastic bag? Why when I search the passenger seat for a cassette tape while waiting at a red light? Why when I'm on hold with the Ikea salesman who promised to find me end tables that match my bedroom set?

The first time I noticed her was on the park bench outside of Mastermind. It's odd that the mall has park benches. Now that I think about it, park benches are wholly out of place in any indoor setting, and yet, there are these pairs of benches all throughout the halls of the building. Back to back park benches, white and bookended by a pair of clean white garbage cans. They're rest stops for shoppers and they're placed every hundred meters or so. The arrangement is so ordered that I never stopped to think that park benches

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have absolutely no business being inside.

I was sitting on one such bench when I first noticed the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny. Claire and I had been looking for a present for our niece Susan, her sister's daughter. Susan turned ten last February and there was a Saturday afternoon party with cake and pin the tail on the donkey and such. My wife and I were at the Town Centre to buy one birthday present and it turned into a three-hour affair. I thought stuffed animal. I thought pretty dress. I thought Nancy Drew hardcovers, but apparently, I have no idea what a ten-year-old-girl wants for her birthday. Claire shook her head no to each of my suggestions like she sympathized my ignorance. Susan isn't that kind of ten-year-old, she told me. Susan is the kind of child who wants gifts from Mastermind, brain puzzlers and chemistry sets.

I browsed in the store for a short while and grew tired. Claire, patient as ever, suggested I grab a coffee or tea and wait for her while she chose just the right gift. So I did. I left the store, picked up a medium Orange Pekoe from Muffins, and parked myself on bench outside of Mastermind.

For a while I amused myself by watching shoppers leave stores through the computer gates, through those shoplifting detectors that stand at the entrance to each and every store. They're twin lions standing guard, waiting in anticipation for the poor bearers of magnetized tags. It's funny to watch grown adults pass through these gates. Their foreheads furrow
in worry even though they know they haven't stolen any merchandise. There is the off chance that the lingerie bought impulsively at Silk and Satin will mistakenly set off the lights and buzzers in Eatons. The alarms at HMV might be set off by the stack of lined paper from Grand and Toy. Accidents happen, after all.

This is what I was doing when I first noticed the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny.

Properly said, I suppose she noticed me. She must have been sitting beside me for a few minutes, but I was oblivious to her presence until I felt a hand brush against my shoulder. At her touch, I sat upright and turned to face her.

"Relax," she said. "I'm just fixing your collar."

I was wearing the blue button down Oxford that Claire got for me from Marks and Spencers on my last birthday and the back of my collar must have been creeping up. The brief moments it took the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny to right this flaw in my dress were awkward for me, but she smiled all the while.

"There. That's better."

She brushed imaginary lint off my shoulder to complete her good deed.

"Thank you very much."

At this point, I didn't know she worked at the Cotton Ginny. All I knew about her was that she was young - seventeen, I guessed - and that she performed this act of kindness all for me. Reasonably, I know that she could be out
fixing collars for complete strangers in malls across the country everyday. She might have even been tucking in young orphan boys' t-shirts and giving fashion hints to unwed mothers. Colour-coordinating skirts and blouses for preteen schoolgirls. Blue and green should never be seen, only in the washing machine. That sort of thing.

But the fact is, she took the time to fix my collar. She helped me. She could see that I was uncomfortable and she lovingly told me to relax. And she smelt as good as The Body Shop.

She stood and wished me a good day over her shoulder before leaving. Another cloud of that Body Shop smell drifted in the air and I lost sight of the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny.

"I found the perfect gift."

Claire took the seat beside me on the park bench and pulled a puzzle out of the Mastermind bag.

"It's three thousand pieces," she said. "All the pieces are a different shape and the whole thing is white."

"Sorry?"

"There's no picture on the puzzle; that's what makes it so challenging."

She passed the package to my lap and I stared at the box front; a red '3000 pieces' was written in the top right-hand corner, but the box was otherwise blank. A puzzle of three thousand blanks. Challenging. Three thousand nothings that can be assembled into one nothing.
"I think Sue will love it."

Claire dug in her purse for a wallet and passed me items to hold while she hunted: a lipstick, a compact, ticket stubs, a hair brush, a cheque book and a pair of sunglasses.

"Just in case," she said and slipped the Mastermind receipt into her wallet.

Occasionally, my presence in the food court is noticed, but usually only by children asking to bum cigarettes. The owner and keeper of Smoker's World is strict about the nineteen-years-of-age law and I've watched at least three young men come out swearing under their breath since I sat down here. One young woman exits and makes no attempt to hide her anger; she stamps straight through the electronic gates of Smoker's World to where I'm sitting and politely asks for a cigarette.

"Excuse me, sir," she started.

She lit up and took a seat at my table.

"Fuckin' guy. I buy cigarettes there every other day and the one time I don't bring my license, he refuses to sell me the things. I mean, it's a law, yes, and I can see that he doesn't want any trouble, but it's ridiculous. Wanna shout at him 'do you not remember me from yesterday? Or the day before or the day before that?' Why be like that, y'know."

"I don't know," I say. She looks at me as if she had forgotten my presence, and then leans over the table to offer me her hand.
"I'm Claire," she says.

"Claire?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"That's my wife's name."

Claire, the Claire sitting across from me and not Claire, the Claire I married, looks to be just old enough to pass the smoking age. There's something about her that makes me think she talks to complete strangers all the time; her hair is dyed black, cropped short and held tight against her head by some sort of gel. She has on a heavy pair of blue jean overalls with a black t-shirt underneath and a heavy pair of brown construction boots completes the outfit. Although she is unlike the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny, she is similar in that she is of a type. She is type B and she looks like all the young women who work at record stores throughout the mall. She looks like all the young women who work at Sam the Record Man, Music World, Sunrise Records and His Majesty's Voice and she looks like she'd sooner sneer before she'd ever smile or fix a creeping collar.

About three minutes have passed since she introduced herself and we haven't said anything more to one another. The silence is upsetting and so I try to make conversation.

"They do say it's a small world."

"How's that?"

"Your name and my wife's name."
"Two Claires."

"Yes."

"Nice talking to you."

Claire stands, stubs out her cigarette and leaves. I watch her step onto the escalator, ride upwards and disappear.

The second time I met the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny was on an errand for my wife. Claire had been taking a night course in ceramics twice a week at the community centre and she ran out of clear glaze the evening before her final project was due. I was napping in the brown vinyl lazyboy in our family room when she interrupted. Her hair was pinned up at the back and several strands had fallen out onto her face and there were small smears of dried plaster across her chin and cheeks. Would I mind running out for a moment? At first, I thought of telling her that I was busy and tired, but the explanation seemed weak even to me. Besides, she looked too adorable to refuse such a simple request.

Once at the mall, however, the errand turned out to be more taxing than I expected. LewisCraft had either gone out of business or had relocated. I knew that there was a Micheal's and a WhiteRose somewhere in the mall, but I didn't know where and I couldn't locate a mall directory. I walked in the direction that I believed the food court was, thinking that eventually I would stumble across either one of the two stores or a directory eventually. I passed Bata, Agnew,
Transit and then Bata again. How could it be that I walked in a circle, I wondered.

From the outside, Bata looked busy - lots of people trying on lots of shoes - so I decided to try the Cotton Ginny next door for directions. The store was empty except for the one young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny. She was standing over a centre island display piled with sweatshirts; one by one, she was unfolding the sweatshirts and refolding them around a plastic template.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" she asked.

"Yes," I floundered for what it was I was looking for.

"Do you carry shaker knit sweaters?"

She guided me over to the corner of the store dedicated to shaker knit sweaters and I choose a pastel blue one with a subtle floral design around the collar and cuffs. When she asked what size I wanted, I was tempted to say 'she's about your size,' but I resisted the urge and instead blurted out 'medium.'

The woman who works at the Cotton Ginny rang up my purchase, slid the bag across the counter and smiled.

"My last sale of the day. Have a good night, okay?"

It was much more than the standard thank you and have a nice day that most clerks will give you; she would have acted the same whether or not I bought anything. It wasn't until I left the store that I realized that it was near closing time and I still hadn't found the glaze for Claire.

At home, I stood with the Cotton Ginny bag in my hand and
explained that Lewiscraft had gone out of business, but I bought her a sweater. She looked confused but seemed happy with the gift. She thanked me even though I had bought a size too big and she asked if I kept the receipt.

My third meeting with the woman who works at the Cotton Ginney has yet to happen; all this smoking and hanging around in the food court is probably just my way of stalling. Am I stalling because of cowardice or because of morality? There probably isn't much difference.

And I've finally figured out what all these old men are doing at the various table around me. They're here to watch all the pretty girls pass by. Their wives, if they're still around, are probably wandering through the department outlets, the clothing boutiques, the shoe stores, the craft shops and the various knick-knack stands, and these men probably decided a long while ago that watching pretty girls was better than suffering through an afternoon of browsing.

When I think of the many mall trips that I've already made with my wife, I can understand why the old guys choose here. My first memory is of us in Sears looking for towels when we decided to live together. Then there was the trek through Carlton, Best Wishes and Hallmark to look for just the right congratulations on the birth of her niece Susan. She waited out on a park bench while I went into Shopper's Drug Mart to buy home pregnancy tests twice during our first years together. We registered at Eaton's for wedding presents. A

And as just as I decide upon action, just when I realize that I am going to say hello and much more to the young woman who works at the Cotton Ginny, I look up and see her on the escalator, slowly and smoothly descending into the court.
Want On The Subway Line

I wonder if they know I notice them, and sometimes I wonder if I should tell them I notice them. Although I cannot imagine how that first conversation could go well, I still like the idea of talking to these people. I'd like to be able to tell them they are noticed even on the days when they feel too insignificant to merit notice.

There's the kid in the school uniform; he wears tan pants and a navy jacket over a white shirt every day. I've seen him hold the key tied around his neck with a knotted shoelace. I've seen him pull the key out from under his collar and I've seen him rubbing the metal teeth with the flat of his thumb. As a child, I held my door key the same way, and when I see him rub the key with his brow furrowed, I want to tell him that everything will be all right. I want to tell him that elementary school will be over soon and I want to tell him that he might even enjoy himself in high school.

The man who always stands and reads. I've seen him on the days he has no problem concentrating and I've seen him on the days he can't seem to get through more than two pages in the whole subway ride. His eyes try and try to stay on the page, but they get away from him and steal glances of the
other passengers. What I'd like to tell him is that I'd be more than happy and more than willing to chat about any number of topics on any day he doesn't feel in the mood to read.

As I ride the subway from north to south everyday, I see the same people over and over again. Sometimes a new commuter joins me and sometimes a long-time rider will go away forever. Sometimes a new person will be just like an old person. For the twelve years I've been riding, there's been numerous kids in school blazers and countless standing men with books. Although I do notice the differences from traveler to traveler, often times the similarities outweigh the differences.

And what can I truly tell about a person through observation only? This guy reads a literary anthology and that guy reads a best-seller. This kid can't match his socks to save his life and that kid bites his fingernails. Perhaps there isn't any difference past what I can observe. It wouldn't surprise me. As a man, I know that there's often very little to know about a man that can't be gathered by a cursory glance. If I was to talk to these guys, that would probably be the best approach; I could tell them that I'm just like them and that that's all right.

So most days, I watch the women. I know that there is always more to see in a woman than any one man could see in a lifetime. And if what I see isn't true; if it isn't even close to the truth inside her, I can comfort myself by realizing that I'd never see the whole truth anyway.
Today there's the older lady in the back. She's wearing a cardigan, probably a cardigan that's seen many many years of experience. Underneath that she has on a white turtleneck. Cotton, not expensive. She dresses conservatively, but doesn't overdo it. There isn't any need to look professional at her advanced years. A grandmother wears her hair up for convenience, because she is too tired to wear her hair any other way.

What is she thinking about today? Her youngest son. She's thinking about the day her youngest son died from cancer. She has quite a few cancer stories to tell, but then again, who doesn't?

Grandmother can remember when she started smoking. She went to a diner with two friends from the typing pool after work and she was offered a Virginia Slim. At the time, she marveled at the progress of her gender. Her own mother would never have smoked in public. She mentions this fact to her two friends and they grin. One of them asks if she has seen the new advertisements in Screen magazine. A cowboy sitting astride his horse, he's wearing dungarees and smoking a Marlboro cigarette. How strange, all three women can remember Marlboro as a woman's cigarette; the faux cork filter hid lipstick marks. Pretty soon, our grandmother and her two typing friends are talking about men. Not the giggling chatter about boys that they indulged in through secondary school, this is talk about men. Marital candidates. By the time grandmother has outlined her ideal partner for life and
has matched up these qualities with the gentlemen around the office, she has accepted three cigarettes from her friend.

This will become a habit, but so what? The man she marries accepts her for how she is; he is proud of every one of her qualities. It turns out he isn't one of the men from the office at all; he's the man who sold her her first car. A used car, but still, he didn't see many women walk onto the lot at all. He was polite and fit more of the qualities she was looking for than any other man she had ever met. Both pairs of parents agreed it was a good match. As she had planned, he wasn't a man who objected to women smoking. In fact, when she raised the question, he asked "Why would I, I smoke?" As I said, it was a good match.

There were three children in all. Three boys. Yes, they would both have liked at least one little girl, but it didn't truly bother them and they didn't think about it much. There were two years between the oldest sons. The youngest son came seven years afterwards, a surprise. As the two older sons entered their teens, she would notice the alcohol on their breath and the smoke on their clothes when they came in after nights at the movies, but she wouldn't say anything to them. She mentioned it to her husband and he assured her that she reacted properly. Alcohol is a pain that all young men must grow through, he assured her. They would hardly be hypocritical enough to fault them for the cigarette habit. Perhaps they even contributed to it; if you associate the smell with parental love, it isn't a bad smell at all. How
many times had they come into a smoky car after waiting outside after hockey practice? Mom and Dad were waiting in the warm car.

Compared to this, alcohol is an easy habit to shake. The two young teens grew to be young men and sitting around the kitchen table with their parents was as real a symbol of adulthood as any. Coffee and a cigarette and the, newspaper. Only their youngest son never picked up the habit. This wasn't an active show of distinction; he simply didn't care for the taste of tobacco.

The youngest was the last to leave the home and the first to come back after his father's passing. Father was an old man by the time he passed away; his days had gotten shorter and he was napping most afternoons. He got catalogues of all the new GM automobiles long after his retirement and he would examine them carefully while sitting in his brown vinyl reading chair. One afternoon, he didn't wake up from his nap and the youngest son was the first to arrive after his mother's phone call. The youngest son was the one who comforted his mother; they calmly cried together over tea and talked about funeral arrangements. An ambulance and police car arrived about the same time as the older sons and the youngest son talked with the officials while his brothers shared their mother's sadness.

She visited her husband's grave every Saturday and the sons took turns driving her there. She would chat about her week to the stone and read to it from the weekend paper's auto

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section. None of the children were sad to perform the task, it was a routine they grew to anticipate. Sometimes the older two sons would bring their own kids with them; they'd laugh in the car as Dad told them silly jokes, but they knew enough to stay quiet at the cemetery.

In July, she noticed that the youngest son had been missing his rotation in the driving responsibility for over two months. Not that she minded, all three of her sons had obligations of their own, and, truth to tell, trips with the youngest son were the least pleasant since he had no children of his own. Children made the car rides back and forth almost festive, all their questions and all their giggles. Her mind had been slipping and so she never thought to ask when he called every Sunday. There was no answer at his apartment, so she called the oldest son. It was just a series of tests at that point, so she could forgive their discreet silence. There didn't seem any point in upsetting her; all three sons agreed. It was just as well she figured it out, though, because it turned out to be malignant. In the prostate, and he died on September the first of that same year.

Now she takes the subway by herself to visit the two separate graveyards.

And today I want to tell her about my grandmother; I want to tell her how I respected my grandmother not just because she was my grandmother but because she was a whole truth that I only understood partially.

There is a woman in her mid-to-late forties sitting
beside the grandmother. White blouse, dark blazer and no jewelry. Black hair pulled up from the back off her neck and held in a bun by some sort of hair device. A clamp, or snap or a barrette. Some sort of hair device that only women know about.

Today her mind is on her niece. This woman has no children of her own; she's sterile and this ruined her marriage. Her husband was, of course, understanding at first. This was his second marriage and he knew that perseverance was necessary. Hell, it isn't anyone's fault, right? So why dwell on the problem? He held her close and they rocked back and forth; he folded his hands around her head and buried it against his chest softly. It's all right, dear. It's all right, dear. Shhh. Quiet, quiet now. And eventually, she stopped crying. Slowly, by small degrees, she stopped crying. This woman wasn't getting over anything, you understand. The sadness wasn't disappearing, just the outward signs of this sadness. Fatigue, maybe.

This same fatigue came over him by degrees. Subtle gradations, let's call them. At no time did he ever make a conscious decision to leave his second wife, he moved that way without ever knowing it. Because, logically and reasonably, he knew that this was no one's fault. No one committed a wrong that could be pointed to. He was firm in his role at the time; he would comfort her and be with her throughout. So what happened? Let's call it fatigue again. As she was moving by degrees in one direction, he was moving by degrees
in the opposite direction. And eventually, there seemed no reason for a marriage.

She's single, a divorcee. A title which she never anticipated, something that feels out of place when she steps back and looks at herself. She's not a bitter, chain-smoking stereotype with hoop earrings and a used car. She wears a plain white blouse under a dark blazer, for goodness sake. She's tired, yes, but she is not played out.

That same year, her brother's wife got pregnant. The woman had no other family to speak of, so much of her time was spent thinking about her brother, his brother's wife and their approaching child. Nothing wrong with that. She was going to be an aunt, a role and title that she was much better suited to than divorcee. The baby came in September and she bought the baby all manner of gifts. What use a toy? By itself, a toy can only lead to play. So she bought an educational toy as well as a toy meant wholly for fun. Both of these toys were attached to a certain children's television program, so she felt she should buy another. A toy with a brand name, but one that wasn't representative of a cartoon, puppet or marketing campaign. Perhaps a simple set of alphabet building blocks. And clothing. Again, she bought both clothing with a recognizable insignia and clothing that was free of any logo. A wool knit sweater from New Zealand. And then practical clothes: undershirts, bummies and stockings.

As the niece grows older, the gifts will change. One year, a book will appear amongst the toys and the clothes.
Something fictional and age-appropriate, a title that meant something to her when she was a little girl. And then more books with the occasional toy. Every year she will give the niece's parents a couple hundred dollars for a college account, too. When she's sixteen, a hundred will be given directly to her in a card as well as the annual deposit in the college account.

Yes, the woman knows she is vicariously parenting and she knows that it is only a fractured estimation of motherhood, but she accepts the role whole heartedly. But this isn't transference. This isn't sublimation. Those are nonsense terms that cannot express even this small portion of her.

I want to tell her that I never had an aunt with whom I was close and I want to tell her that I do have a partial understanding of how much I missed out on.

There are two young women sitting beside each other behind the man standing and reading. They've been whispering comments back and forth since they got the train. They're dressed similarly, comfortable blue jeans and sweaters. The Japanese girl has her hair in a French braid, the white girl has her hair in a ponytail; same thing, really. Beautiful young women who share only a brief three-month history, but who are close nonetheless. They've been close ever since school started in September.

Both of them traveled away from their families to study. It's a long flight from New Hampshire, but it's a longer flight from Tokyo. One of them is studying communications and
one is in microbiology; these aren't fields that have a whole lot in common, but it hasn't hampered their relationship in the least.

The university placed them together in a condominium, and so they just started talking out of circumstance, really. There's a fear about being so far from family and friends, so they were happy to explore the new city together. That first day here, they hadn't gone grocery shopping, so they went out to dinner. A drink afterwards and they were both hit on at the bar. On the walk back to the campus, they discovered that they had many of the same favourite movies and they planned what videos they would rent as soon as they got settled.

On their second day, they helped one another unpack. It took longer than it would have if they unpacked individually, but classes didn't start for another week, so there was no hurry. The Japanese woman unpacked a small wire sculpture carefully and explained that it was a going-away present from her boyfriend. The American woman had a pewter picture frame with her boyfriend's picture in it. Stories about how each of them met their loved ones were exchanged sadly. In the first letters to their boyfriends, they both talked about the new friend they had made. Later, the women told one another this and laughed about how nervous they were initially.

After a month of letter writing, both women had to admit to themselves that they were probably never going to be with these men again. Too far apart for too long; this is how these things work out. Both have been dating new men, but
since their futures are so uncertain, nothing serious has yet arisen. At the end of the day, these two women are closest to one another.

Perhaps they'll keep in contact for a long time to come. Perhaps they'll write letters to one another long after they graduate from university; I'd like to think so. I'd like to think that if one of them ever does marry, she'll ask her friend to be in the wedding party. Maybe they'll play bridge as old women.

I want to tell them how much their friendship means to me; I want to tell them that I have never been as close to another human being as they are to one another and I never will be.

Maybe I'll see them tomorrow. Maybe I'll see the grandmother, the aunt and the two students tomorrow and I will tell them. I will tell the grandmother what a lovely cardigan that is and I will tell her I think her hair looks distinguished. I will ask the aunt about the hair clamp and a conversation will grow out of my simple question. Maybe I'll tell the students my favourite memories from university. I want to tell them these things; I want to fill my rides to and from work with more understanding. I want to tell the kid and the man that everything is all right, and I want these women to convince me that everything is all right.
Planted Paradise

At W.E. Thompson Elementary School, the children with learning disabilities and behavioral problems were taught in the same portable as the children labeled gifted. A wide swinging door, painted green and as high as the ceiling, divided the building into two separate classrooms. I sat near the back, in a desk with a lifting top. At that age, I never gave the label of gifted much thought; I didn't wonder what or who placed me in a whole separate room and the implications of the title weren't ever a topic of discussion during recesses. Once in a while, though, I would catch sight of the others. The special ed teacher would borrow and trade supplies with Mr. Richardson and I'd see the faces of the others as she passed through the swinging green door.

Childhood memories, what do you make of them? I don't fully know really. There, but for the grace of God, go I? Perhaps. I wish I could say that I made an effort to get to know my neighbours in the portable; I wish I could tell you that I invited them to sit and eat with us in the schoolyard during lunch. That's not true, though. They were as distinct from us as we were from the destreamed classes. The seemingly numberless children who had classes within W.E. Thompson's
main building didn't swap pudding and pb and j with us; they played red rover while we ate quietly. They were the robust children who had energy to burn; they were the healthy kids. In the portable, regardless of which side of the door your desk sat, you knew you were somehow not one of the healthy kids.

I am the Door. Ms. Templeton read that to me one day after a Sunday school lesson on Noah's Ark. She told me that the cartoon pictures of animal pair smiling were for the other children and she told me that I shouldn't pay much attention to their questions. Ms. Templeton wanted me to follow her example when listening to the children's questions. How did Noah find two fleas? How did he know that one was a boy and one was a girl? To these questions, she would nod, smile and ambiguously respond. I was always to remember that there were more important lessons, but I should keep my questions hidden from the others. So, I would sit through a rhymed version of the Ark story with the other children and then I would sit listening to her teachings on Christ by myself afterwards. I am the Door; by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.

Through all of high school, I shut myself in and read. The right room is important if you're going to seclude yourself, and in between novels, I gave my room much thought. With the door open, a room invites. A closed door, on the other hand, defines a room. I mean, what makes a room a room, if not the door? Since I'd learned that I was unhealthy and different, seclusion was the next logical step. Mind you, I
wasn't always reading; I closed and locked my bedroom door through puberty for all the common reasons too.

My private room at MacTenn Hall was at the end of the hall; on the third floor, the line of co-ed residences all ended at my door. So, at the end of a day of classes, I had to walk past all of my neighbours, some of whom had introduced themselves and some of whom I'd never spoken to.

Sometimes a door would be slightly ajar and I'd catch a glance of one of my female neighbours changing. Kelly Peirson held her hands straight up and let her sweatshirts drop down over her bra and bare stomach as she dressed. Samantha Wallace sat at the chair in front of her desk and leaned all the way back to pull on her pale stockings. Katlin Tambert walked unconsciously through her door and around to the commons room, the kitchen and the t.v. room in plaid boxers and a white v-neck undershirt.

Although I'd only spoken to her a few brief times, Katlin Talbert was, by far, my favourite neighbour. I'd often leave my own door open a crack so I could watch her pass in the hall. She caught onto my habit but, to my surprise, was not offended; the incident actually led to a happy four-month relationship.

When she caught me peeping, she said something about the doors of perception and I finished the quotation for her:

"everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."

"Hey, you're a Morrison fan."

"Umm, no."

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From the small moment onwards, she came into my room whenever she wanted to. I welcomed her; she was sex and she was drugs and, to my astonishment, she was impressed by me. For a first-year undergraduate, I guess I had read quite a bit.

Katlin was in her fifth year of studies and was leaving at the end of the term whether she graduated or not. I was just grateful for her and didn't really think past her next visit to my room. The way I think about her now, she was every awkward young man's dream come to life.

The following years of university came easily because of Katlin; women had previously seemed another distant other, but she taught me the falsity of that mystery. I had learned what to do to get close to women, what to do once close to women, and I went through whomever I could find. Break on through to the other side. I told them a whole variety of things I honestly meant and they believed most of them.

I was atte dore of thyn herte.

I have no will to wander for the doors, yet the doors are open.

He breaks up house, turnes out of doors his mind.

Would she had never come within my doors.

The novelty of abusing myself and others wore off sometime during grad school. I graduated from a high school room to a residence room at school and to a apartment with a door, but the seclusion was the same. I'd meet women and consider inviting them out to dinner or to my apartment, but
I'd always stop myself just short of forming the words I knew would work. It just didn't seem to matter either way.

Three more years of working, reading and seclusion pretty much brings me up to two months ago. Five months after graduation, I got a job with a publishing house writing advance copy for how-to books. It's a job I'm pretty well suited to; I pull the best lines from hundreds of pages and put them into paragraph blurbs. It's work I believe in, even though I know it's far from essential.

Two months ago I was sent to talk with the author of a gardening manual; she had written a thin volume on raising herbs in limited backyard space and we were interested in committing her to a whole series of backyard gardening texts. It was my job to review the paragraphs I had written on the herb text with her and to provide some examples of what I could write for the whole series. Usually, this kind of salesmanship went to others in the office, but my immediate boss said this woman wanted to meet whoever was responsible for the advance press release, so I accepted the assignment.

She greeted me at the door and introduced herself as Emma. I told her I recognized her from the jacket photo and followed her into a covered patio at the back of her home. The patio looked out over her own wide and lush backyard; a fence far back marked the end of her lot, but the field beyond there stretched back even further. Because I've always lived in cities, the open spaces of country homes honestly moves me.
Far in the back corner, there was a rectangular patch of dirt that I imagined was her herb garden. All in all, a nice view for a late shady afternoon.

Emma wore a pair of brown corduroy coveralls over a plain white v-neck undershirt, much what I had imagined a country gardener would wear. I had expected her to be cleaner, though, like the women on gardening shows who, dress for working in the dirt but never seem to have any dirt on them. Emma's elbows were stained brown and there were smudges of dry mud across her face. Her hair fell in strands out of a barrette from the back top of her head and she fussed with it as if I wasn't present.

I accepted the tea she offered and we sat exchanging pleasantries for a good half hour sitting in the outdoor air of her patio. I complimented her on what I thought was her herb garden and she smiled amusingly at my mistake. The brown rectangle of dirt near her back fence wasn't actually a herb garden, she said. She tucked her legs up in her wicker chair and admitted that she wasn't all that fond of growing herbs.

"I once had a little window box with oregano and things, but I stopped doing that years ago."

"Oh."

"No, I can't taste the difference from the dried herbs you get at the store, so the fuss isn't really worth the bother."

I reminded her of the enthusiasm and joy throughout her backyard manual.
"Well, I suppose I enjoy it then," she agreed.

She cupped her tea mug at the bottom and brought it up to her mouth. When the whole cup was drained, she put the mug down with a smile.

"Tea has an exact right temperature for drinking. I like to wait for that point and then drink it all at once."

Our conversation eventually made its way to the proposed series of books some time near dusk and she suggested we move into the kitchen. She switched on the overhead light and I saw the lines in her face clearly for the first time. Through much of our conversation on the patio, I was wondering how old she might be. I had guessed that she was older than me by about five years, but, in the well-lit kitchen, I could see I had underestimated by about five years or so. Emma was probably in her late thirties, perhaps early forties.

She sat on a stool at the cutting table and removed her heavy workboots. From inside her coverall pockets, she produced a pair of heavy wool socks and pulled them over the socks she already had on.

"My feet get so cold at night," she explained.

After another tea, I politely declined her offer of dinner and wished her good night. She had agreed to the backyard series and I told her I'd call with more details sometime during the following week.

That Saturday, I got out of bed early and turned my trip for the weekend paper into a rather long walk. I returned to the apartment just after one and made myself a tea to enjoy
with the paper. Somewhere around the Leisure section, I realized how drowsy I was and lay down on the couch. Afternoon naps are a real pleasure, I find. Without fail, I always wake up from an afternoon nap feeling warm and content. It's at these times when I wish I didn't choose seclusion; it'd be nice to share this feeling with someone else.

I guess I only nodded off for about fifteen minutes or so, because my tea was still slightly warm when I reached for it. I drank the whole mug down and remembered what Emma had said. An exact right temperature. I made myself another tea and brought it out with me to the balcony. With my legs tucked up under me on the patio chair, I waited for my tea to cool and lazily considered my own view. The tops of lower buildings made up most of my view; there were black tar roofs, stove pipes and not much else.

During the promised phone call that following week, we planned to meet to discuss the series' details more fully, and this time, I accepted her offer of dinner. Did I like chili, she asked. Well, I told her, I hadn't had chili since a school picnic over a decade ago, but I remembered liking it at the time. It was decided. I asked if there was anything I could bring and she said beers were best with chili. I laughed and told her I'd be happy to bring some.

Again, she greeted me at the door wearing coveralls and an undershirt and immediately invited me to the back patio. It was too chilly outside for the beers, so we had a tea while the chili finished stewing on the stove inside. She asked
about other books I was working on and I admitted that her
series was my only assignment at present. The herb book had
promising advance sales and my supervisor wanted to ensure
that the whole series came to be. I told her I was honestly
happy to have the assignment and explained that my normal work
didn't get me out of the office much.

A comfortable silence followed until I asked her what was
in the back garden if not herbs. Was it something she would
include in the series, I asked.

"Oh, no. That's just hobby gardening. I have the space,
so why not?"

"Why not, indeed."

Inside, I opened two bottles of beer while she placed the
crock pot in the middle of the cutting table. She apologized
for having to eat there, but she didn't have any proper dining
room set to speak of. There was a loaf of sourdough bread to
go along with the chili; I followed her lead and ripped off
bits of bread with my hands. Six beers, four bowls of chili
and the whole loaf of bread later, we sat and sleepily
chatted. As it turned out, we shared many of the same
favourite authors; we talked about where we were and how old
we were when we first read our shared favourites. The whole
second floor of her home was given over to books, she told me
- the personal library she had built over forty-two years. I
noticed that she watched my reaction to the hint of her age;
my face didn't give anything away, though, because I didn't
think anything of the news either way.

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Emma stood and reached out for my hand.
"Come on, I want to show you my back garden."
"The hobby garden."
"Yeah. My hobby garden."

Up close, the plot of rectangular dirt didn't look like much, an empty garden with a dozen or so two-by-fours wedged into the ground lengthwise. Emma carefully walked into the dirt and picked leaves and sticks off of the wooden boards.

"What are the markers for," I asked.
"Oh, they're not markers. That's my crop."

I supposed that the three beers had had an effect on one of us; perhaps I wasn't understanding properly.

"They're doors."
"Pardon?"

"They're the tops of doors. It looks like they're all going to come in in a few weeks."

Was this playful flirting, I wondered. I decided not to make an issue of this and leaned my head up to admire the stars. It always amazes me how different the sky is twenty miles out of the city. After all, it is essentially the same sky I can see from my own balcony.

"I've always meant to learn the names of the constellations," Emma said.

Funny, because I had had the same thought whenever I looked at a clear night sky. I told her that if the eyes were the windows to the soul, surely the mouth is a door.

"Pardon?"
"I'm a little bit tipsy, Emma. Sorry."

"That's all right. We should go inside for some tea. Sober you up for the drive home."

"I think that'd be a good idea."

We made tea and chatted while we washed up the supper dishes. Afterwards, she brought me upstairs to her book rooms and showed me a few of her signed editions. I mentioned that some of them must be quite valuable, but neither of us had any idea how old books were priced. She slid a volume back into the shelf and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek.

My response was an honest thank you. Emma and I spoke of getting together for lunch the following weekend and then said good night.

On Tuesday, there was a note from the supervisor in my office box; Emma's signed contract had come in late Monday night and all the particulars were in place. There was also an offer of lunch from my supervisor and I called him to accept. In the diner downstairs from our building, he congratulated on a job well done. It was his hope that I'd start seeing more clients face to face, but I politely declined the offer. I really wasn't cut out for such work, I told him; Emma had already decided to accept the series before I ever met her, really, and I hadn't done a whole lot of work persuading her.

That night, I telephoned her and related my day to her. She said I was right to turn down the offer; I was better suited to the writing of extracts that I had been doing all
along. I told her I was glad to have the business matters out of the way if we were going to see one another socially.

"You sound so serious," she laughed.

"I know."

I stayed at her home the whole following weekend; we ate meals together and chatted about ourselves. On Saturday, in the afternoon, I lay down on her couch with a book and fell off to sleep almost immediately. She woke me with a kiss on the nose and I was happy to be where I most wanted to be. She told me there was something she wanted to ask then.

"Doesn't nine years bother you?"

"You sound so serious."

She laughed, curled up beside me on the couch and we moved onto another topic.

On Sunday morning, I awoke at seven and made myself a tea in her kitchen. She had told me she liked to sleep in on Sundays and I wondered how I was going to fill the time alone. The sun warmed the patio and I stood admiring her land with my cup of tea. I had assumed that her comment about the door crop from the week earlier had been induced by the beer, so I hadn't given it much thought since. It was an odd surprise to see that there were a dozen or so planks sticking out of the ground in her rectangular garden. I took my tea outside with me and walked to the back of her land.

Sure enough, it looked as if there were a dozen doors growing out of the earth. They only stood about three feet high, but I remembered what Emma had said about them not
coming in for another couple of weeks. Already, you could make out the fact that these were front doors; they all had the same square inlaid designs. My first thought was to wonder whether they would grow with knobs or with the holes the way you see them at building centers. Then, I wondered why I was being had. Why would Emma go to these elaborate lengths just for a silly joke? I didn't get it.

I walked onto the exposed dirt and grabbed onto an end of the closest door; I wanted to find out if these were whole doors buried deep within the ground or if she had sawed off twelve tops of doors and stuck them in.

The door top wouldn't budge, so I put my tea down to get better leverage. With one good yank, the earth gave up the door and exposed roots. There were roots; dozens of them, about as many as you would expect a growing door to have, I suppose. I leaned down and held a shoot in my hand; its length was cold and damp.

Emma would be up soon and I wanted to prepare a pancake breakfast for her, so I placed the door top back down and shifted it back into the earth. The knees of my jeans were dark with wet soil and reminded me of the stains on all of Emma's clothing. I changed my pants, made the pancakes and woke her at ten with a kiss on the nose.

At work on Monday, my supervisor again asked me out to lunch. I guess that's when I realized the extent of my feelings for Emma; I would rather have sat at my desk chatting with her on the phone through the lunch hour than spend the
time on my career. I went to lunch, though. He wanted a second chance at getting me out of the office; he had written out a plan whereby I could work my way through the company ranks and have a position equal to his within a year. It was actually very kind of him to go to such a bother, but I managed to again politely decline. It wasn't hard to resist, my thoughts were all on Emma's doors.

I had had trouble sleeping the night before because I couldn't get my mind around the idea. My first thought when I woke up that morning was about doors and I thought "of course." Of course, Emma is growing doors; the more I thought about it, the more the whole thing made sense to me. By lunch with the boss, I couldn't even understand my earlier confusion. Emma grew doors. Nothing could be simpler.

The following weekend was as pleasant as the previous one; we ate and drank and talked later than we should have on Friday night and then we napped on and off for much of Saturday. Whichever one of us woke first would rouse the other with kisses on the nose. We had a late dinner of ordered in Chinese and ate right out of the cardboard containers.

We went to bed and talked with the lights out. After a few minutes of silence, I assumed she had drifted off to sleep and I turned to do the same.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes."

"I almost forgot to tell you, my doors came up this week."
Want to go see them?"

"Sure."

We didn't bother to dress, but pulled blankets over ourselves and walked outside in our bare feet. The light from the moon was bright enough to see by and I admired each of her crop. They were all fully ripe front doors, eleven of them in total. Each one had a hole where the knobs would later be installed.

"Only one didn't make it, but eleven of twelve is a pretty successful crop."

I looked at the spot where I had uprooted the door the previous week. The half grown door had warped and fallen down in the dirt; it had already begun to decay into an unrecognizable organic mass.

"I'm sorry, I think I did that. Last week, I guess I was just curious."

"You sound so serious," she laughed. "It's just a door."

The surviving crop was impressive and I told her how much I envied her green thumb. She shrugged.

"It's nothing really. Well, they're harder than herbs, but they're nothing like squash or rose bushes. You just have to get a fertilizer with a low nitrogen level."

Nitrogen levels. Of course. There wasn't any mystery to it; the most confusing part about growing doors was getting the right level of nitrogen.

I guess the cold air had awoken both of us, because we didn't feel like returning to bed. She put the kettle on for
tea while I waited on the back patio. The patio chair was cold against my naked bum and I tucked in the blanket to sit comfortably. I looked and saw the eleven doors standing solidly and reflecting the moon's light.

Emma lost her blanket while trying to carry the two mugs onto the patio. Naked and laughing, she handed the teas to me while she made her way under my blanket.
Shall Have No Dominion

August couldn't sleep; this happened often enough. It was just a matter of time before he would turn over to his left and switch on his reading lamp. From there, it was just a question of what route he would take to his nighttime drive destination. He lay in the dark and pictured himself going through all of these motions. He saw himself standing in the cold with his coat open to dry snow and when he got there, the scene was just as he had imagined it.

There is nowhere so quiet as the Rougemount cemetery at four in the morning, nowhere better for a man to speak to his dead wife. August knew that he couldn't be sarcastic here. The bitter remarks he let slip to his family, friends and coworkers to let them know he wasn't getting any better would be pointless and out of place here.

August wondered yet again whether rose stone was the right choice. It was a purchase of necessity, made without as much thought as he would have liked. Perhaps there was a better choice in the catalogue of headstones that was brought over to the house, something more appropriate to her personality and person. He bent slowly and sat beside the headstone. "In loving memory" was inlaid across the top;

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under were both their names, blank smooth rock covered where
the year of his death would eventually be chiseled.

The layout of Rougemount was logical; the headstones
lined symmetrically in rows chronologically, the oldest dead
in row A on the far left. The graves added like words from
left to right, justified columns. So far, bodies occupied up
to row K, three plots in from the left; hers was in row H. A
mound of cold brown dirt sprinkled with grass seed that August
knew wouldn’t take root until after spring thaw.

Perhaps the logic of the place’s layout demanded honesty
of mind, that and the fact that ‘dead’ has no superlative, no
comparative. Maybe, he thought. Her passing was now too far
removed to incite an outwardly passionate response, but does
anyone see the sadness inside?

“Hello, it’s me. I’ve been well, thank you. Much of the
same, really.”

August brushed snow off the marker as he spoke, both took
more effort than he felt he had in him. On better nights, he
could come here and speak idly for hours. He’d relate how his
day went, how the family was getting along, the details of
some small achievement at work, explain why he wasn’t yet
remarried or why he happened to be sad at that particular
moment. These were trivial conversation points that he knew
came out sounding sad. If he could think of something of
importance to tell her, he surely would have done so.

The same problem had bothered her after that first visit
to the specialist; at certain times, the pressure and urge to
produce profundity can be greater than decorum and ability allows. She wrote a dozen false starts on clean sheets of paper, but crumped most of the efforts somewhere after the opening paragraph. She wanted to say something of importance to everyone who loved her, to compose a eulogy to be read by her father. What to say, though. Profundity and true sentiment aren't easy. Eventually her strength gave out and he had to accept the latest draft to be read that day.

That day in the silent hall with tasteful decor full of browns and fine pine wood finishings above the embalming room and below a non-denominational steeple without a bell, August heard what his wife wanted him to hear after her death. He couldn't now remember one word of it. While reading, her father broke down and cried, August broke down and cried and distant relatives broke down and cried. Funny that he can't remember what was actually said.

"Dear?"

August closed his eyes and again pictured himself elsewhere; driving calmly just under the speed limit and passing winter scenery along the side the highway. He'd turn down the dimmer light on his dash board so it was entirely dark inside; he'd light a cigarette and watch the shadows play off his reflection in the rear-view mirror. There was a movie game they used to play together on long car rides, how did it work?

And so August got in his car and rolled back onto Rougemount road and five minutes later he was on the 401

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heading west.

"Do you remember the summer we took that two weeks together?"

There wasn't much along the highway of beauty until past Mississauga, at which point high white hills hide out along the sides of the road.

"Jesus. Look at that."

And off the highway north just past Guelph, trees, some sparse and some evergreen, canopied the road. August slipped his shoes off and felt the warm air blowing on his stocking feet. This is not the most direct route to the town he's traveling to, no. In fact, the trip is going to take an hour longer than it should. But she is somehow closer when he's just wandering; he's at ease and memories have substance.

Radio CBC sometimes ran interesting interviews and chat programs, relaxing listening for a long drive. Tonight there's a woman speaking about trends in the contemporary memoir.

"...the twentieth-century disease of exalting feeling over thought..."

The announcer's voice belonged to a round cartoon mouse, an odd persona to speak commentary. If his wife had been here, August would have made that observation aloud and gotten an inconsequential but genuine chuckle. She'd tell him he could always make her laugh, but she really loved him for his mass of inherited wealth.

It was a little after five when August passed the town of
Kincardine's population sign. Five thousand, the same as it was when they visited several summers past. She had fallen asleep ten minutes before that sign; she had this habit of drifting off just near the tail end of long car drives and August would sit watching rather than waking her. In Kincardine, he remembered watching her for a full hour before she roused and asked how long they had been sitting there.

"We just got here, dear. Would you like to go see what Lake Huron looks like?"

It had been a last-minute vacation, planned during a Saturday afternoon after lunch. She was bored with the book she was reading and asked if he really needed to work on Monday. She asked what he was game for, they both phoned work for two weeks off and drove west without any definite plans in mind.

At the end of a dead-end street, August pulled the parking brake, returned into his shoes and buttoned his coat for a walk. A travel poster in the front window of the rental office showed what one of the cabins must have looked like twenty years ago and featured the slogan "you'll never forget the time spent with us." Leaning against the glass front and peering in, August could see the lobby was unchanged, wood paneling with the finish worn off. What was that old guy's name? Something they laughed about later in their cabin. He had a greying handlebar mustache and sat on a stool behind the linoleum counter twirling the sharpened ends above his mouth. Did they want to sign the registry, did they want wake-up
calls and did they want to purchase a postcard. The man's impossibly small wife had hung behind him the whole time, silent but alert. The sundress and cardigan that she wore must have been bought at a child's clothing store.

August turned away from the deserted office and went in search of cabin seven. For most of their visit, they saw what few sights were to be seen and flirted on the beach, but they returned to the unheated cottage at night and it held several tender memories. A padlock held the screen door loosely closed, rattling busily against the frame. He considered forcing his way; the hinges didn't look like they'd hold up to much pressure, but he turned to the frozen fire pit instead. They had taken turns telling one another camp stories on their second night here; she told a story about a man with a hook who had escaped from an asylum. He told a story about a young couple that met and fell in love over and over again. Although she said she could see his story coming, she laughed anyway. The next morning they found a spot on the beach that was more or less secluded, in the shade of several trees and straight in from a boulder in the water. If she stood on her toes, she could just make out the tip of this boulder about a block away, but it was actually sizable when she waded out to it. Up to her shoulder, August had to pull her carefully out of the water so she could sit with him and watch the slow-moving water all around them. Other times they shallow-dived off the rock, cut the water and made their way back to try again. On days in which the water was calm, the rock's
surface stayed dry, a light dry pink speckled through with white flecks.

He eventually found their spot on the beach, though the trees around it didn't provide any shade without their leaves and the boulder was hidden frozen and not at all visible from the shore. Their beach umbrella sat here and they laid their towels out side by side. August rubbed his foot against the frozen sand and dislodged some grains.

He turned again to the lake and tried to make out the boulder, but again couldn't spot it. Snow blew across the surface, running around the uneven waves caught in a cold snap. At the shore, the change from beach to water was so slight that August almost missed it. Just a slight creak as he stepped onto the lake. He noticed a gentle change in the tone of the creaks as he walked farther out. It would probably hold his weight, but he wasn't certain. Lake Huron must never freeze over entirely, he thought as he looked farther ahead for moving water. The ice's frozen edge was barely perceptible, a comma between blue tints. A near invisible transition from where August stood.

The boulder, when he reached it, came up almost to his ankle; its colour, except for the patches of snow caught in its crevices, was exactly how he had remembered it. A soft pink, more natural than any of the rock offered in the headstone catalogue. August sat with his back to the wind and pulled his legs into himself. Tired, he shut his eyes and tried not to think of the chill that made him shiver. A
restful sleep probably wasn't possible, but August knew he'd sit for a long while this way. She had sat in this same spot in the red and blue plaid bikini she bought nearby in town; she told him she would never wear it in front of anyone but him.

Exactly how much time had passed was unclear; how much time does it take to run through dozens of memories? He rubbed his legs and thought of the coconut lotion she wore continuously through their stay; her clothing had held the smell and August remembered catching traces of it around the apartment well into the autumn. He remembered that she looked fun in her baseball cap and serious in her sun hat. He remembered that she woke before him everyday of their vacation and had a new way of rousing him each time.

"Excuse me. Hello?"

August looked up at the figure waving frantically from the shore, a short parka with two legs. It was a real woman's voice but the figure couldn't have stood much higher than four feet.

"Please come in."

It didn't occur to August that he had any choice in the matter and so he stood and again made his way across the frozen water, this time not wondering if the surface below his feet would give way.

The figure on shore walked away before August reached her; he followed her towards the rental office and went inside. The parka's billowed white trim looked up at him and
asked if he was all right.

"Yes," he said "why wouldn't I be?"

August stamped his feet, first vigorously, and then, realizing the wooden floor planks might not take the pressure, he lightly walked in place. Two mitten hands pulled back the parka hood and revealed the mustached man's tiny wife, several years older but with the same alert quiet on her face. She pulled a kerosene space heater out from behind the counter and lit the pilot light with matches from her pocket.

"I stayed here years ago." August offered. "Cabin seven. We, my wife and I, just ended up here. One of those wandering vacations that kind of pull you along."

He let his voice trail off and regarded the postcard carousel, largely empty except for a few identical sunset shots. It seemed to him that his wife took up the mustached man's offer years ago and that a similar postcard must be stashed somewhere along with her belongings. Perhaps in one of the boxes in the pantry.

A thermos sat on the counter with two steaming mugs beside it, an offer from this woman that he must have missed but gratefully accepted. August cupped his hands around the mug and tested the coffee's temperature.

"Your husband had this impossible mustache and I'm afraid my wife and I mocked it quite seriously. We were often so wrapped up in one another that we didn't really think too much about others. He was very kind to us, now that I think about it. Brought firewood out and a bag of marshmallows one
night."

"He'd try different kinds of mustaches," she said quietly, "every once in a while. I only have one picture of that. He smoothed some kind of wax into it."

August nodded, considering the importance that this trivia had to her.

"You and your wife must have been here in eighty-five?"

August thought but couldn't place the date exactly; pleasant memories had a way of existing only in a vague past.

The woman placed her mug down and walked behind the linoleum counter, bending down to retrieve a registry. Masking tape stuck to the book's cover with the date written neatly in black marker.

"You're welcome to have a peek through."

August paged slowly each column, looking for his wife's slanted script. She was always embarrassed by her handwriting, something which August never could understand. Although he couldn't understand why, August felt a slight surprise when he came across their names. Mr. and Mrs. She had stood in this spot and written in this book. August pressed his finger against the pages and traced their names lightly.

"Thank you."

The woman looked down at the floor and nodded.

"I don't know how long you were sitting out there, but your car might need a boost. That is your car parked at the end of the road out there?"
"Yes."

Tomorrow he would drive around the town and visit the shops he and his wife had browsed in, if they hadn't closed down. He could walk through the shops where they had bought supplies, alcohol and impractical vacation food. Maybe stop in at the department store and survey the bikini selection.

August again thanked the woman, apologized for inconveniencing her and asked where he could find a motel room, somewhere to warm himself properly and nap before tomorrow's long drive home.
Headcheese

In the dream, I'm always in a foreign country; it's never the same foreign country from one night to the next, but it is always a country in which English is not spoken.

I should stop here to clarify a point: I'm not one to attach any particular significance to dreams. Dream or don't dream. Remember a dream or lose a dream before I'm finished shaving. Either way, they're just stuff I think about while I'm asleep and there really isn't any need to attach some interpretation or prophetic value to them.

So the dream is set in Portugal one night and the next night it's in the Soviet Union or Mexico, or where ever. Never the States, England or New Zealand; it's always somewhere where nobody speaks English.

At one point, I thought the problem was my lack of knowledge. Whenever I meet someone who can speak or read more than one language, I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I'm limited to English. I avoid the French and Spanish teachers in the staff room. Sticking with the English and Drama teachers is the safest way to go; I'm most comfortable around people who are as ignorant as I am. And so, I assumed that the dream was an extension of this anxiety; I felt guilt while I was awake, so I should expect guilt while I slept.
In the dream, I have a craving for cheese, an urgent and undeniable craving for cheese. Craving may not even be the right word; the sensation isn't the same as the one I sometimes have during fourth period when I think to myself, "geeze, I think I'd like to order in some pizza tonight." That kind of craving is a passing fancy compared to the dream craving. In the dream, the craving is a need to fill something inside of me that is missing; the craving is a desire to fill something that has been lost, a way of dealing with loss.

The loss is impossible to deal with, though, because I don't know the words. I run around from dream house to dream house, knock on the dream doors, only to discover that I can't say what it is I want when the dream women answer.

Oh yeah, I should have mentioned that it's always dream women. What I'm supposed to make of that, I don't know.

I say the word cheese, even though I know the word won't work. In the dream, I know the word isn't going to work even while I'm saying it, but I try anyway. The dream women smile and shake their heads to show that they don't understand; their friendliness and patience are the same not matter where the dream takes place. The smiles are meant to comfort me, I suppose, but they have an opposite effect on me; their friendliness and patience makes me want to be understood all the more.

So that's the dream, the little drama that has followed me through six semesters. At some point last spring, I decided that I'd take steps towards turning the dream around.
Like many of the teachers I know, my summers are opportunities that I waste year after year. If I spent my summers learning foreign languages, I'd be multilingual by now, but I repeatedly waste the time reading more and more books, fictional literature that only expands my knowledge of trivia. So this summer, I set about learning the words for cheese in as many languages as I could. If my waking mind knew the words, I reasoned that my dream mind would be able to form the necessary words too.

Although I hadn't spent any time in the university library since graduation, I quickly remembered how to track down specific information amongst floors of stacks. In fact, the process had grown much simpler since I attended school; card catalogues do have a certain charm, but they cannot keep up with on-line cross references. The information I thought I needed was all in one building; all I had to do was footwork and I learned. The Lebanese sounds like "jibin." The Serbian "ceera" comes from the Russian and the Macedonian "cerenca" has its origins in Greek. I learned much about the words for cheese.

One search through the world wide web led me to Kincardine. According to the site, the town of Kincardine had been hosting an annual cheese festival every August since 1970. The celebration marked the opening of the town's main industry, a cheese factory built nearly thirty years ago that has been the town's largest employer since. I browsed through the site and found that the factory was such a part of the town's culture that it affected local slang and idiom.
I learned that "the blues" refers to common ailments such as colds and stomach flus, deriving from the feeling one gets after eating too much blue cheese. I learned that "respecting the cheese" means obeying posted speed limits. And I learned that a "head" (or "'ead" to the older townsfolk) is an odd or peculiar occurrence.

After a month of library visits, I decided that I would attend the town's cheese festival. Since I prefer night driving, I didn't depart for Kincardine until after a late showing of Apocalypse Now, and by the time I passed the town's green population board, it was morning. Six in the morning and already there were indications of the festival. Two men strung a banner across the town's only set of traffic lights and a group of six or seven older folks stuck small signs into the grass along the main street.

I parked the car by the town square and took a short walk. There was a band shell decorated with yellow streamers and I sat down in the middle of the empty platform. I imagined the crowd that would soon be assembled on the very spot and I imagined the crowd that would huddle in front of this spot. They'd come to listen to the speakers and they'd come to hear the live music. The mayor would tell the anecdote she told every year and it would be well received by everyone. There would be stands selling huge bricks of cheese and there'd be stalls giving away curds. And after the factory president spoke to the listening audience about recent sales increases and the projected expansion in the new millennium, the high school band would break into a lively
rhythm without missing one beat.

I could feel my body swaying while I stood in the empty band shell; the need for sleep started to affect my body and I knew that I'd have to catch a couple of hours of rest if I wanted to be around for the night's festivities. Since I only needed a nap, I figured that a hotel was unnecessary and I decided to drive down to the lake. The roads in Kincardine all lead downhill towards Lake Huron and finding a quiet, private spot was easy. I turned off the engine, rolled the front windows down a crack and crawled into the back seat.

And when I awoke, it was dark; I had slept through the day and I missed the festival. What's funny is that I can usually wake up when I want to, no matter how few or how many hours of sleep I've had. I've taught Mondays after a full eight-hour sleep and I've taught Mondays after being up since Saturday; the students cannot tell the difference. If I tell my waking mind to sleep only three hours, my sleeping mind knows what to do three hours later.

In Kincardine, though, my sleeping mind seemed to ignore my wishes; I settled in behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition. The dashboard clock read half past eleven in the morning, which meant that I'd slept seventeen hours. Seventeen hours, I couldn't understand. My body hadn't reacted to a lack of sleep like this since my last university exam period.

Back up the uphill street at the town square, I found the band shell empty. Some of the yellow streamers were torn and fallen onto the grass. Litter lay scattered around the area,
plastic cheese wrappers and red wax thrown away carelessly during the celebration. All that forgotten garbage made the abandoned square feel even more abandoned. I walked onto the band shell stage where I had stood seventeen hours earlier and imagined all that I had missed.

I imagined the mayor again. The high school band again and the factory president again. The very young children would've run around and their mothers and their fathers would've run behind them. I would have heard much of the local language that I drove three hours to hear, and in between the cheese words, there would have been much laughter.

"What are you doing?"

I turned around and saw a woman standing with me in the band shell. She leaned against the rail casually and I wondered how long she'd been watching me.

"Just looking around."

She nodded.

"It's rather late."

"I just slept seventeen hours."

I couldn't think why I told her that and I fumbled for conversation.

"Did you go to the festival?"

"I'm lactose intolerant."

"Oh."

"Local joke."

"Oh."

She introduced herself. I introduced myself. And we went for a drink.
Ruth turned out to be a teacher too, and like many teachers I know - myself included - she drank too much throughout the summer. I've always found that even small amounts of alcohol help smooth over stunted and broken conversation; we lounged in a booth at a tavern until two in the morning, discussing whatever topics floated in and out of our conversation. From what she told me, I could see that my image of the cheese festival was inflated. The mayor didn't speak and there wasn't any high school band. The president of the factory did, in fact give a speech, but it was poorly attended.

"Mostly it's just the president and a couple of other cheese employees handing out free samples all day. Most of the town shows up for a little while. Wander in on their lunch hour, and mothers taking the kids for a walk. There's never really a crowd all at once."

She told me that the local slang did exist, but it was used sarcastically when used at all; the web site turned out to be some bored kid's idea of a joke.

We talked about teaching and told each other about students we'd had. She asked me how many Ruths I'd ever had in classes and I was able to tell her the exact number; it's a memory trick that teachers do and only other teachers seem to appreciate it. Ruth taught French and German, but also knew Latin and Ancient Greek.

"They're useless leftovers from Classical Studies," she explained.

In a moment of openness brought upon by the alcohol, I
admitted my fear of language instructors.

Since driving was out of the question, Ruth suggested that I return home with her; I could tell the offer was more hospitality than come-on, but I accepted anyway. At her house, we drank tea to sober up before bed and chatted more. At one point, she told me that she was always a little intimidated by the English teachers at her school because they seemed to be constantly learning new material while the language instructors taught the same lessons year after year.

"Strange that the people you are intimidated by can also be the people you're intimidating," she commented. I had nothing to add to her sober comment and struggled for a new topic.

"Have you seen Apocalypse Now?" I asked.

"Shit, Saigon."

"Pardon?"

"Another useless leftover from Classical Studies. Refer to movies by their first line rather than the studio's title."

"Oh."

"And yes, I have seen it.

"I watched it last night before I left for here. And I was thinking about it while I was driving. The ending specifically. And I couldn't remember if it was 'the horror, the horror' or 'the terror, the terror'. And I think what's tripping me up is Bridge On the River Kwai."

"Does it matter?"

"No, I suppose not, but you know, I use the movie every semester for the twelve class when they do Heart of Darkness
and so I've seen it many many times and you'd think I'd be able to keep it straight in my head."

"They're just words from a movie."

"Yes."

We talked about movies for a couple of hours, and only stopped when Ruth noticed morning was coming around. Since there was nothing stopping me from driving at that point, I told her I should be on my way.

"Well, you're welcome to stay. Labour day isn't for another couple of weeks, so you won't be bothering me."

After she said good-night and climbed the stairs to her bed, I turned on the television and flipped channels. The seventeen hours had done something odd to me and I couldn't imagine ever being tired again. There wasn't anything on except morning shows, so I switched off the television and lay back on Ruth's sofa.

An hour later, I was still just lying there, awake and thinking about Ruth. Yesterday, I couldn't have pictured a stranger offering her sofa, and I couldn't have imagined accepting such and offer, but she did offer and I was accepting. At some point, I had to use the washroom and I climbed the stairs to do so. The door to her bedroom was open and I couldn't help taking a glance in. She was sleeping soundly, bundled up tight in a quilt and I must have watched her for a full ten minutes; I listened and I watched as she breathed loudly and heavily.
The Grace Of Synapses

Gerard Canton loved shaving. He loved shaving the way he loved ironing and clipping his toenails and Sunday afternoon baths, set routines that soothe and comfort simply by being monotonous, repetitive and free of thought or complication. Gerard thanked God for shaving, but he thanked God quietly.

His smirk was thanks; after he held the blower dryer up to the bathroom mirror and formed a clear circle out of the hot shower fog, he smirked at his own reflection and his smirk was a form of sad gratitude.

He pointed the can of Barbasol into his palm and released the foam, watching the ball expand and grow until there was more than he needed. For twelve years, he'd been wasting shaving cream this way, releasing more than was needed just to watch the circle expand in his hand and every day the blossoming cream was a wonder to behold. The can of Barbasol itself was a wonder, an unassuming cylinder of red and white stripes that he'd been buying for twelve years.

Twelve years, Gerard wondered.

No, twelve years was over-estimating. Although he'd been shaving since he was fifteen - which was, he admitted to himself, probably two or three years before the grooming was
really necessary - he'd only been using cream and a blade for eight years.

Eight years, then.

Gerard had been buying the red and white can that was, to his way of thinking, the least pretentious design of all the creams stocked on the shelf at Shopper's Drug Mart, for eight years. Barbasol's only compromise was a variation on stripe colour: pink and white stripes for sensitive skin and green and white stripes for aloe-scented. It seemed to Gerard that the design was an outdated form of packaging, and, in fact he seemed to remember the same can sitting on the bathroom counter when he, as a boy, watched his father shave. He also remembered a brush. He could clearly remember a shaving brush sitting on the soap dispenser in his father's bathroom. If he was using Barbasol from a can, he wondered, what possible use could a shaving brush have had?

Starting with his neck, Gerard patted the cream onto his face in soft slaps. As he always did, he worked the cream up from his neck to his nose and then right cheek over to the left, a cross pattern that brought Catholicism to mind. With that done, he rinsed off the remaining Barbasol from his palm while filling his sink with hot water.

Shelley had used hot water to shave him that first time. Since then, he'd tried using cold water only once; after seeing the Coen Brother's *Miller's Crossing*, following the advice of the mob boss played by Joe Polito, Gerard had tried shaving with ice water. In the movie, Polito had explained
that since cold causes metal to contract, rinsing the razor with cold water would sharpen the blade and make for a closer shave. At the time, the theory seemed to make sense to Gerard, but when he put it into practice, he couldn't feel any notable difference on his face. The failed experiment, however, didn’t stop him from following another movie’s advice on shaving. He and Shelley had just seen Whit Stilman’s Barcelona downtown and, during the car drive back home, they talked about their favourite parts, a conversation they had after nearly every movie. Shelley had wondered if, like Christopher Eigeman's character in the beginning of the film, Gerard shaved against the grain of his stubble, or if he, like the same character at the end of the movie, shaved with the grain of his stubble. Gerard couldn’t remember, and so, when they arrived home, he shaved and found that he actually shaved in both directions: against the grain on both his upper neck and underneath his chin and with the grain on his face.

Gerard shook the razor in the hot water and started on his neck with small strokes. Shelley should have been able to figure that out, he thought. If Shelley had remembered the first time he was shaved with a blade, she would have been able to figure out that he went both with and against the grain. Eight years ago, they had spent two weeks in a cottage outside of Orillia; it wasn’t a honeymoon exactly, but they both thought of it that way afterwards. Their actual honeymoon, the one that followed the wedding, had been a rushed long weekend because Gerard had only been able to
afford a short time off work. The cottage trip had been leisurely, two weeks of overeating, midnight skinny dipping, sleeping in, and sharing the shower stall in the morning. After the shower, Gerard had started shaving with his Gillette Tracer from the bedroom.

"Do you always use that thing?" she had asked.

"Well, yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just always have. Well, not always. I only started shaving at fifteen. Doug and Hayley bought it for me that Christmas and I remember they teased me about it. Hayley always teased Doug that he didn't need to be shaving and now he was corrupting his little brother into shaving. I'd tried shaving with his razor once and he walked into the washroom while I was using it. Wasn't mad exactly, but I think he punched me in the shoulder, anyway. So I yelled out and Hayley came into the washroom to see what was going on and she started teasing both of us. She was singing that song from the commercial. 'I can't face her; I can't face her without my Tracer.' So when they bought it for me at Christmas, it was kind of a joke, but it was also nice. So I've just always used it."

Shelley had shook her head, he remembered.

"You just like that memory don't you? You've been using that electric thing for four years just because you like the memory."

"I guess so."

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She then took him by the elbow and sat him on the hamper. From her travel bag of toiletries, she removed her own razor and her own brand of shaving cream. Gerard started to say something but she just placed her finger over his lips.

"Shhhh."

She remained silent while she softly patted the pink foam onto his neck and face, and when she did speak, she spoke in a low calm voice.

"Hold still. And let's see if you can keep from talking for a few minutes. Lift your chin."

He did as he was told.

"Your hair grows in all these different directions. Different than shaving my legs."

When she had finished, Gerard stood and admired her work in the small cottage mirror. He had to admit that the shave was much closer than the electric razor ever provided. For the rest of that day, a sweet smell somewhere between cotton candy and lilacs had followed him around.

As he remembered this, Gerard cut himself. She should have remembered, he thought. She taught me how to shave with a blade and she should have remembered. The wound was only a small nick of flesh of the jaw, but the blood ran down his neck quickly. He grabbed a Howard Johnson's towel and pressed.

In the mirror, he looked in bad shape. Recently, he'd started smoking more and drinking himself to sleep too many nights. Now he had added a scab to his poor complexion. Buck
up, he thought; this too shall pass. And tightened up his
gut.

He dabbed with the towel one more time before setting it
down on the counter. Stealing hotel towels had been Shelley's
idea. She'd take ashtrays, soaps, towels, stationery and
pillows too. She had once taken an RCA television remote from
a suite in Auckland that she knew wouldn't work anywhere else.

Gerard leaned closer to the mirror to shave above his lip
and wondered if he shouldn't grow some sort of facial hair. A
small mustache might be a pleasant change. Or a beard. He
remembered a guy from first-year university residence who let
his facial hair grow every Christmas and Easter. The gesture
was more to mark the exam periods than to celebrate the
religious holidays. This fellow, whatever his name was, would
shave only after the exam period ended; he'd come back to the
floor straight from writing the last exam and shave his face
piecemeal. Gerard remembered trying to study in own room and
the knocks on his door that came at five-minute intervals.
The first knock on the door produced this guy with a full
beard and a shiteating grin.

"Whooohoo, I am finished, done, over and done with, no
more studying and that's all, my friend."

Five minutes later, he knocked to show off his
muttonchops and goatee. Then there were five minutes, a knock
and just the goatee. Knock, a van Dyke. Knock, a mustachio.
Knock, the mustache of a traffic cop. Knock, Hitler. And
knock, clean shaven.
The one time Gerard had attempted a mustache brought giggles from Shelley.

"You've got quite the little affectation going there," she had said just before he went home and removed the slight growth.

Gerard's face was still covered half in white foam when he realized that he had failed to put music on. As it was with any routine whether shaving, ironing, toenail clipping or Sunday afternoon baths, the background music was crucial to Gerard's enjoyment. He left the bathroom for the living room and selected Ennio Morricone's score for The Mission. With the music turned up loud, he could still make out every movement when he went back to the bathroom. Gerard listened to the sweeping orchestral swoons and again smirked at his reflection. Doing fine, he thought.

During the past year, he had rediscovered instrumental music; Shelley only loved lyrics, and so he hadn't listened to several albums in his collection in years. A few months after her passing, he was in the supermarket trying to shop for one and he heard "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" over the sound of families shopping. He had to stop his cart and concentrate to identify the piece. Gerard ended up enjoying browsing for groceries, another pleasure he hadn't known while Shelley was alive. Now, whenever he needed food, he'd spent hours leisurely walking up and down the aisles. He bought foods that he knew were bad for him and swayed his cart to Bach.

Grocery shopping, like shaving, became one of the rituals in
which he could lose himself; he could relax and let his mind flutter from one unimportant thought to the next.

Thoughts betray, though, and Gerard started to think about his plans that evening. He started to think about the date he agreed upon for that evening. After years of marriage, a date is an odd word. This woman, Ruth, was from Gerard's office. This woman, Ruth, had asked him out to lunch more than once; at first, Gerard believed that she was just trying to keep the widower company and politely turned down her offers. Later, he wondered if her invitations weren't genuine and he politely turned down her offers. Last week he politely turned down an offer to dinner and motioned back to his desk when he felt her hand on the back of his neck. She was touching him to fix the collar of his shirt and he asked if the dinner offer was still good.

Gerard shaved the last of the cream off his face, cut the bottoms of his slight sideburns into sharp lines and rinsed his face. Perhaps a date wasn't a good idea, he thought. A year isn't long enough to mourn and he wasn't ready, he thought. His mind turned again; the neurons communicated from one cell to another, traveling from axons to dendrites until the synapses completed their pilgrimage and Gerard thought that maybe a date was somehow a step forward.

Cupping his hand under the faucet, Gerard rinsed the sink of dozens of millimetre long hairs and globs of spent shaving cream. A bubble formed around the drain and reminded him of the hospital room. Shelley, during her final week, asked him
to bring soap. Forget magazines, she had said. Forget magazines and forget crossword books, she had said. She wanted dish soap and they filled the room with floating bubbles all during that last week.

Gerard thought if he ever married again, he'd want small jars of dish soap on every table. Forget potpourri, he thought. Forget potpourri, forget matchbooks, forget seedlings and forget mints, he thought. The guests at his second wedding would fill the hall with floating bubbles.

With the blood-spotted towel, Gerard dried his face, listened to Morricone and recalled the cross launched over the waterfall. It was a movie he and Shelley had rented and watched together on a Sunday afternoon. While the end credits scrolled down the screen and the score played, he and his wife danced in their living room. Just as they had danced years ago on the side of the 400 highway with the car headlights on, the windows open and the tape deck turned loud. He then remembered the skunk that abruptly ended the gazebo picnic of Coca-Cola and ruffled Pringles potato chips during that second summer together. That was the summer he had a summer job with the township of York and was making more money than he would for the first three years after graduating university, money that all went to weekly long stems and savings for the Christmas to come. A 100% wool sweater from Eddie Bauer they picked out together when he was invited to her family's Christmas eve which he wore while she drank too much red wine and spoke too loudly to her relatives. Drinking Tom Collins
in the parking lot outside a Tom Waits concert, adults necking like on prom night. The stereo stand, the queen -size pine and the hope chest, Ikea furniture they picked out for their first apartment. The hug at his grandfather's funeral. Betting with kisses on Oscar night. Dinosaur mini-putt in Niagara Falls. The first of her clothes that he put his hand inside, a purple tee shirt and white shorts. The year they lived 280 kilometres away from one another and managed to speak daily on a Sprint Canada premium package. Spelling out "do you want to make love" in scrabble tiles on her bare tummy in a trailer outside of Belleville. Her only brassiere with a clasp at the front, the burgundy one. Shelley's bridal speech and her rose stone monument.

Gerard finished drying his face, hung the towel neatly on the rack and left the bathroom to dress for his dinner date.
The Warmest Room

Douglas sat up straighter when he realized Nick was eyeing him. He watched Nick wipe the counter top between them and wondered how long he'd been staring at his half empty pint.

"Just feel like nursing them this afternoon?" the bartender asked.

"Yes. Sorry, my friend. I guess I'm not all here today."

Nick nodded a smile at his customer.

"That's all right. Pretty slow day. Makes the mind wander."

When Douglas didn't reply, Nick added "I'll grab the tab for you" and knocked his knuckles on the bar top.

It was a little after 5:30 by Douglas' heavy silver watch, an anniversary present from Pamela on their twentieth. Time to get going, he thought. Douglas fished through his suit pocket for dollar coins, found three and left them for Nick beside his glass. This was the way he always tipped at the hotel bar, not by the round, but all at once before he exited.

Hungry, Douglas decided he'd grab an all day breakfast
special from the diner on the corner before he went back to his room for the night. He had steak and eggs, sunny side up with a side of wheat toast and two double double coffees while he tallied up his day in his head.

There really wasn't that much to review. He'd shown only one house that day, an overpriced walk-up condominium right downtown. The guy obviously wasn't that serious, so Douglas made no real effort to sell the place. Why waste his breath stressing hardwood floors and pointing out how close by the elementary school was? The place was shown in near silence. Douglas mumbled a few things about storage space when he opened the closets and cupboards, but neither one of them made any attempt at conversation. By three in the afternoon, the showing was over; Douglas gave the man his card, locked the condo's front door, and completed his first, last and only obligation of the day.

Since then, he'd been letting his mind wander at the hotel bar, remembering the days and the conversations that led up to the warmest room last year. He'd thought about Pamela's missed period and how it was strange what personal information a husband and wife share. Before marriage, this was something mysterious, a physiological reminder of Pamela's gender that always took Douglas by surprise. Once married, though, she would provide this information as readily as a grocery list, but he still never learned to expect what was coming. Even after almost thirty years, eight as high school sweethearts and twenty-one as husband and wife, he never knew
when to expect her days. So it wasn't odd that he didn't notice she went two months without it. It wasn't surprising that he had no clue to her body's change when she told him one night before sleep.

"It's foolish, I know. Just my body going through aging. Just my body moving on."

He held her and said he'd make them an appointment at the family doctor in the morning.

The following week, in the doctor's waiting room, they sat holding hands and waited for the blood and urine tests. Then they sat in the doctor's office, held hands and waited for Dr. Mendolshonn to tell them all the physiological ins and outs of menopause. Douglas patted the back of her hand and told her what great old people they'd make. He painted a picture of them on the porch of a country house. They'd sit on the steps and he'd pat the back of her hand like he was doing then. He affected an exaggerated aged voice and called her 'mother.' By the time Dr. Mendolshonn entered, both Pamela and Douglas were in good spirits, smiling at one another playfully.

The news wasn't what they expected, though. At forty-five, Pamela was pregnant. While Mendolshonn talked of the dangers and described various courses of action that they could take, Pamela tried to remember her first pregnancy fifteen years earlier and the birth of their daughter Juliette. Try as she might, though, she couldn't remember enough of the physical sensations of pregnancy to compare them
to the feelings her body had been going through for the previous two months.

Douglas was also paying little attention to the doctor's words. His thoughts were on the possibility of a second chance at fatherhood. This was a whole new opportunity to raise an infant from birth into a person, a chance to correct the missteps and choices that he regretted through Juliette's fifteen years. There was, he knew, a lack of consistency in his role as father. Too often he had been lax when he knew what he should have been strict, and too often he had been strict when he knew what he should have been was understanding. He shouldn't have encouraged his infant daughter to say "dammit," no matter how cute it was, and he shouldn't have sent her directly to Pamela when she asked him about menstruation. He had acted, he knew, like a stupid, stupid man. Juliette had grown into a happy average fifteen-year-old despite his failings, but he regretted playing what he saw as a passive, or even detrimental part in her maturation. That day in the doctor's office, he watched Dr. Mendolshonn's lips move, but he thought about fatherhood the whole while.

As Douglas finished his plate, sopping up the last of the runny yoke with the wheat toast, he wondered whether or not it had been his absorbed thoughts of fatherhood that began the path that led him to his single room at the hotel. And he hated himself. He knew that the harshest criticisms of himself were not enough; it was his fault for not listening to
Mendolshon that day. It was his fault for not fully considering the dangers of a late pregnancy. It was his fault the baby didn't live until birth and it was his fault Pamela and Juliette were now living without a husband and father.

Douglas took off his glasses and pinched his swollen eyes just as the waitress came to offer him a coffee refill.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No. No, I'm fine, thank you."

She shrugged and left after topping up his mug. Buck up, he told himself; nothing evidences complete ruin like public displays of grief and he couldn't believe he had let himself get so worked up thinking about the warmest room.

He and Pamela and Juliette had painted the room on the first thaw after winter, spring's abrupt arrival and Juliette was home on a P.A. day, flipping through magazines on the living room floor while Douglas updated his client list in their study.

One of Pamela's prospective buyers had settled earlier than expected and guaranteed her a large commission cheque, a cheque she decided to spend on remaking a room for the baby. She entered the house early in the afternoon and called out to her husband and daughter for help. They came to the front door and each took a can of paint out of her hands.

"There's a third one in the car," she panted. "The guy at the store said we'd need at least three to coat the room properly."
Douglas went out for the third can and returned to find his wife and daughter arguing. This kind of trouble from Juliette was getting more and more common. She didn't want to do this, she thought that was stupid and her parents were growing embarrassing. The present dispute was over the fact she didn't want to help paint the baby's room. It was stupid and they couldn't force her to do it, she said. He listened and watched his wife's excitement deflate. She'd probably been looking forward to this, Douglas thought. She probably has been planning it in the back of her mind for a couple of weeks.

He tried to settle the dispute without notice.

"C'mon, bunny. It'll be fun. We'll put on old clothes, order some pizza and get real messy."

His daughter looked at him and it was all she could do to stop her eyes rolling. He'd blown it with her again, he thought. Fifteen-year-old girls don't want their fathers calling them bunny.

Pamela walked into the kitchen.

"Please do this, Juliette."

She left him standing in the front hall and followed her mother into the kitchen. They'd settle it on their own, he told himself. They'd talk, and, by the time he retrieved the rollers and drop cloths from the basement, they'd be hugging and apologizing to one another. Living in the same house with two women, Douglas had long ago learned that it was best simply to roll along with these little ripples in his daily
life. The smallest disturbance could set emotions roaring and
he knew the best way to deal with them was with passive calm.

And as he had expected, when he came up from the
basement, the two of them were sitting together at the kitchen
table wiping away their tears.

* * *

Pamela checked the time by her station wagon dashboard
and wondered what could possibly be holding up the couple.
They'd agreed to meet at the house for their second viewing at
five o'clock and it was now almost half past the hour.
Probably held up gossiping in the staff room, she thought.
Teachers are a strange breed.

She had had this thought before. Two months earlier, she
went by herself to a parent-teacher interview and met Ms.
Mills, Juliette's ninth grade English and Drama teacher.
Usually Douglas went to the meetings at school by himself and
she stayed away because she tended to work later hours, but
with his absence, she was forced to cut her day short. Ms.
Mills (call me Ellen) couldn't have been more scatter-brained,
in Pamela's opinion. The woman giggled and fussed when she
was unable to locate Juliette's records amongst the stacks of
papers and piles of binders on her desk.

"Well, we'll just have to make do with what I can
remember about your daughter's performance, won't we?"

After another small run of embarrassed giggles, Ms. Mills
made some vague criticisms about Juliette's less than cooperative disposition. Pamela knew about the disposition and certainly didn't need some twit who'd only known her daughter for three months reminding her about it, so she decided to defend Juliette.

How does this woman possibly control groups of thirty teenagers eight hours a day, she wondered as she again checked the dashboard clock. Teachers can be a contradiction, she thought; they can be models of efficiency while in front of children, but they can also be absent-minded fools who make their real estate agent wait for half an hour. Once they've left school property, she thought, all bets are off.

Late clients were the only drawback to this job, in Pamela's mind, and she'd remarked this to Douglas more than once. "People just don't seem to realize how little there is for us to do while we wait around." Douglas would usually nod and smile, but he wasn't one to speak complaints aloud. He'd been doing the job longer than she, and she often felt like he still treated her like a trainee. She'd be the first to admit how little she knew about the job when she first started as an office secretary in Douglas' firm. She'd file, she'd type and she'd answer the phones; it was a good way to spend the days once Juliette started full days at school. After a few years, though, she grew restless, studied for her license and took a job at a competing firm. She thought the move was for the best, really. Husbands and wives shouldn't compete for the same properties.
It was a job she was good at, she knew. Her favourite sales were to young couples. She'd imagine them walking barefoot to the kitchen nook for morning coffees, she'd imagine them cleaning the two-and-a-half baths frantically before the wife's parents came to dinner, she'd imagine them celebrating every anniversary by candlelight in the dining room and she'd imagine them discussing what colour to paint the baby's room. With these thoughts, it wasn't difficult for her to convince clients how well suited they were to a particular home.

The house she was waiting in front of was a large country ranch style, an easy sale to her way of thinking. This was the kind of home she always imagined she and Douglas would find for their retirement. High ceilings, pine finishings and all the original fixtures. Pamela opened her day planner and flipped to the house specs. The second bedroom was just off the master bedroom and it got a morning light from the east. Perfect for a baby's room, she thought. She'd point this out to the couple and give them her speech on yellow for babies' rooms.

The digital clock clicked from 5:29 to 5:30 and she thought about the warmest room in her own home, the room she and Douglas and Juliette had painted yellow. The colour was her idea and he didn't object to it all. To her way of thinking, a child's gender shouldn't plan the colour pattern of the room. Notions of blue and pink were outdated stereotypes that adversely affected the maturation of an
infant, she had told him. A child should naturally grow into his or her personality, free of ill-conceived influences. Douglas had only nodded and smiled, but she knew he'd been thinking about their second chance at parenthood as much as she had.

During the drive home from Dr. Mendolshonn's office that day, they both stared at the road ahead of them in silence. For her part, she was amazed how easily she had forgotten the physical sensations of pregnancy, the constant need to pee and the heartburns of reflux. She searched her mind for what else her body had done while she carried Juliette and remembered the flashes of light, the sudden unexpected brightness that blinded her as the unborn Juliette moved up against her spine. Oh yes, and the strange sight of her stomach moving where there were no muscles.

They had pulled into their driveway and sat through another five minutes of silence before she spoke.

"I'll have to start sleeping on my side again."

"Yeah."

"Or my back."

"No more coffee for a while."

"I should notify the office."

Douglas leaned over and pulled his wife's shirt up, exposing her tummy.

"Just imagine." he said.

"Yeah."

He kissed her on the stomach. She softly held his head
in her hands and they both cried.

"I guess we won't be sitting on any porch in our rocking chairs anytime soon," she laughed.

"No."
Douglas sat upright and grinned.

"What?"
To her question, the grin became more mischievous.

"Douglas, what is it?"

"I was just thinking."

"Yes?"

"If we're not going to be geezers on a front porch, want to be teenagers in a station wagon?"

Pamela opened the passenger door and moved into the backseat. He climbed over the backrest and joined his wife in the backseat. They kissed and they kissed urgently for over an hour.

* * *

Juliette returned home from school a little after half past five, threw her book bag on the kitchen table and studied the contents of the refrigerator. Nothing to eat, she said aloud. Like usual. She glanced at the wall clock and counted off the hours until her mother's arrival. Maybe Mom would bring take-out home with her; she'd been doing that more often lately. Juliette didn't mind, really, but she did mind her mother's constant apologies for it. It was all Juliette could
do not to roll her eyes every time her mother explained how busy she was and how things would get back to normal soon. With every word of explanation, Juliette thought "enough."

She settled on her stomach in the living room in front of the television and flipped channels. Nothing, nothing, nothing on, she thought. She was too early for the evening's sitcoms and too late for after-school reruns. Usually, she came more-or-less straight home at the sound of the 3:15 bell, but today she loitered around the front of the school until all the bused kids were gone. Thomas Cameron wanted to feel her up. At least that's what the note passed to her by a mutual friend said. Feel me up, she thought to herself while she waited. What an odd phrase. What a stupid, odd phrase.

When she got the note, she read it and located Thomas across the Chem lab. He looked away as soon as she made eye contact and then cautiously returned her glance. He was, without a doubt, she thought, a stupid, odd boy. Juliette had shrugged and nodded at the same time. Why not, she thought, what difference could it possibly make if I let him do it. He smiled a stupid, odd smile to himself, leaned over to tell his lab partner, William Turner, about his good fortune and then finished setting up a bunsen burner. What does it matter if I let William Turner feel me up too, she thought; I could let every boy in this classroom try it and, in the long run, it wouldn't make one bit of difference to anything.

Andrew Tyler had been the first. He'd asked in the cafeteria while Ms. Mills made the afternoon announcements.
Something about play tryouts. Juliette hadn't been really listening to either one of them. She said yes and asked him how long it would take; she wanted to get home and call her father at the hotel room he'd just moved into. It hadn't taken long at all, as it turned out. She and Andrew went down in the stairwell outside the girls gym and he just did it. His right hand went up her blouse while his eyes stared at the ground the whole time. She must have lost track of time because she was startled when he spoke. She'd actually forgotten he was there and was thinking about her parents. She had found them in the station wagon the day they told her about the baby. Home from school, she walked up the driveway and spotted her mother and father in the back seat of the car. Juliette watched as her father put his hand inside his mother's shirt. They were kissing fast and hard. Juliette watched for a moment, walked around to the back of the house and let herself in undetected. This is what they were doing, she thought as Andrew Tyler pushed and pinched her chest. Juliette felt to urge to tell Andrew Tyler what a stupid, odd boy he was, but she remained silent.

"Does this feel good?" he asked.

"What?"

He was still looking at the ground, a fact that angered Juliette, though she didn't know why.

"Does this feel good?"

"Honestly?"

Andrew Tyler broke his stare with the ground and looked
straight at her.

"Yes, honestly. I want you to tell me how this feels."
She returned his stare.

"This feels. Like nothing at all."

And then it was over. She had been felt up. After
Andrew Tyler, there was Ben MacKenzie, Todd Ingells, Todd
Simmons, Thomas Cameron and William Turner.

She flipped off the television and walked to the yellow
room. The room was mostly empty; there hadn't been enough
time to buy a crib or a change table. There was a diaper pail
in the corner with a mobile sitting on top, the wind-up kind
with four small stuffed bears on the ends of strings. A blue
bear, a red bear, a pink bear and a green bear lay on their
sides, attached to one another by the limp string that also
lay still and forgotten.

Beside the diaper pail, there was a step ladder and a
half empty can of paint. After Pamela lost the baby in her
seventh month, the room was evacuated and left unfinished.
Such a shame, Juliette thought. The warmest room in the whole
house was going to waste.

On the same day she spied on her parents in the back seat
of the station wagon, Juliette's parents announced that she'd
be getting a little brother or sister. Her parents asked how
she felt about that, and she was actually excited about the
prospect, but she only shrugged and gave the impression that
she felt nothing at all about it. Her father called her bunny
and told her she'd have to learn how to change diapers pretty
soon. That was the second last time he called her that. The last time was when the three of them painted the room, a pleasant memory of fun despite Juliette's initial reluctance.

They had all changed into Douglas' old clothes, sweats and tees that were too big for Juliette and her mother. They rolled up the cuffs of the sweat pants, but couldn't do much about the sleeves of the t-shirts that came down over their elbows.

There had been a small paint fight between father and daughter while Pamela was out of the room phoning for pizza. Douglas started it by dabbing the excess paint off his brush on Juliette's shoulder. She laughed, rolled her eyes and said "oh, that's so hysterically funny, Dad." When his back was turned, she ran a roller along the whole length of his back. After that, they flicked paint into one another's hair and laughed loud enough to draw Pamela's attention.

She stood in the doorway and laughed.

"I only bought enough paint for the walls, you two."

Douglas wrote out an apology in yellow paint on a wall, waited for the laugh from his wife and then covered it with a roller. Soon, the three of them were writing all sorts of messages to one another and then covering their sentiments over in yellow paint.

Pamela painted "I'm going to be sooooo fat."

Douglas painted "I love pizza."

Pamela painted "We need more pizza."

Juliette's message was "we're going to have a baby" and
it made both her parents smile.
Read Through The Day

The morning light was not yet enough to read by, so he stood and flipped the switch above the kitchen sink. Years and days before his birth, his father and his grandfather worked together to build this room and this house. They built without an architect's assistance and without even a blueprint; imperfections like an oddly placed light switch became memories passed down at family gatherings.

Doyle placed a blue hardcover open over a placemat, pressed down to smooth the spine back and read. He read for a good twenty minutes, not a long enough interval to satisfy him completely, not a long enough interval to allow him to fully forget himself, his father's kitchen and the day ahead of him, but a long enough interval for him to relax, even if only slightly.

"Doyle?"

"I'm right here, Dad."

"What are you doing?"

"Just reading, Dad."

Sacks walked to the switch over the sink.

"You shouldn't read in the dark. It'll kill your eyes."

With the overhead lights off, morning shadows covered the
kitchen. Doyle stood as his father sat; he walked to the 
switch over the sink and turned the light back on. 
"I mean, how many times have I told you that."
"I don't know, Dad."
"So don't read in the dark."
"I know, Dad."
The placemats on the table are well worn. Once, they 
were clean and cushioned, but the cotton batten has all been 
flattened and twenty years of spilt juices have stained the 
quilting. These were homemade placemats and Sacks was 
thinking of their maker as he picked at the edges of one. 
He must have had dreams last night, Doyle thought. He 
must have had the dreams and now he has forgotten them. And 
although the memory isn't there, and although the exact images 
he remembered are beyond his waking mind, he has been left 
with a feeling. 
"Can I get you some toast, Dad?"
"Toast?"
"Can I get you some?"
"Yeah. I'd like that. Should I help?"
"I'll get it."
He stared at the toaster while his father stared at the 
table. 
"Did you sleep well?"
He waited for his father's delayed response and did not 
register the four beats between question and answer. When 
this first started happening, when the lapses in his father's
thought first started expanding, Doyle counted the beats to himself. One. One, two. One, two, three. Four. Now the pauses that broke their conversation went unnoticed by both men.

"I like my room better."

"I know."

"The television is good, though."

Four months earlier, Doyle moved the majority of his father's belongings down to the ground floor of the house. He didn't trust his father's ability to navigate the stairs. The pictures on the bureau that Sacks had collected over a lifetime still sat on the upper floor and Doyle thought it best to simply leave them there.

"What did you watch last night?"

"My building shows. They built a playhouse in half an hour. Should take more time than that. It was a big playhouse."

"Do you remember the one you built for me?"

"I never built a playhouse in my whole life."

"In the corner of the yard. Beside the willow."

"You must be thinking of someone else, Doyle."

Doyle crossed the kitchen to his father and placed a plate of toast down.

"Maybe I'm wrong," he said.

"Milk?"

"Sorry?"

"Shouldn't I have milk with this, Doyle?"
"You must have finished the last of it last night."
"There's no milk?"
"No."
"Did I have some during my building shows?"
"I don't know, Dad."
He watched his father eat.
"Is there any pain?" he whispered.
"I think I need something to go with the toast."
"Juice."
"Yes."

On the refrigerator door, there were pictures drawn in Doyle's childhood hand, pages of faded construction paper and sketch pad paper yellowed unevenly. He poured juice into a glass and carried it to Sacks.

"What are you reading there?"
"Just a text."
"Work."
"No. Just for myself, Dad."
"Don't read in the dark anymore, Doyle."
"Yes."

"What's the book about then?"
The curiosity across his father's face wasn't a positive quality, thought Doyle. Curiosity's good only to a point.
"Is it any good," his father asked.
"It's a medical text, Dad," he started without knowing why. "A medical text, really. Not terribly technical, though. More accessible. Which is good, I suppose, because I
probably wouldn't understand most of it if it was too technical.

"It's a series of case studies, but all the studies are written as little stories. The body at birth and the body through life. The author goes through each case and concludes that the body is essentially unchanged as it goes through years. Yes, it grows, but what is there in the body is essentially there right from the beginning. What's bred in the bone.

"And this doctor, the author, works the expression 'blood and bones' into each story. Synonymous to experience. Blood and bones.

"He's trying to be hopeful throughout. He keeps asserting that this is a wonderful thing; he keeps insisting that we should be encouraged by this consistiteny: I mean, these cases are all sad and all seem to work against any kind of optimism, but the author keeps returning to the same phrase to put a positive spin on each story.

"So it's a very interesting book, yes, but I'm not sure whether or not I'm enjoying it. Each poor case patient lives under different ailments and the doctor tries to put each terrible ailment in a positive light. Is this a good idea? Is this right? Yes, probably. But it doesn't change the facts of each ailment that each of these patients carry with them every day. Something about it bothers me. I don't know."

Sacks popped the last crust in his mouth and chewed while
he picked at the placemat's corner.

"Can you pick up some milk today?"

"Yes. I'll stop on the way home, Dad."

"You're not going to forget?"

"No, I'll make a note of it."

"Don't much care for juice."

"No."

The rock and sway of the subway worked to throw off his balance, but he held firm. Doyle was used to reading with one arm gripped tight to an overhead handle and his feet planted firmly a foot apart; this was a trip and a routine that filled five of his days each week. He'd fine-tuned his schedule through ten years of repetition; everyday he was on the road into the city before the worst of rush hour and everyday he was on the subway for a full twenty minutes of reading. Through those many rides, he never once bumped into another commuter in the crowded car.

"Excuse me."

"Yes?"

"You're from the..."

"Oh, good morning."

Doyle closed his blue book and nestled it under his free arm.

"I thought I recognized you."

"Yes. Quarlington, isn't it?"
Doyle, in fact, was sure of the man's name, but he didn't want to assume a familiarity. Many people at the office had forgotten his name over the past ten years and he'd found that it made people uncomfortable when he recalled their names without even a pause.

"I'm afraid ..."

"Doyle."

"Right. We met at the thing."

"Last month."

"Right."

The book under his arm was hardly comfortable. It not only threw his balance off and made standing in the train car a task, it reminded Doyle that he probably wouldn't be getting back to the book for the remainder of the ride. Nonetheless, he did his best to be sociable with Quarrington.

"And how are you finding the work?"

"Good. Getting a bit restless."

"The third floor can get like that."

"You're not on three?"

"I have spent some there, but I'm based on five."

"Five?"

"Yes."

Quarrington looked down at his brown dress shoes and then, remembering the conference he had attended on interoffice relations, cleared his throat to assume a deeper voice.

"Things are going well on five, sir?"
At the beginning of his career, Doyle sat through the same conference and had learned many of the same mannerisms that Quarrington was adopting. The conference's keynote speaker had distributed a list of twenty-five tips for success. Straighten your spine and speak confidently from the diaphragm. The winning voice is confident but never cocky. Never assume an overly subservient pose but know your place. Thinking back now, Doyle cringes to think he actually followed this advice for weeks after the conference.

"I'm taking a night seminar on four's operations right now."

"Yes?"

"Five nights a week after the job."

"Oh."

"The instructor goes into five sometimes."

"Yes."

"Getting ahead of herself, I guess."

"Well, there's overlapping."

"Maybe you know her. Something Macsomething."

"Kathleen MacNeill. Yes, I do know her."

"She's from five?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Again, Quarrington cleared his throat and considered his hush puppies.

"So. What are you into there?"

"Sorry?"
"Your book. Work?"

Doyle smiled.

"No, just for myself."

"I haven't the time or patience for that anymore. Do you do much personal reading?"

"I suppose."

"Effective time managing."

"Well. Not really."

"So what's the book about then?"

The subway veered to the right and jerked the car. Usually, Doyle anticipated the jolt, a sharp turn in the tunnel, but this day he forgot and temporarily lost his balance.

He bumped into Quarrington and apologized.

"No reason to be sorry. The book."

"Sorry?"

"I was asking what the book is about."

"Yes. Carpentry. Well, about home renovation in general, I suppose.

Now it was his turn to look at Quarrington's shoes and pause.

"Not so much a manual. More one person's reflections on a life of working in carpentry and home renovation. There are some details that come up occasionally, of course. He speaks of different contracts and how they worked out; so many of the points are specific details. Whitewash a dark wall before adding a new colour. Tap an indent into quarter round with
the head of a finishing nail before securing the quarter round into the wall or floor. Wood will never split that way. Unroll linoleum from a home center and roll the sheet back up the opposite way. So the underliner is outwards. This makes it easier to lay the flooring in a small kitchen or bathroom.

"The details are rather unimportant to him and to the book, though. I mean, the details stop him from simply reflecting abstractly, but the actual facts themselves do not much matter. The point the book is trying to celebrate is that a day spent with tangible work is fulfilling. And the book does not romanticize its point. The point is made indirectly through the series of anecdotes. The book never brings up an opinion on intangible occupations either positively or negatively because that opinion has nothing to do with these anecdotes.

"Other professionals he has worked with come up. People trained in various crafts, whom he's worked with. And sometimes he's the boss and sometimes he's the subordinate. He makes no distinction, really. These facts arise as part of the anecdotes.

"I should give you an example. My favourite anecdote is about a playhouse. The author states that, in his opinion, the playhouse is the most rewarding project a builder can get. The brightest paint colours are used. Outdated moldings that would look silly in most projects can be used. Illogical staircases that are structurally sound but wholly impractical.

"Yes. The fellow got as much joy out of the building
whether it was for his own children or for children he'd never know. The idea of it is enough."

At the stop before Doyle's own, the train emptied out considerably and left open seats. Quarrington sat down and slid over to offer Doyle a spot.

"Sounds good, sir."
"Yes."
"What was that last name again?"
"Sorry?"
"Kathy Mac..."
"MacNeill."
"MacNeill."
"Yes."
"MacNeill. I'll have to remember that."
"Yes."

Dust motes played through a single beam of sunlight when he opened the door to the corner office. Doyle stood in the doorway with the blue hardcover between his knees while he wrestled to put his keys back into the pocket of his jacket. With the door closed, he laid his book and belongings on the desk and opened the blinds.

Out in the staff lounge, Doyle plugged in the kettle for a cup of orange pekoe and sneaked in a few more minutes of the blue book while he waited for the water to boil. Sometimes he skipped this morning routine and settled straight into work,
but today he felt slightly off; he didn't get down to work until half past nine, but no one knew. No one knew, he figured, and if anyone did know, there wouldn't be any trouble.

At half past nine, Doyle slid open the right hand desk drawer and left his blue book; from the left drawer, he took out the green manuscript, opened it to the marked page, and smoothed down the spine with the palm of his hand. As he'd been doing for ten years, Doyle popped the lid off a red felt tip and settled into work.

Under a flickering fluorescent lamp in the near empty cafeteria, he sat reading and eating his lunch from a service tray. Reading by fluorescent light can be a strain in any circumstance; in a cafeteria where each scrape of his fork was amplified and grating, Doyle was about ready to give up on his blue book when he felt a heavy hand hit his back.

"Afternoon, Doyle."

Doyle turned and was greeted by a smirking grin that belonged to his office neighbour. Baker's office, the only other corner suite on five, was across the hall from Doyle's and the two men had enjoyed a passing acquaintance that was now going into its tenth year.

"Hello, Baker."

"In the mood for some company?"

"Certainly."

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"How was your morning?"

The fat man walked around the table, sat his tray down and settled into the chair across from Doyle; the effort showed on Baker's red face and his voice was a half pant when he answered Doyle's question.

"None too productive, I'm afraid. I'll have to be harder on four from now on. When they don't do their job, how can we do ours?"

"Yes."

"I appreciate that they have a lot to do, but I don't think I'm being unreasonable."

"No."

"It's lunchtime. No more shoptalk."

"Yes."

Baker peeled back the spigot to his chocolate milk, drank down a gulp and continued.

"It just burns me is all."

"What's that?"

"I have to be the bad guy. They all think I have no simple human compassion, but you know I'm in a rough spot."

"It can be difficult."

"Difficult, indeed."

"How are your children?"

"Oh, fine."

"And your...?"

"Father."

"Yes, how's your father getting along?"
"He's managing."

"Remember when it was you and me on four, Doyle? I mean, we were busy, yes, but we managed to get everything done. Done well and done on time because you're working for upstairs, right?"

"Yes."

Baker spooned a mouthful of mashed potatoes in his mouth and jerked his head at Doyle's book.

"That the new project?"

"No, just something for myself."

"For yourself."

"Yes."

"Ambitious."

"Not really."

"Any good?"

"Yes."

"What's it about, then?"

"Sadness."

Baker nodded.

"It's a text that attempts to measure sadness," Doyle continued. "It tries to assign a quantitative measure on sadness. The whole idea is speculative, but it gives various examples to illustrate the point. Hypotheticals.

"You're on a long car drive and you've brought twelve audio cassettes with you. The tape carrier you keep in your car only holds twelve. So you're driving along listening to the radio and somewhere outside of Uxbridge the song you're
listening to reminds you of another song. And the song you are reminded of is not on any of the twelve tapes you have with you. That's about a ten.

"If you cannot think of anything else, you realize that no matter how many tapes you bring along in your car, you will always want to hear a song you do not have with you. Fill up the trunk of your car with audio cassettes and it will not matter. There will always be a song you want to hear that you cannot. This realization is about a fifteen."

"You and your brother George write songs together. You've always done this. Your parents encouraged it and it has been your hobby and greatest joy for more years than you can remember. You write the lyric and George writes the tune. Eventually, you start getting paid for this. And one day you're getting paid handsomely for this. All for your hobby and your joy. But your little brother gets a brain tumor. He's only thirty-eight. He's dead. And you'll work with Kurt Weill and Vernon Duke, and everything will be all right. But you know you'll never get to write words for George again. That's at least a seventy."

"The text gives more examples. I don't know if I like the point being made, though. I mean, is there really a ceiling on sadness? People expect there to be, yes. No one likes someone who mopes. There are things, though. Sadnesses that you can't imagine measured."

Baker nodded.

"So it's not for work at all, then."

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"No."

"We should get back."

"Is it time?"

"Yeah."

Sitting at his desk, he set his blue book down in the middle of his blotter. Around the edges of the blotter, the sun shone brightly off a dark oak finish. Doyle searched through his cluttered drawer for the metal ruler with the company insignia that he knew was there somewhere and, once found, he used it ensure that the book laid in the exact centre of his blotter. The top of the ruler was marked in centimetres and the bottom was marked in inches; Doyle double checked his measurements with both units before returning the ruler to its drawer.

At half past one, Doyle slid open the right hand desk drawer and left his blue book; from the left drawer, he took out the green manuscript, opened it to the marked page, and smoothed down the spine with the palm of his hand. As he'd been doing for ten years, Doyle popped the lid off a red felt tip and settled into work.

The subway car wasn't as full as it was in the morning; Doyle was, in fact, the only passenger who did not have a seat. He held onto an overhand rail and read his blue book

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but couldn't concentrate. There was a woman watching him; he was certain of it. After ten frustrated minutes of travel, Doyle turned and more-or-less looked directly at her.

Anne smiled and shimmied closer to the passenger beside her, leaving an opening on the bench. She wore a modern nurse's uniform, a pastel yellow jumpsuit with no pin-up hat. Because she gave him another smile, and because he couldn't concentrate anyway, Doyle sat down in the small spot she had created for him.

"Thank you."
"Not at all."
"Yes."
"It is appreciated."

Anne's right thigh was pressed into Doyle's left thigh, and he believed continuing a conversation would be impossible. After the briefest moment of silence, however, Anne spoke.

"I believe we've met before."
"Have we?"
"Where?"
"Where. I don't know."
"Do you work at the hospital?"
"No."
"No."
"This is my day."
"Sorry?"
"I mean, I've been here before. The train at six. Perhaps."
"Oh. Yes, my schedule is the same."
"And I've seen you here."
"Fellow travelers."
"Yes."
Anne placed her hand on the blue hardcover in Doyle's lap.
"What is it you're reading?"
"Nothing really."
"I only ask because it looks familiar. I think I may have read it at some point."
"Oh."
"It just looks familiar."
"Fiction. About this one fellow's experiences through thirty years of living. Not really experiences at all, though. He can't. He cannot seem to experience anything for most of the story.

"You see, he was an only child. He and his mum and dad are very close. They did everything together. None of them socialized with anyone outside of their trio. And for the longest time, this is keen. All three love and respect and admire and praise and help one another. For the longest time, this is a happy story.

"But then, when the boy is almost thirteen, his mum finds something on her breast. And by the time he is almost fourteen, it is only him and dad. Dad is, of course, ruined. The boy does his best. He loves and respects and admires and praises and tries to help. This fourteen-year-old boy tries to

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make the story happy, but he cannot. He's only a fourteen-year-old boy.

"And so he gives up. He reads. Mainly, he just reads. And he begins to shrink. He contracts to the size of a book. He and his dad still love one another dearly, but they can't help each other at all. The dad does what he does and the boy reads.

"Then the story gets sadder because the boy becomes a man. He is a tight tight tightly bound book and he's not much else. Yes, he's managed to make a life for himself and most days he's all right. He's all right the way he is and he's even managed to make a career out of what he is. He can get through most days.

"Even when this man is almost thirty and his dad starts to forget things, the man is all right. The something that was on his mother's breast isn't the same something now on his dad's brain, but it may as well be. Something getting bigger. And the bigger it gets, the more the dad cannot remember. The man has learned that he cannot help and so he doesn't even try. Forgetting is probably a good idea, anyway.

"So it seems to be a sad story. But not really. Near the end of the story a new character is introduced. Someone out of nowhere comes into the story. The man could not have imagined this character on most days. Someone who knows how to care. Care for a dad who forgets. Someone trained to deal with things on breasts and things on brains that grow bigger. Palliative. This is what she does; she helps.
"And although the dad is gone by the time the man is over thirty, the she is still helping. She is helping the man. Loving and respecting and admiring and praising and helping the man. And he's loving and respecting and admiring and praising and helping her. He's over thirty and he realizes that he can help."

Anne leaned forward, adjusted the bag between her feet and cleared her throat.

"I must have been mistaken. It doesn't sound familiar at all."

"Oh."

"Sorry."

"Not at all."

It was well past last call when Doyle returned to the house that his father and his grandfather built. Sacks was asleep on the couch, his face lit by the glow of the television. This had happened before and Doyle usually just left him there until morning. Doyle hit the power button, ridding the room of light and accidentally waking up his father.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"Shouldn't you turn a light on?"

Rather than feeling the wall for a switch, Doyle turned the television back on.
"I must have fallen asleep."

"Yes."

"The train was late?"

"No. I went for a walk."

"I made my own dinner."

"Yes."

"Cooking shows this afternoon."

"Oh?"

"Potato pancakes. I figured it couldn't be that hard."

"And how did they turn out?"

"Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"Harder than they look. Or they're just no damn good. Sandy."

"Did you wash the potatoes?"

"I'm not stupid."

"I know, Dad."

"I can't remember."

"It's all right, Dad."

"I don't remember."

"It's all right, Dad."

"Did you miss the train?"

"No."

"Okay."

Doyle knew the kitchen would be a mess, but he figured he'd have time before work the next day to clean.

"I forgot the milk," he said.
"That's all right."

"I can go out again."

"No need. I can even get it myself tomorrow."

"I'll get it."

"I don't mind."

"I know."
Tin And Aluminum Anniversary

He taps the toe of his shoe on the brass foot rail while he's waiting but the rhythm of his foot doesn't follow the music that's playing. It's impatience really. He's wearing khakis and a blue jean button-down with "king of beers" embroidered over the left breast pocket. When the Tom Collins arrives, he doesn't pay and he doesn't say thank you, he only nods and walks towards the booth by the door.

Karl is in his late forties.

On his thirty-ninth birthday, he stayed up all night drinking and trying on clothing that no longer fit him easily. Many of his dress shirts were tight around the stomach and many of his trousers no longer did up without effort. Every hour or so, Karl would notice that his glass was empty and he'd refill it with another finger of Canadian Club over ice. He moved around his home in his stocking feet and looked in on his wife and two sleeping daughters. Earlier in the evening, they had given him two ties and a gold watch. The watch was identical to the one he got on his tenth year as an office supplies salesman, but he didn't mention the mistake to Amy or his daughters. There was a cake and there were thirty-nine
candles and when he blew out their thirty-nine flames, Karl wished he was somewhere else.

As they drank coffee in the kitchen nook the next morning, Karl explained the notes he had made. He explained that a second mortgage on the house, together with their savings and a bank loan, would purchase a franchise license, thirteen months rent and a year's operating cost.

"Does this include the girls' education account?" she asked.

In the restaurant's second year, Karl and Amy were still paying off their investment, but since Amy had made the decision to retain her real estate license, money wasn't a concern. Karl managed the restaurant everyday from lunch until well after last call. Sometimes Amy would stay awake and wait for him to come home. With the girls asleep and the house quiet, Amy often thought through conversations in which she would point out why the business just wasn't working for her, but by the time Karl came home, she didn't want to ruin the short time they had together and she just listened while he told her of the day's sales. Eventually, she waited up for him less and less.

Good fortune and a good location turned the restaurant into a success, and by the fourth year, the majority of the profit was profit that went directly to the couple. Now, Amy spends too much on their two teen-aged daughters whenever she wants to and Karl trades in his automobile annually. He is happy their risk paid off in the end and he celebrates his
good fortune as often as possible, hosting parties for his staff as often as once a month. As he makes his way around the crowded restaurant with the Tom Collins balanced carefully not to spill, the young staff remind him why he originally wanted to start the business. This is a closely knit group of people who all enjoy dancing, laughing and drinking. Karl pats the guys on the back and shakes their shoulders in camaraderie. Sometimes he forgets himself, either because of the alcohol or because of the general revelry, and he'll pat one of his female employees' bottoms too often. Once, he put his hand over a teen-aged hostess' bottom and left it there for a good five minutes. He was, at first, ashamed; then he realized that she was giggling and didn't really mind. Amy had stopped attending all of the staff functions except at Christmas, so there was really no harm done to anyone. The next day, she woke him around noon with breakfast in bed and he felt a moment of guilt that passed as quickly as it came.

The Armadillo is closed to the public tonight so its employees can celebrate the restaurant's tenth anniversary. Although he doesn't know the name of the song playing, he moves his head to the music as he makes his way over to the booth near the door. The booth is full but the group slides over and makes room for him.

Thomas is twenty-six.

A few minutes ago, the dj put on a song that made him and
his brother laugh and smile at one another. Since no one else at the table understood their private joke, he explained. The table listened intently and Thomas spoke urgently; alcohol made the topic seem important. According to Thomas, there are two types of people in the world: Moondance people and Astral Weeks people. Gerard maintains that there must be third group, those who don't listen to Van Morrison at all.

"No, no, no. You still don't get it," Thomas explained. "Whether or not a person knows the albums is unimportant. You can just tell once you get to know a person. You can suppose what kind of person he or she is just by talking - "

A pat on the back interrupted his train of thought and he slid into the already crowded booth to make room for Karl.

"Does anyone know who sings this song?" he asks.

Although Thomas hasn't worked for Karl in over a year, he is invited to every staff party and he attends as many as he can. He sells life insurance for a living and is busy most evenings with home visits to clients. When he can, though, he likes to see his old friends, catch up on what's going on in each of their lives and laugh for no reason at all. Nick, the bartender since the restaurant opened, is the only person who has ever called him "Tommie."

Karl's pat on the back makes Thomas cringe slightly, but only his brother picks up on the reaction. Working at The Armadillo helped Thomas pay for six years of school and he knows that putting up with the odd moment of forced camaraderie is the least he can do. For six years, he
balanced food and booze on a little round tray, and when he wasn't doing that he could be found sitting at the bar reading Psychology texts. Karl bought him a Tom Collins at some earlier staff party and it has been a running joke ever since.

That was the same party that Thomas brought Gerard along for the first time. They both converse better in public as a duo than they do individually and it is their jokes that most everyone remembers the following day. His friends thought seeing them together was a novelty, an insight into a Thomas they didn't see while working. During such evenings, someone invariably commented "I wish I was so close to my brother" and, indeed, Thomas knew that most siblings didn't share as much as he and Gerard. Not many siblings expressly insist upon bunk beds. Not many siblings do homework together all the way through elementary and secondary school. And not many siblings deliberately study the same discipline through university.

Thomas and Gerard only split the path after graduation; Thomas followed graduate work and Gerard married. The separation lasted two years. While Thomas read and read, Gerard took an entry level position at London Life. After two years of knocking on doors, he was promoted to an in-office position and although the career wasn't one that Thomas had prepared for, his brother's promotion left an entry level position. Thomas took the entry level over unemployment and balancing food and booze on a little round tray.
He takes a long drink of his Tom Collins and pats his brother on the back. His brother pats him back. It's a parody of camaraderie that doesn't look as sincere as it really is.

Gerard is twenty-six.

He and his twin Thomas are well onto their way to a drunkenness that partially celebrates the restaurant and partially hides their shared thoughts from turning to unpleasant topics. Such topics can be hid from conversation better than from thought, though.

In the cab over to The Armadillo early in the evening, the two agreed not to discuss, or even allude to, the topic that has dominated their telephone and dinner conversations over the past two months. Both brothers agreed not to talk about the abrupt departure of Gerard's wife. They agreed not to talk about his many attempts to contact her and his in-laws many interferences. They agreed not to talk about the lawyer's papers that arrived last week. Most of all though, they agreed not to speculate and discuss and whine and wonder. His wife had left no note and no explanation and the brothers had been trying to discover a reason or cause for two months.

They agreed to just have fun for one night, and in doing so, they agreed to drink, they agreed to argue about Van The Man and they agreed to make pretty women laugh.

The last goal started after the mutual pats on the back.

"Remember that film in first year Intro on sleep
deprivation?" Thomas asked.

"Yeah."

He turns to the women with him and his brother in the booth near by the door and relates the memory. Through many retellings, the memory has become well-rehearsed. His brother interrupts at just the right moments to add detail and the two women laugh.

"So there's this movie..."

"A documentary."

"About this study in sleep deprivation. There were these soldiers."

"The study used enlisted soldiers for subjects."

"And these guys won't let the soldiers sleep. They've stayed awake for days on end."

"And to add to the absurdity, these researchers are all wearing lab coats and they're standing there with clip boards and pens."

"Recording every little thing the soldiers say."

"While this other lab coat pokes the soldiers continuously so they can't get to sleep."

"And they're asking the soldiers these very factual questions and recording each nonsensical response on their clip boards."

"What year is it?"

"What is your mother's maiden name?"

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"How many fingers am I holding up?"
"Who's the president?"
"It must have been an American thing."
"And this soldier just keeps repeating 'I like plums'."
"I like plums."
"Over and over to every question."
"I like plums."
"God knows what this soldier was thinking about."
"Some sort of hallucination waking dream about plums."
"I like plums."
"Over and over again."
"And then the one guy."
"The one who's poking this one soldier."
"Just really softly, he asks 'define a non-sequitur'."
"And again."
"I like plums."
Tobie and Gillian are quiet a moment before laughing.
The brothers join in.
"It was brilliant," Thomas laughs.
"Yeah," his brother adds. Two beats later, the laughter still continues when Gerard lowers his tone.
"I probably agreed not to talk about this, but there was this other study. I mean, I remember it so clearly and it was kind of interesting, so yeah. Intro Psych, how many years ago was that? It was in the same chapter, in the same lesson as operant conditioning. In this study, though, the dogs couldn't stop the electric shocks by any kind of learned
behaviour. I mean, they just shocked the dogs repeatedly to see how they would react to this punishment that they couldn't control or stop in any way. And so these subject dogs just lay down and became passive. They were helpless to stop the pain so they just lay down and did nothing. It was called learned helplessness. And I remember thinking about this during the lecture. I thought 'well, what did these researchers expect?' Really, I mean, what else could these dogs have done? Nothing. Yeah. Intro Psych seems a long time ago."

Tobie twirls the ice at the bottom of her drink and Gillian looks at the wall behind Thomas' head. A fast song turns into the mystic and he brings up the idea of dancing. The women smile, nod and slide out of the booth.

"I'm sorry," Gerard offers until his brother shakes his head. He doesn't want to let on that he minds but he does. He needs his brother to help him with Gillian. He needs his brother to fill in the gaps in conversation when he can't make Gillian laugh all by himself. Gillian is a woman Thomas has had a sentimental crush on for five years running now; during staff parties, she usually visits and stays to chat for most of the evening. Thomas enjoys how easy it is to make her laugh; he simply relates his feelings and opinions about whatever book or movie happens to be popular, and she holds her hand to her throat smiling. The few times he's been unable to come up with conversation have always been saved by Gerard and this evening's misstep just pushed her farther away.
Thomas asked Gillian to dinner once after they first met and she politely declined, offering an excuse that was meant to save his feelings. After that, it became clear to Thomas that she wouldn't ever be more than a special friend. That's what she calls him, a special friend. So, it is enough to see her once in a while and make her laugh. Two or three times, there have been phone calls after midnight and Gillian will need cheering up. He never asks exactly what is wrong; he sidesteps and provides anecdotes to cheer her up, but he never asks what's wrong. After a couple of hours on the phone, he wishes her goodnight and she says she doesn't know what she would do without him. At such times, he looks forward to the next staff party.

He asks his brother if he'd like another drink while he's up and only receives another apology. Leaning against the bar and tapping the toe of his shoe against the brass rail to a rhythm he knows well, he watches her on the dance floor.

Gillian is twenty-five.
She's dancing with Tobie at the moment and the two women are singing along to the sad lyric while they move. Gillian's dress is short and sheer, two thin straps hold the material easy around her shape. Occasionally, one of the straps slides off her shoulder.

Thomas loses his breath for but a moment.
Gillian's two favourite things to do at these staff
parties are dancing and talking to Thomas. The second activity is sometimes tainted by his tendency to flatter her openly; he is the most interesting man she knows, and she wishes he wouldn't ruin their conversations by occasionally revealing his feelings for her. Once, at an earlier staff party, she slipped off her heels to dance and he told her that nobody, not even the rain, has such small feet. Now, what would have been an appropriate response to that?

Lately the release Gillian feels when dancing has been shrinking; it used to be that she could dance and concentrate all of her thoughts on the control of her body, but that doesn't happen very often anymore. She studied dance all through elementary and secondary school; twelve years of modern, jazz, ballet and three years of tap. At home, her parents still have her team photographs mounted around the family room. She once choreographed a half hour routine for herself that blended twelve of the styles from An American In Paris; she's shown bits of it to Thomas and his jaw always drops in the same fun way. He'll shake his head and claim to be dumb-founded. In her final year of high school, Gillian's dance instructor refused to let her onstage. He had said that her acne was a disgrace and he wasn't going to let her represent the team in that condition. Her parents were in the audience, as they were for all her recitals, and she had to lie to them later that night. She told them she must have pulled a calf muscle but she didn't have any idea how it happened. At home, her mother made an ice pack with a face
cloth and Gillian held it on her leg for an hour.

After high school, she moved to Ottawa to study Sociology, but found that the classes held little interest for her. She has been working at The Armadillo for five years. Five years ago, she met a regular customer who complimented on her beauty and laughed at all of her jokes; this man's name is John and he's married. John explained how he wed his pregnant wife and how he never got to finish high school. It probably wasn't the right thing to do, he knew. Still, he wound up with a good sales job at an office supplies distributor and he's more or less successful in his work. He comes to The Armadillo during evenings when he finds that he can bear his wife's company no more. Instead of following that itch to strike he gets during arguments, he comes to the bar for friendly conversation and a couple of drinks.

A tall drink of water. Those are the first words John said to Gillian. He had come in during one of her closing shifts and stayed after hours; she had taken off her apron and was counting her cash when he first spoke to her. They talked for an hour or so and left only when Karl said he had to lock up. Although she wasn't in the habit of doing such things, Gillian asked if he wouldn't like to continue their conversation at an all night coffee shop. That was five years ago now; he's declared that he was going to divorce several times and he's actually separated from his wife three times. Gillian knows that he is too bound to his children to ever leave his wife and she has accepted it. In her opinion, it is
better to see him the odd night and to have a weekend in Montreal four times a year than to not have him at all.

When John can get away, he attends The Armadillo's staff parties; he has provided Karl with some of the company's surplus supplies and the two of them have exchanged sales stories in the easy relaxed manner that salesmen have. John promised Gillian that he would show up for the tenth anniversary party if he could; his son was performing in a school assembly and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to get away afterward. Gillian understood. Watching John with his son was one of the reasons she fell in love with him and she didn't want him to miss one moment of the boy's childhood. Still, she cannot fully get into the dance because she's expecting him to walk in at any moment. Tobie shouted a question over the music during the last song, but the sound didn't reach her friend. Gillian assumed a nod or a laugh would pass for a suitable response and so she provided both.

The song turns to a quicker and happier number and the women dance faster. They smile at one another and reach their hands out to one another.

Tobie is twenty-four.

Her missed question asked was about fun. Having fun? It is just as well Gillian missed it. Tobie, herself, is having fun. She feels guilty for enjoying herself, but she has decided that senseless enjoyment may well be therapeutic.
Last month her father died suddenly from a brain aneurysm, a
death that came quickly and without any kind of announcement.
The man was fifty-three. Finding a reason for such a death is
difficult, but Tobie has been trying to ever since her
mother's late night telephone call. She tried throughout the
visitations, she tried throughout the funeral and she tried
throughout the wake. Nothing good can come of such a death.
Nothing can be learned through this suffering, she thought
until she noticed a change in her own husband, Hedley.

Hedley is a warm man deep down, but it takes a while to see
his goodness. Her parents never approved of him, she knew. Yes, they wished the couple well and welcomed Hedley
into their family with open hearts, but Tobie could sense the
disapproval behind all that. In the end, they may only have accepted him because of his wealth and career. Hedley was a
man that could support the daughter who never had any ambition higher than waitressing. Tobie knew the difference between
her old and new family was cultural; where Hedley was born, women were treated a certain way and that was that. Yes, Hedley may come across as stern, or maybe even insensitive, to an outside observer, but this didn't mean that he didn't love her dearly. He had always treated her as best as he knew how. Hedley would never once come to a restaurant staff party, but that didn't mean he wasn't a good husband.

Since that late night phone call, there has been a noticeable shift in his Hedley's personality. He held her longer and rubbed her back while she cried. One evening he
brought home a video and had the patience to sit through the whole thing, rubbing Tobie's feet on the couch. No, he wouldn't ever change his mind about women drinking alcohol and he wouldn't ever wish for a female child, but he was changed for the better last month.

She hugs her friend and yells in her friend's ear to suggest another drink. Dancing has worn both of them out and they decide to sit up at the bar counter and order two frozen dessert drinks.

Nick is thirty-five.

He bangs the ice into the blender deliberately roughly, finding it hard to believe they'd have the nerve to ask for such elaborate cocktails when he is busy trying to keep up with the orders. He also understands that they're both drunk. He presses chop on the blender and yells at someone to wait their goddam bloody turn. Nick is the oldest employee at The Armadillo and is usually a very patient man. He's worked in bars and restaurants since he was eighteen and has managed to buy a house and support a family of four on the tips left by drinkers and drunks. Patience is something he adopted out of necessity many years ago and the effort has made him a quiet man, one who knows and understands far more than he lets others see. The bar hosts a trivia night every Tuesday and Nick refuses to answer any of the questions aloud. When Tommie worked with him, they'd swap answers and discuss

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whatever topics the trivia game came out with, and he now misses those nights.

One night after a late close, the two of them shared Nick's smoke and talked openly about a variety of topics. What Thomas really wanted to know about was Nick's family. What must it be like to have a wife and children; to have love that you can be assured of? For a moment, the older man understood how Thomas envied him and he was grateful for the honesty. He told Thomas that he'd one day have the same security; one must pursue love honestly, he said. Nick told the younger man about all the people he had watched while bartending in a dozen different restaurants and taverns. The groups of women who sit and say all they want is a man with a decent job that they can talk to and the groups of men who sit and say all they want is a thin woman they can talk to. Thomas got the point. If not for the marijuana, he knew they would never have had that conversation.

Nick's wife's name is Sheila and the two of them talk constantly. They talk and share the crossword every breakfast, they talk while cleaning the house together and they talk before, during and after making love. He had his first seizure one night after they had made love; it was late and Sheila assumed her husband had drifted off to sleep. She felt the bed shake and switched on the overhead lamp to see him helplessly drooling. Nick is a large man and it was heartbreaking to see him so defenseless; for five minutes, he wasn't the strong man she knew.
Nick has since had three seizures at work and he knows that he will eventually have to find a job that will get him off his feet. With no education, he knows he will lose a great deal of money. For now, he tries not to think about it and he controls the seizure with legal pills and illegal cigarettes. It is a relief to ring the bell at the end of a night.

He yells last call and adds "in ten years" as an after thought. His smile isn't for the tin and aluminum anniversary, though; he smiles because he knows he will soon serve his last round and he'll soon be able to go home. The young man at the end of the bar snaps fingers and clears his throat in an exaggeration of rudeness.

"What do you want, punk?" Nick asks.

"One more round for my brother and I, tender bar."

Thomas pays for the drinks, tipping Nick more than was necessary and makes his way back to the booth near the door. Thomas sets the two drinks down on the table and Gerard nods his thank you; except for thirty minutes, they are the exact same age.

They've spent the past half hour of their conversation in privacy and they've broken all the agreements they made at the outset of the evening. Gillian was upset and she agreed to split a cab with Tobie; since then, the two men have been trying to understand the same problem they've been trying to
understand since Gerard's wife left. As always, they assume their two minds will be better than one, but they seem to have exhausted all possible explanations. They cannot find any reason and, eventually, both of them will stop trying.

A pat on his separated brother's back doesn't help, but Thomas gives him one anyway. He suggests they call a cab after he pees and Gerard nods slowly.

What can he do to stop his brother's pain? Thomas stands himself in front of a urinal and remembers a memory that he hadn't thought of in years and years. Until the age of twelve, his brother refused to use urinals. Gerard apparently believed that the curved white porcelain was designed to splash urine back on one's pants. There was a time at a mall when Thomas stood by his brother and practically begged.

"All the stalls are taken. C'mon, you're gonna make yourself sick if you don't get over this."

That was it, Thomas thought. That's the memory that's just stupid enough to cheer Gerard up for a short while.

He zips and turns to see his former employer seated on a cubicle toilet. The king of beers has fallen asleep on a toilet in a cubicle in the restaurant that he owns and he's mumbling drunken dreams.

"Yes," Thomas says, "I like plums, too."
In A Library, On The Thirteenth Floor

It was nineteen ninety-one and there was a hair in between the forty-fourth and the forty-fifth pages of a book that was the fourth volume of a six-volume series that was lined up on a bottom shelf in a library on the thirteenth floor.

A man who was once a boy sat cross-legged in between the stacks. He pulled out several books and made a pile of the texts he thought he might need; some of the books had indexes to help him make his decision, but for the most part, he picked and chose arbitrarily. There would be time in a vague future to consider these decisions more fully. In two months, this man would have to write a thirty-five-page paper on the verse of a seventeenth-century country parson.

When this man was a boy, he hadn't thought of pursuing an education past secondary school. There must have been a point at which he made some decision, though; there must have been a point at which he consciously decided upon this and not other alternatives. Maybe not. If he had stopped to think about it, he would have realized that he fell into his undergraduate studies as unconsciously as he had turned from a boy into a man. During his first graduate degree, he had fallen for a woman heedlessly, a woman with brown curling hair that reached
down to the small of her back; there came a time before convocation when he had to decide whether he should stay with this woman or move to the university that he now attended. He did not choose the woman.

This man pulled out the first volume from the series of six and examined the date on the title leaf. Nineteen hundred and five. He thought of his two parents, the three grandparents he had known and his great grandmother whom he had called Nana. No, he could not trace his own history back to the date of these six volumes.

The last volume contained an index to the whole series; he needed to take the last four volumes to his home for further reading and examination. Like many of the books this man was looking through this day, and unlike any of the many books he owned and kept in a large room at his home, these six volumes had uneven pages, rough-edged pages that had needed to be cut. He flipped through the fourth volume and noticed that several of the pages hadn't yet been separated into individual leaves. Through eighty-six years, these folds had survived hidden on this bottom shelf.

The long, brown hair folded and mashed between the forty-fourth and forty-fifth pages slid down slightly. The motion caught the man's attention; he held an end and pulled the hair out to its full length. There was a moment for pause before he turned to the volume's back inside cover; the book had been last checked out of this library in nineteen seventy-one. He would have been all of seven years old that year. Whoever once possessed this hair could be anywhere in world; she
could have a head of all white. The man turned back to the hair's home to find some hint and read "there is but joy and grief; if either will convert us, we are thine." The message was, he admitted to himself, cryptic at best. She probably hadn't put the hair purposely here; it'd probably fallen without notice. When it came right down to it, really, the hair could have been put here a week earlier by a woman who decided against signing the volume out. It might even have belonged to a male affecting a foolish hair style.

He reasonably knew that there was no way of knowing who had put the hair here in between the forty-fourth and forty-five pages or how much time the hair had been hiding within this six-volume series down on the bottom shelf, and since the library was closing in fifteen minutes, he knew he shouldn't be indulging in such imaginings for much longer. He had to sign out a whole pile of books. A time to put aside boyhood things. The man added the fourth volume to his pile and carried his lot towards the elevator.
A Zoo Story

April fed the rabbits.

Raymond lifted his daughter up to the rabbit hutch. At seventeen months, she was still too unsteady for the deer and llama park, but the rabbits were more nervous than she. They came as soon as she held her hand out, a dozen dwarf rabbits that nibbled and licked the green pellets in her palm. April looked down watching them eat and Raymond looked down watching her watching. He couldn't imagine a plainer look of marvel and he tried to memorize every giggle and gurgle that she said.

After the pellets were all eaten, the rabbits scurried back into the boxes at the back of their hutch. A dozen brown tails on a dozen brown bottoms bobbed as they hopped out of sight. April turned her head to her father for an explanation.

"They went home, love. All the bunnies went inside."

She squirmed to be let down and thought no more of the rabbits. Raymond, though, made an effort to remember near everything: the surprise on his daughter's face, the smell and shape of the pellets and minutely different shades of brown fur.
A mini mass exodus of brown bunny bums.

He'd promised his wife he would tell her all about their morning at the Bowmanville zoo. He promised that he'd tell her a zoo story. From her bed, she blew kisses to her husband and daughter and reminded him to have April home in time for a nap at one. She reminded him to finish the whole roll of film and, with a half smile, he told her they'd all go together when she was feeling better.

In the car on the way over, he'd played a tape while April clapped along in the back seat. "There was corn, corn, blowing on a horn," they sang along. In the song, beans tried on jeans and plums played drums, all in the corner grocery store. Raymond loved the illogic of these songs and, as he sang, he decided he'd try to tell his wife the zoo story in the same way.

Giraffes chomp clouds, nibbling nimbus.

and

Aloe all over rhinos.

He let his daughter walk four paces ahead or behind him while he pushed the stroller, staying far enough away to let her explore, but close enough to grab her up at a moment's notice. She rarely used the stroller anymore, but he brought it with him wherever they went just in case she got tired. Besides, the basket underneath the seat was ideal for carrying
numerous and various infant sundries, all of the toys, bummies, diapers, wetnaps, sunhats, tuna sandwiches and milk that were needed for a morning trip out.

They next stopped at the turtle pool, a sunken pond of green moss and gray rocks. April gripped the low fence and looked for the animals while her father explained that turtles don't move much. He pointed to the dark shapes along the pond's small shore, but they were no more exciting to her than decorative rocks. Come on, turtles, move, he thought. From the bottom of the pond, there came a bubble that rose and popped.

"Let's go find the lemur."

"Lmr." 

"Lee-mer."

"Lmr."

"Let's go find the lmrr."

April knew the inflection, if not yet understanding his words, and she absently toddled away from the turtle pond. One of the straps on her jean overalls slid off her shoulder, Raymond noticed. She didn't. He pushed the stroller up alongside her and corrected the strap without her noticing the adjustment. Her only reaction was to reach out for her father's hand, a grip that almost fit around his index finger.

At the lemur cage, he lifted her onto the fence and made a soft groan from her weight.

"Ughnn."

She repeated the sound, something she'd been doing lately whenever she lifted her toys for clean up.
"Ughnn."

One of the animals spun its head towards the sound. Its alert eyes stared at the father and daughter.

"Ughnn."

"Ughnn."

"Do it again. Ughnn."

Soon all the inhabitants of the cage were staring and April giggled. Silly, silly lemurs.

Without warning, one of them jumped onto a lower branch and sent the whole cage into a frenzy. The black-eyed monkeys jumped without reason from one location to another and fed into each other's hyperactivity.

"Man, lemurs are just nuts."

Giggles turned into laughs. April held her hand to her mouth in imitation of her father's laugh.

Raymond snapped a photograph and thought of another sentence to tell his wife.

Man, lemurs are just nuts.

He decided to forget the giraffe and rhino remarks he'd thought up during the car ride. The Bowmanville zoo was only a modest collection of animals and didn't possess anything as exotic as a giraffe or a rhinoceros. He wanted to make his wife feel better, but he didn't want to outright lie to do so.

The truth of the matter was that the most extravagant animal at the Bowmanville Zoo was a brown bear named Auggie. According to the map at the front gate, Auggie was housed near
the rear of the zoo grounds, so Raymond had already decided that he'd have to wait until after April's morning snack.

The lemurs ceased their frenzy as abruptly as they'd broken into it; each returned to a branch and stared. Again, April looked to her father for explanation, but again, he didn't have one.

"They must be tired, love. The lemurs wore themselves out."

"Lmrrs."

He lifted her up from the fence for a quick hug before placing her down again. He felt his bare arm moisten from her touch and knew he should find a washroom soon. With her fist again around his finger, they walked over to the attendant selling petting food.

According to the attendant, the nearest washrooms were by the waterfall, but, no, the men's washroom did not have a change table. Like he had had to do many times before, Raymond would have to change his daughter's diaper on the counter beside the sink.

The world wasn't made for dads, dear.

The waterfall itself wasn't what Raymond expected, just a steady stream that poured from the top of a manmade hill. Swans and ducks swam around the bottom ponds and a class of elementary school children were throwing breadcrumbs into the water while their two teacher chaperons counted heads. The older teacher yelled out "twenty-two" and the younger woman
nodded.

April was always happy to see children and Raymond knew she'd laugh at their bustle as she had laughed at the lemurs. He knelt beside her, and pointed to the activity.

"What's that?"

"Ohno"

"Oh no what? They're just feeding the ducks."

"Ohno"

"It's all right."

The more the children threw breadcrumbs, the more April disapproved.

"Ohno, ohno, ohno, ohno, ohno, ohno, ohno..."

"It's okay, love."

"Ohno, ohno, hi, ohno."

Raymond laughed.

Seventeen months and she's already mastered the non sequitur.

Raymond changed his daughter into a fresh diaper and bummie and they ate their snack by the waterfall. The tuna fish sandwich was cut into four triangles and April only ate one. The remaining three were broken up and thrown to the ducks.

Auggie the bear was their only stop after lunch before heading home. Like all of the animals at the Bomanville zoo, Auggie was held within chainlink fencing strung around wooden posts. More chainlinking was laid overtop of the cage. He looked big enough to break through his enclosure but he just
lay curled up near the rear of his cage like a brown boulder. Perhaps escape never crossed his mind.

Raymond thought the bear looked old and tired, but he realized that he had no way of judging the age of a bear. Perhaps Auggie was just sleepy.

April pointed and asked a question her father didn't understand.

"He's a bear, love."

She pointed to the orange pop machine in front of the cage and asked another question. These questions always made Raymond a tad insecure. He never had explanations and he didn't even fully understand the questions.

What can I tell her?

The twenty-two school children moved in around the cage and pushed up against the fence. After a headcount, the older teacher asked who wanted to feed Auggie. She bought a bottle of orange pop from the machine and twisted off the cap. A loud young boy stepped forward and accepted the bottle. He tapped it against the fence.

From the rear of the cage, Auggie roused and made his sluggish way to the fence. His bulk was even more impressive mobile than curled up. He lifted his whole body up, front paws against the inside of the fence while the boy slid the bottle neck through a fence link. In a few gulps, the bear drank down the whole bottle.

The younger teacher stood beside Raymond and offhandedly
remarked that this was always the kids' favourite part of the trip. A bustle of laughter and cheers affirmed what she said.

April held onto her father's finger and watched as the children ran, skipped and walked away.

"C'mon dear, let's go home to Mommy."

She slept through the car ride home and wasn't awoken when Raymond carried her into the house. He slipped off her shoes in bed and went to see if his wife was awake. She wasn't and he didn't want to wake her. She needed her sleep now.

He made himself comfortable in the living room and wondered about August the bear. How could the zoo encourage that? Surely it couldn't be good for the animal. How much orange pop could a bear drink before he got seriously ill, he wondered. Maybe he would tell his wife about the giraffes and the rhinoceros. Raymond pulled off his shoes and cried.
F*ck This Noise

The first and only time Alen cursed in the presence of his wife was in the delivery room. After nine months of ultrasounds, urine and blood tests, a midnight trip to the emergency room and warnings of an unspecified danger, his frustration and helplessness came out in the simple but firm expression "F*ck this noise."

Sharon had trained and worked as a nurse's assistant for five years at that point, and she knew that hospital staff were accustomed to outbursts that wouldn't be permitted elsewhere. Still, she held her husband's hand tighter and encouraged him with soft words to ensure his peace of mind.

"It will all be over soon," she said. "The waiting is the worst of it and the worst of it is over."

This calmed him and she never again heard him swear, not in the delivery room and not anywhere else. Shortly after her comforting words, the physician removed the infant from the birth canal with the help of metal tongs. At the time, none of the medical staff could tell either parent why her muscles ceased working halfway through the birth; no one knew why the infant had to be pulled by force, but they were relieved to discover that the incident only left superficial marks in the child's head. The physician set the baby down on a table away
from its parents to inspect for damage and he correctly concluded that the marks left above the infant's temples caused only cosmetic damage and would one day be covered by hair anyway.

While Sharon slept, Alen told their waiting families that it was a boy.

The infant Ron didn't get to take the momentous first car ride home until two months of age. Although his health was fine and he was growing at the rate that the maternity staff expected, his mother was under observation and was regularly wheeled through various wards at Toronto Grace Hospital for testing. In between the tests, Sharon spent as much time with her son as she could, but the tests often tired her and required hours of rest afterwards. Still, she got to know the boy well; soon she could distinguish his soft cry from the dozen other voices in the nursery and she learned exactly how tightly he wanted to be held. Sharon told herself that the pain and the effort and the time away from her husband were more than worth it.

Since Alen had only been given a month off of work from the Pickering Nuclear Generating Station and he was not permitted to stay past visiting hours at Grace, the frustration he let show on his son's birth day grew. He'd always sworn at work - it was part of the culture of an industrial occupation - but lately he'd been cursing at his crew more out of anger than a spirit of camaraderie. After
day shifts, he spent three hours at the hospital telling Sharon about his day, watching her nurse their child and inquiring after the hospital staff for information. After night shifts, he would drive straight to the hospital and try to keep up the same routine, but more often than not he fell asleep in the chair beside her hospital bed.

At the end of the two months, definite results were handed to the husband and wife. They were told that Sharon had Multiple Sclerosis and the stress of pregnancy must have triggered the nerve disorder within her body. They were told that the condition can affect almost any part of the body and senses could come and go without warning. They were told that there was no treatment they could give her and they were told that they were free to take Ron on his car ride home.

After Junior kindergarten, Ron started full days at school and Sharon decided she should return to work. Looking through the paper, she found few openings for nursing assistants and she reasoned that the MS, even though it hadn't surfaced since Ron's birth, would put her low on any list of applicants. For this reason, she lied.

Her first job upon returning to the workforce was with the BallyCliffe retirement home and it lasted until Ron's first year of secondary school. For eight years, she fed and bathed elderly who could not feed and bathe themselves. For eight years, she gave them the pills listed on forms filled out by doctors and fully certified nurses and she held their
hands when they couldn't cope with aging. Alen often remarked that she gave too much of herself to the home; she wasn't being paid enough and he was making more than enough for them to live on. When they fought about it - though they didn't often - Sharon won every argument by simply stating that helping them helped her.

During the summer after Ron's elementary school graduation, Sharon tied off a patient's arm for an injection and found that her hand was shaking. Instead of risking harm, she called a coworker to take over and signed out early that day. When she woke the next day, she found that the hand didn't work at all. It wouldn't grip; it wouldn't hold. She held her right hand in her left and it felt like nothing at all.

Alen convinced her that a leave of absence from the home was the smartest approach for the time being and, although BallyCliffe was sorry to see her go, they told her that they'd hire from a temporary agency and hold her spot indefinitely.

Halfway through Ron's ninth grade, Sharon regained the use of her right hand. The faculty arrived as abruptly as it had departed; she woke up one day to make her son breakfast before the school day, leaned over to turn off the alarm clock and switched off the buzzer. It wasn't until she sat up in bed and rubbed her face that the change occurred to her. The ability had left with no announcement or warning and it returned in the same manner.
That afternoon, the family physician, Dr. Mendolshonn, told her that such occurrences were not unusual; Mendolshonn told that the disseminated sclerosis could affect any part of her nervous system at any time, and so unpredictable changes were par for the course. She took a taxi home and ran the phrase through her head several times.

Par for the course, she thought.

Through the next five years, what was par for the course were deafness, blindness, paralysis and combinations of all three losses. What was par for the course were Alen and Ron's night classes in American Sign Language and finger spelling lessons for the deaf and blind. What was par for the course were visits from volunteers from Bob Rumble and C.N.I.B.

Faculties would return long enough for Sharon to think about returning to work. Although Ballycliffe had changed management and her position was not held for her, she managed to find a position at the Addiction Research Foundation where she handed out methadone and counseled young adults on recovery. There were also jobs at Sick Kids, Toronto General and the Ajax-Pickering hospital. Each time she would omit information on her application and each time she would argue with Alen, telling him that helping helped her; each time she would have to take a leave of absence and never return.

At Ron's high school graduation, she heard his valedictorian speech, saw him turn the tassel on his cap, and
stood to lead the ovation.

Alen managed to hire Ron as a summer student at the power station through his entire university education. The work wasn't satisfying in any way, but Ron was more than willing to sweep floors and receive a union salary.

Although the son had grown up close to his father because of the needs of Sharon, Ron had never heard Alen swear until his first summer at the plant. Ron would enter the cotton laundry to drop off a delivery from his unit and he'd overhear his father using language they never used at home. Once he saw his son, of course, Alen reverted back to his paternal role immediately, thanking his son for the delivery and asking how his day was coming along. Each time this happened, Ron would spend the rest of his day thinking about the side of his father that never came into their house. He had a father who respected his mother, he thought.

From the money he saved each summer, Ron was almost able to pay for his school years. Sharon would regularly write to her son and slip a fifty dollar bill into the envelope. The post-script of each letter always said "an English student can always use more books" and Ron never did tell her that the money invariably went towards the phone bill, women or alcohol.

She'd been working for a home care service for three uninterrupted years when Ron was in his final year of university. The job let her pick her own hours, and at
nights, she had started taking university credits in English Literature. Ron received one excited phone call after the next as she finished texts. Since the calls weren't charged to him, he was more than happy to talk books with his mother for hours. Each time he hung up the phone, he'd think how odd it was to never have known the excitable side of his mother.

Both Ron and his father had taken her health for granted because of the extended grace period. So when he phoned home for his weekly call, he found it hard to believe that he couldn't speak with his mother. He also found it hard to believe that the loss of both sight and hearing had occurred three days earlier and Alen hadn't contacted him.

"You're busy with school and women, Ron; your mother didn't think it'd do any good to bother you."

The father and son had fought as much as any father and son while he was growing up - the foolish friction that occurs between a man and a boy becoming a man - but Ron had never sworn at his father until that day on the phone. He swore; his father didn't speak. When Ron had worn himself down with anger, his father said, "There's more" in a simple, but firm voice.

His father hadn't told him about the lump Sharon found under her arm and his father hadn't told him that Mendolshonn had already referred them to a series of specialists. His father hadn't told him that these specialists said that a trauma to the mind can trigger the sclerosis; Ron had to
return home to hear all of this.

Ron returned home and his father didn't ask about the degree Ron would have received in another three months. As they had done since Ron's ninth grade, the father and son set about learning. They learned how to feed her. They learned how to help her change without embarrassing her. They learned when to give the pills prescribed by the doctors and certified nurses and they learned which of the many pills to give at which times. Later they learned to inject morphine and they held their hands steady.

Both heat and cold had been bothering Sharon and Alen was constantly turning the air conditioning on and off in an attempt to comfort her. With the discomfort added to his worry, Ron did not sleep comfortably through many nights. One evening, he awoke in the middle of the night covered in sweat and went to the kitchen for water. Outside of his parents' room, he heard her crying and entered without knocking. Alen was holding Sharon up from the side while she rocked back and forth repeating "It's so warm in here" over and over. His father must have undressed his mother for comfort because she sat on the bed without a nightgown. An inflamed red scar ran from her collar bone down to her stomach, a tear that the doctors left. Alen looked up at his son and his son looked at him.

The next day, as scheduled, a representative from MacKenzie Monuments stopped by the house with headstone information. Sharon had been trying to make as many of the
arrangements for her funeral and burial as she could to help Alen and Ron later. The saleswoman appeared shortly after lunch; Ron and Alen took turns describing the headstones to her on her hand. The day, however, wasn't one of Sharon's bearable days and Alen helped her return to her bed. Ron sat in the living room with the saleswoman and drank tea quietly while they waited for his father.

To fill the silence, the saleswoman suggested Ron look through the catalogue, a photo album of markers that MacKenzie Monuments had done in the past. Ron took the album in his lap and turned the pages slowly, considering each design and stone type. It occurred to him that if his mother's headstone was well made, it might someday be in this catalogue.

"Do you see anything you like?" the woman asked.

The yelling brought Alen back into the living room. He watched at his son waving his arms and shouting; although he wished he could join in on the anger, he only told Ron that it wasn't the woman's fault.

Ron stopped and sat back down.

"Fuck this noise," he said.

"I don't want you talking like that. Your mother might hear."

"No, Dad. She won't."

Sharon lasted two weeks more after the saleswoman's visit. Two weeks in which Ron didn't help. He didn't help feed her. He didn't help with the pills and he didn't help
with the needles. To him, she wasn't there anyway. She was deaf and she was blind. She wasn't there and he just wanted out.

The night before she died, Ron again woke up sweating and again he went into the kitchen for water. To his surprise, his parents were sitting at the table. Her last night was not unbearable and she was feeling well enough to get out of bed. As he'd been doing since the cancer arrived and the sight and hearing had left, Alen was reading to Ron's mother on her hand. That last night, he was spelling out *Heart of Darkness*, a text from her night course that she never got to. The book had been on a course in Ron's first year; he hadn't read it, but he had received an A for a paper he wrote on it.

Ron didn't touch his mother to let her know he was in the room and Alen didn't acknowledge his presence. At the sink, he filled up a glass with water and drank it down before returning to bed.

The next morning, Alen knocked on his son's door to tell him that Sharon was gone, but he couldn't get the words out. Ron stood and held his father. It hadn't occurred to him before, but he stood almost a full foot taller than his father. Ron took his father's head in his hands and held him close to his chest.

"The worst of it is over," he said.
Vita Auctoris

Scott Randall was born in 1970 in Toronto, Ontario. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto in 1993, and a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1995.