1996

Shifting Fictions.

Christopher Paul. Kocela

University of Windsor

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SHIFTING FICTIONS

by

Christopher Kocela

A Creative Writing Project
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English and Creative Writing
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1996

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for my parents,
who set me in motion

and for Amanda,
who keeps me moving
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Mike, Jen, Brady, Paul, Julie, and Laurie for their early help in the "fun room."

Special thanks to Dr. Alistair MacLeod for his ongoing encouragement and support.

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THE CAGE
The Cage

Richard fed the lizard frozen green beans thawed in a plastic dog dish divided into two separate bowls, one for the beans and one for water. This he had done every morning for four years and still the lizard did not know him. Every morning she suspiciously watched the opening of the cage door and the slow intrusion of Richard’s hand into her lamp-lit and lamp-heated world. Sometimes she would rise on thick green legs to arch her back, steadying her long striped tail for striking as if to prove she did not know Richard, would not know him. Today, back arched, tail poised in a vertical curve behind her, the lizard opened her scale-lipped jaws and hissed a quiet reptilian warning.

"Now Andromeda, don't be that way," Richard said in a higher tone of voice than he used when he spoke to people. He knew from the many books about green iguanas that filled one shelf on the wall above his bed that they often responded favourably to female voices. Richard's imitation of a female voice was not very clever, but this never
prevented him from trying to woo the creature in the manner described by his texts. This morning his attempt was even less successful than usual, and in a definitive display of hostility the lizard raised her head and stretched to a spiny white shield the dew lap between her chin and neck.

"Iguana iguana iguana," Richard said in reply. He was not repeating himself needlessly, for this was the lizard's species name, a shortened version of Animalia Chordata Reptilia Squamata Sauria Iguanidae Iguana Iguana. Broken down, this lengthy appellation referred to a cold-blooded vertebrate animal, hatched on land, with scales, of a distinct family of lizards having pleurodont teeth and the unique facial scale arrangement of the iguana genus. Carniverous land-crawlers at birth, sustained on insect life until the approximate age of one year, they become in adolescence fully arboreal and vegetarian. Maximum recorded size: six feet seven inches weighing thirty pounds. Native to Mexico, tropical South America, the West Indies, and Central America, where in select countries they are known by the undignified name gallina de palo, or 'chicken of the tree.'

The books which supplied Richard with all of these facts rested atop a bookcase filled with very different texts; on the bottom shelf John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding was positioned like an obese brown
monolith between Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* and Leibniz's *Monadology*. Richard had written his final exam of a combined Bachelor of Philosophy and Literature degree three days ago, and the distaste he had felt growing over the past year for this lowest shelf of books had, while studying for that exam, reached a final peak. Too many conflicts in interpretation, too many cryptic notes scribbled in narrow margins, too much fruitless re-reading of abstract passages had pushed him to a new resolution: he would see those texts moulder and crumble before he lifted them from their shelf again.

Yet now as he studied Andromeda's green four-foot length he could not help remembering an earlier time, when the potential for literature to instruct and explain had been real for him. And in thinking of his freshman naïveté Richard was drawn into recalling the incident that had changed everything. Over the past three years the event had taken on a near-mythic significance, becoming enshrouded in his mind in a special sort of gloom which thickened with each re-living of the memory. It had happened early in his third academic semester. He had been struggling to stay awake through an early morning lecture in his eighteenth-century literature class when his professor—-an arrogantly weary man who lectured in an exaggerated pattern of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables—had related
something extraordinary with regard to Samuel Johnson and the writing of his great English dictionary.

"Johnson was trying to establish a one-to-one correspondence between ideas and words. He hated vagaries of language, ambiguities of meanings, metaphors and the like. Really an odd thing for a poet to have attempted."

Then after a moment of consideration: "An odd thing indeed. Of course he failed."

It was the presumed inevitability of Johnson's failure that troubled Richard, and he pursued the subject after class.

"Of course," his professor answered, briefcase rigid at his side. He and Richard were walking across campus toward the English department, their feet crushing the first scattered leaves of fall.

"But I don't understand. Why did he have to fail?"

"Because it's impossible. Language can't be tied down or it dies." His tone implied an unvoiced "silly boy" at the end of each sentence.

"So he could have succeeded, then, but it would have meant the end of the language."

Now his professor chuckled. "Well, I suppose so, in theory. But it's far too big a job for any one man. Even a great man like Johnson. Language has no single owner. There's no objective right or wrong in it." Then he paused
and smiled. "No, thank God it's too messy for that."

Since that day Richard had come face to face with the messiness of language on many occasions, but never once had such an encounter instilled in him the sort of peaceful satisfaction he had detected in his professor's smile that autumn morning. On the contrary, every unclear passage, every vague description, every critical dispute sent him rebounding off that memory with the disheartening knowledge that doctors of language rejoiced in and even depended upon the very aspects of the written word that Richard saw as its greatest shortcomings. If language could not be limited to absolutes, and if single words could not be stripped of their host of connotative meanings, then humankind's greatest effort to arrive at an understanding of its world was a dismal failure. Certainly there was enough difficulty in understanding the real universe without constructing an even more complex and confusing system to represent it. And over the past few months Richard had come to the conclusion that language, despite its power to evoke feeling and thought, would have to be destroyed entirely and rebuilt from the beginning if it were to be of any benefit to human understanding.

In her cage Andromeda grew tired of her back-arching pose of defiance and went abruptly to her food dish. Propping herself up on the edge of the dish with her front
legs, she turned her head to one side and surveyed the thawing beans with a single yellow black-pupilled eye, leaving its counterpart, far away on the other side of her head, to stare vacantly into the air above her. Richard fastened shut the cage door with five short ties of copper wire, and each twist of the ties made him guiltier for confining her here in this basement room where the only sun was the fifteen-watt Vita-lite fluorescent lamp above the cage. But she had become a delicacy in Mexico and the West Indies and, if one could believe the environmentalists, as Richard's troubled conscience prompted him to do, tropical South America was all on fire and no home for iguanas.

Half an hour later he was climbing the stairway that led up from his apartment to the back door of his landlord's house. Richard rented the small, damp basement of Mrs. Sutter's home for three hundred dollars a month, and received for that sum the use of a private bathroom as well as Mrs. Sutter's loud but operative washer-dryer set. He paid an additional token fee of ten dollars per month for the exorbitant amount of electricity it took to run the three 125-watt infra-red heat lamps which maintained Andromeda's ideal living environment. These lamps ran continually for ten hours a day and certainly used more than ten dollars' worth of electricity per month, but Mrs. Sutter
was a stubborn old woman and refused any greater payment. Richard was certain she refused in order to maintain a subtle but sure hold of guilt on him.

Richard reached the top of the stairs just as the door to Mrs. Sutter's kitchen, which shared the same landing as the back door of the house, swung open. This was Mrs. Sutter's method of initiating conversation and Richard had learned to dread it. Her head pushed its way through the partially opened door.

"Oh, Richard, it's you," she said. Though Richard was her only tenant, his presence seemed always to surprise her.

"Hi, Mrs. Sutter. How are you today?" Richard asked peremptorily.

"Fine, fine. Got some gardening to do." She was a short woman with grey hair cut so as to appear like some sort of feathery plumage, which Richard suspected may have been a daring older lady's hairstyle fifteen years ago. She did not look at him as she spoke and this meant there was a specific reason for this morning's ambush.

"How's your back today?"

"Oh, fine, fine. Listen, Richard. That lizard of yours--what is he?"

"An iguana. It's a she."

"Anyway it's got to go. Just saw it in the paper this morning. In here. Come here."
She led him into the kitchen where a section of last night's newspaper lay open across the table. She pointed to a short column in the top corner of one page entitled 'Reptile Owners May Face Loss of Pets.'

"City by-law in effect," Mrs. Sutter said. "No reptiles for pets in city limits. Read what it says."

Richard read the five-line article twice and then tapped the title with his index finger. "It says 'may' lose pets. It hasn't been decided yet."

"I know that, but I'm telling you. I'm just telling you, Richard. I let you keep that thing because you pay your rent on time and don't give me any hassle with parties and drinking or anything like that." She was squinting now in the way she always did when she felt herself being challenged on any issue. Her kitchen smelled of Pine Sol and distant, hidden onions. "I think I'm about the only person who'd let you keep that thing, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"Well I'm just telling you when it's against the law I won't have it. Not under my roof. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You remember the poor little boy killed by that snake on the east side?"

"Not really."

"Well, Richard, I'll tell you." Her voice was
quavering and she had managed to work herself into genuine
anger. "They ought to put that owner in jail and throw away
the key. Just throw it away! Who keeps a boa constructor
for a pet? Eh?"

"Well they're different from iguanas, you know.
Iguanas are practically harmless--"

"Don't tell me! I know it!" She paused, calming
herself. "Listen, Richard, it's nothing against you. It's
just the law. Did I ever tell you..."

Now Richard was getting angry. Enough conversations
with Mrs. Sutter had fallen into this pattern for him to
know there was nothing in her die-cast mind she had not
already told him. If only he could get through to her
somehow, just grab her and shake her by the shoulders and
shout until his voice gave out: "Listen to me! You don't
know everything! You don't!" But every time he imagined
this the complexities rose to thwart him--wriggling little
snakes of sentences that taunted, "You can't, Richard, you
need a place to stay," or "She's done a lot for you,
Richard," or "It isn't right, Richard, you're being
intolerant." Then he would swallow his anger and agree with
her and slink away hating himself for letting her think she
was right. Sometimes the face of his old eighteenth-century
literature professor would appear to him in his defeat,
smiling and repeating again and again, "Thank God it's too
messy... Thank God it's too messy... Thank God it's too messy..." It was this outcome that Richard feared the most: the appearance of that smiling, mocking face so at peace in the same horrible mire of language in which Richard struggled incessantly, unable to believe any longer in the possibility for escape.

Walking to work through the drab downtown neighbourhood in which Mrs. Sutter lived, Richard fought off his growing sense of entrapment in an elaborate but effective manner: he thought of his favourite story. It was an encouraging tale first told to him years ago by his friend Tim, and it centred around the heroic son of a rich doctor in Tim's old neighbourhood who managed to acquire a real Nile monitor lizard smuggled into the country from Africa. Over the years Richard had shaded the subtle details of Tim's story to suit his own taste, but the basic facts remained intact.

The hero's name was Mike, a hard-working fellow about twenty years old, who spent the majority of the money he made working in the summer (the job Richard gave him this morning was something nondescript involving an old folks' home full of crabby ladies that looked like Mrs. Sutter) on his two favourite hobbies: smoking weed and collecting strange pets. The particular summer in which the story begins saw the merging of these two hobbies in a peculiarly advantageous way; one of Mike's smoking buddies knew a
dealer who knew somebody else with a racket set up for smuggling restricted animals into the country. It was all very complicated and slow getting started, but a lot of frustrating talk eventually worked itself out to a thousand dollars and Mike's choice of the first available deadly venomous snake, scorpion, or large carnivorous lizard. He chose the lizard—a newly hatched Nile monitor with wide black claws and serpentine tongue and a voracious appetite. Mike kept it in his basement in a steel-wire cage under heat lamps, much to the chagrin of his rich, progressive parents (Richard envisioned Mike's mother as having a striking resemblance, though somewhat younger, to Mrs. Sutter). The monitor grew from a foot and a half to five feet long in two years, fed to a weight of fifty pounds on rabbits and frozen chicken foetuses. Then one glorious summer afternoon, cotton-throated, eyes red from smoke, Mike stumbled into his basement and had a vision. Richard, having had little experience with the joys of a marijuana high, always imagined this vision as a sort of slow-motion revelation, a puncturing of visible reality occurring at the moment when Mike, stepping dizzily from the last basement stair, turned his head to see the fierce, noble creature he had raised in the cage beneath his parent's house. The cage fell away, dissolving into air, the lizard grew, slowly at first but with increasing rapidity, bursting through what should have
been the basement ceiling but which had become all at once a lush green canopy of extinct conifers and cycads, each leaf and needle a perch for huge rainbow-winged insects. And there, amid the vegetative glories of the early Cretaceous Period, Mike saw his own pet lizard rise erect on two gigantic hind legs, proclaiming with a roar the return of the old saurischian order. Twenty feet tall, thirty feet, forty—greater than great-grandfather Allosaurus or his infamous son T. Rex—the new king of the Mesozoic pantheon at last stood waiting, and Mike knew what he had to do.

Protected by elbow-length leather gloves, he wrestled the monitor (now returned to its proper size) into submission just long enough to harness the old family cat-leash around its neck and front legs. Then, with leash in hand and both arms tight around the furious beast, he mounted the stairs and emerged outside in the blue-skyed suburbia of his parents' neighbourhood. All afternoon the monitor walked with unequalled prehistoric dignity past the pretty-as-punch pastel-coloured houses of Mike's neighbours, drawing a following of curious children who pestered Mike with questions as he struggled to keep the animal tethered on the fraying leash. Mike in his greatness did not leave a single question unanswered, and his lofty tone impressed on the children something they would not have understood in words: that this lizard and its fearful parade were an
assault on the petty warm-blooded sensibilities of the neighbourhood Mike had always despised.

Then came the best part of the story. Returning home past smooth dark driveways and countless mailboxes all labelled "Sutter," Mike and his hungry reptile stumbled upon an idyllic scene. In the midst of a perfectly trimmed dark green lawn an old man was playing ball with his poodle, and the dog, barely able to contain its excitement, was yapping and wagging its cotton-ball tail. Mike felt the monitor strain for but a moment, the leash taut between them for the last time, and then the fifty-pound lizard was free, broken cord dragging as it crossed the lawn in a single predatory leap and devoured the squeaking poodle whole. And the face of the old man, clenched in shock and horror at the sight of the last struggling remnants of dog locked between the lizard's jaws, was none other than that of Richard's eighteenth-century literature professor.

"No smile now, eh?" Mike shouted over the sounds of reptilian chewing. "Isn't it messy?"

This was not the real end of the story, but this is where the story ended for Richard. He had long since stopped thinking about the disturbing continuation of the tale: about the old dog-owner's subsequent lawsuit, about the maelstrom of legal verbiage which ensued, about the terrifying eye-witness accounts that eventually funneled
down into the cold laborary death of that noble cold-bloved creature.

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At the deli where Richard worked, one of the regulars--a young blonde mother of two blonde little girls who were always seen to wear identical outfits--stood at the counter with list in hand, reading instructions to Richard.

"Half a pound of pastrami, shaved please. A half pound fat-free turkey, sliced thin. One quarter pound genoa salami sliced really thin, O.K.?'" Every time she came in she read her list this way, far too quickly, and every time Richard forgot the third item and had to ask her to repeat it and then she said, with a loud sigh, "Oh never mind, I can see you're busy." It happened again today.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I just didn't hear what you said--"

"No no no forget it, it's all right."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, if you'll just repeat--"

Richard hated to plead with her for the third item but Lou, the deli owner, had already warned him about the business lost when employees angered customers by not listening. Of course there was no way Richard could slice that much meat in time to keep up with the way she read her list; but it was impossible to convince Lou of the problem. Arguing in the midst of chicken-loaf rinds and spilled pickled egg juice and peppercorn-halves fallen from salami
sticks was simply too messy to be effective.

"No really, I don't need it," she said again and 
flicked long strands of too-blonde hair behind her shoulder.

One of her little girls whined, "Mommy, I'm hot."
Richard saw that all three of them—mother and both 
daughters—were wearing the same combination of white skirt, 
yellow blouse and bright yellow hair-ribbon.

"Well, I'm sorry ma'am, but when you read the list that quickly I can't--"

Lou appeared round and sweating from the back room in a 
white apron that stank of freshly cut beef. "What's the 
problem?" he demanded.

"Well I missed something on her list. She read it so 
fast--"

"Could I please have a quarter pound of genoa salami?" the woman piped up.

"Of course you can," Lou answered. "How would you like it sliced? I'll cut it myself. Richard, finish up for me 
in the back."

Richard set down the woman's first two orders, already 
wrapped and priced, beside the cash register and pushed his way through the swinging doors into the meat-cutting room. 
There on the central table among thawing curls of discarded 
fat was a large half-opened tin of corned beef still 
suspended beneath the magnet of the electric can-opener.
Richard took a step toward it, prepared to finish the job, and then stopped. This was, after all, the "back room"—Lou's private and personal domain, where the smooth white bones of thousands of cows and pigs had been stripped of their frozen flesh by the skilfully-wielded blades and saws of Lou the Boss. Lou had made it clear many times that no employee could do anything in this room that would not ultimately prove detrimental to the smooth functioning of Lou's Deli. No, Richard had worked here long enough to know that a command to "finish up" in the back room was really a command to sit and wait, out of the view of customers, for the tyrannical fit that would commence at Lou's first convenience.

This time Richard did not have to wait long. Lou was yelling even before the doors had swung closed behind him.

"Can you tell me what your problem is that you can't even take a simple order?! You're in university! Where's all the brains?"

"I can't cut three orders of shaved meat as fast as she reads her list, Lou."

"Oh you can't, eh? Why don't you just do what I told you? Listen to the whole list first and then cut it. It's not anything difficult!"

"Lou, I do that, except..."

"Except what?"
Lou had come around the opposite side of the cutting table and now stood facing Richard with his back to the cooler-room door. The meat-cooler was a small cellar-like room adjoining the cutting room, and Richard noticed for the first time that its heavy steel door was partially ajar. The Infallible One must have forgotten to close it after he had finished with this morning's beef. The thought of all that terribly expensive cold air escaping into the world cheered Richard as he stood under Lou's sweaty stare.

"Forget it," Richard said.

"No I'm not going to forget it. That's what you do. That lady out there just asked me if you had some kind of problem with day-dreaming! She said she told you three times what she wanted!"

"That's not true. I tried to get her to tell me--"

"Richard..."

"So you're going to believe her over me?"

"Why would she lie?"

Richard thought of those sunshine-yellow and white outfits and knew that he was trapped. His word was nothing against that of a loyal customer, especially a pretty one. In his mind the voices were all against him: "She's right, you must be wrong..." "There's no proof..." "And why would she lie, Richard?"

Lou shook his head solemnly. "I'll say this one more
time, Richard. We're in business because of customers, so pay attention to the customers. Listen to them, O.K.? That's pretty simple."

Richard stared beyond Lou at the meat-cooler door. There was nothing simple about any of this. He saw himself backed into the frozen room, the door slamming shut...

"And the next time this sort of thing happens, I'm going to be looking for some new help. Have you got that?"

In the cooler the sides of pork and beef hung like horrid ornaments, frozen and caged between the cold stone walls.

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The appetite of the common green iguana is controlled by the detection of light through a small, membrane-covered organ in the top of the head, known as the parietal eye. This eye is a primitive visual organ capable of recognizing large variations in light intensity, which it communicates to the pituitary gland as a means of triggering the lizard's vital activity cycles. When it sees light, the parietal eye responds by awakening the lizard to its need for body heat, typically garnered through an hour's basking in the sun in late morning. This in turn stimulates the rapid blood flow required to search for food, and enables digestion and defecation later in the day. The perception of light through this organ is essential to the lizard's survival.
instinct. Light detected through the primary eyes of the lizard is ineffective in exciting a "daylight" activity cycle because there is no connection between these organs and the pituitary gland. If kept in darkness, or if the parietal eye is somehow prevented from sensing light, the iguana cannot awaken to its need for sustenance and may sleep into starvation.

In the heat of her caged lighting system Andromeda had just eaten the last of the green beans and was leaning on her front legs over the empty dog-dish. She ate in spurts throughout the day, taking a little at a time, often not finishing completely until well into the evening. Sometimes for reasons not detailed in any of Richard's books she would refuse to eat for days at a time, staring idly at the thawing beans cut lengthwise and arranged into piles to attract her attention.

Richard awoke to find her watching him, right eye unblinking, only the slow swelling and retraction in her side to show that she was not a remarkably intricate statuette. He rolled over in a daze and met the red digital face of his alarm clock: 4:49 pm. He had slept over an hour. His deli-clothes lay strewn on the floor beside his bed, relics of an earlier part of the day he did not want to think about.

He stood up in his underwear and went to the closet.
"Still hungry?" he asked Andromeda as he passed. She turned her head to watch him out of her other eye.

Iguanas see two different pictures of the world simultaneously. Richard, having studied this phenomenon at length in various texts and through the day-to-day observation of his pet, found the implications of such dual-perspective philosophically staggering. Always two sides to everything, always two visions of reality to be compared and reconciled, it implied a great injustice done to humankind in having been limited to a single field of vision. Of course iguanas have no depth perception, but in Richard's estimation this was an advantage for their long-term survival. What had a visual sensation of depth really done for humanity? Nothing but to provide a sense of going into, of penetrating beyond what one could see, into ideas and abstractions that had led to the need for hopelessly complex language. For iguanas, thought is the simple steering between two flat sides of reality. The way in which human beings think has been forever corrupted by how they see.

As Richard pulled wrinkled clothes from the gloom inside his closet he remembered an afternoon two months ago--the day before the due date of his Empiricist Philosophy paper--when studying Book II, Chapter 9 of Locke's Essay, he had felt his mind grow bright with sudden insight. The moment had come during his reading of Section
8, Locke's famous discussion of the effects of judgement on perception. Richard had always loved Locke for his concern with words, and especially for his instructions, at the end of Book III, as to how to remedy their philosophical abuses. Yet far more clearly than 'The Imperfection of Words,' something spoke to Richard that afternoon in the hypothetical story of the blind man who learns to identify cubes and spheres by touch. When suddenly granted sight, this man cannot tell the difference between curves and straight edges merely by looking at them, for his hands--though capable of making the distinction on their own--have imparted no corresponding means of identification to his eyes. Only when told to equate certain visible shapes with the tactile sensations he calls "cube" and "sphere," will the man gain the ability to distinguish by sight alone. It was then, imagining that first association between vision and touch, that Richard had seen the solution to his greatest problem. Language was messy because words stood for concepts which yoked all of the senses together, forcing "meaning" to fill impossible gaps like those between the sight of a straight edge and the spatial movement of a finger on a plane. If these gaps were only left unbridged—if the sight and feel of a cube remained dissociated, preserved by different words, there would be no misunderstandings, no interpretive difficulties. Each
sensory faculty would have its own unique language, and the
word corresponding to the appearance of a cube would be
different from that corresponding to its feel. Any single
word would be keyed to only one specific sensory impulse.
Here, at last, was an escape from the mess.

He decided to write a paper explaining everything.
Samuel Johnson would be its hero—he who had tried so
gallantly to tie words to single things and to limit their
terrifying allusive powers. But the paper proved impossible
to write just as Johnson's dictionary had fallen short of
its goal. Words as Richard had been taught to use them were
destructive of his purpose, and he felt the beauty of his
ideal universe fading behind footnotes and parenthetical
remarks. By dinner-time that afternoon he was defeated, but
he knew more surely than ever that humanity had missed its
one chance at control. A word tied to a single idea can be
manipulated, utilized; but a word with countless meanings
has a life of its own and entraps those who created it. The
next morning he handed in some eloquent drivel about innate
ideas and later received an A.

Andromeda crawled languidly over her empty dish and up
one side of the cage, toes curling through the openings in
the wire mesh. Her full green belly was now displayed to
the rest of the room, and when Richard was finished dressing
he went to the cage and poked his finger through at it,
rubbing back and forth with and against the grain of the scales. Andromeda turned her head sideways to look down at the probing finger, then crawled higher up the wall of the cage. To the tip of Richard's finger she felt cool and lifeless as a plastic doll.

The phone rang on the table beside Richard's bed and he withdrew his hand.

"Hello?"

"Hello, how are you?"

"Fine." It was his father. "How about you?"

"I just called to make sure you were still coming next Sunday for the reunion."

Richard should have anticipated this. His brother had called earlier in the week to warn him; but Richard had foolishly put off planning the excuse that would save him from attending. Now unless he could come up with something quickly he was doomed to a full-scale family reunion. He would not have minded a quiet dinner with his immediate family, but the thought of chit-chatting with aunts and uncles and cousins he had not seen in three years made him rigid with foreboding. He would have to play dumb to buy time.

"Oh, what's going on? Something special?"

"We're having everybody come down, Richard. Grandma and Grandpa, Uncle Mike, Aunt Jane, Suzie, David--didn't
Robert tell you?"

"He just said Grandma was coming."

"Well it's a big deal," his father said. "I don't know why he didn't tell you about it."

"Maybe I misunderstood," Richard answered. He winced at his despicable method of self-defence. Certainly language failed often enough in reality without the need to feign difficulties.

"Anyway, dinner is scheduled for six. Of course everyone will be getting there a little early--"

"I don't think I can make it, Dad."

"Why not?"

Now a dozen lies blossomed before Richard--he had to work, he had to finish a late paper, he'd been fired and had to look for a new job--but with each new excuse his mind turned forward he felt the cage shrinking tighter around him, sealing him away in a realm of double-edged vagaries, subtle insinuations, second-guessed meanings.

"I can't, Dad. Sorry."

"But it's no good if we're not all there. Why can't you go?" Frustration was rising early in his father's voice. Perhaps he'd had the same problem talking to Robert.

"I have to go, Dad..."

There was a long pause. Richard waited for an angry lecture; but when nothing but silence ensued he realized he
was under attack from a more powerful weapon. In the space empty of fatherly rebuke, Richard's inner voices rose to torment him, spurred to outrage by his neglect of filial duty. "He's your father, Richard, don't you owe him this?" "Can you really lie to avoid your own parents?" "How do you think your mother will feel?" There could be no defense against such an onslaught. He felt the words forming unbidden before he spoke.

"I guess I can go. What time is it?"

"Six o'clock, but it'd be nice if you were there a little early. This will mean a lot to your mother."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know you can call me if you need anything, right?"

"Sure, I know."

"O.K. then. Take care, son."

"Bye."

Andromeda pushed nose-first against the door of her cage, the scarred top of her head bleeding from the force of her efforts. Whenever Richard let her out to run free through the room she ran frantically as if fleeing for life, and resisted with jaws and whipping tail every attempt at re-capture.

The phone receiver was still in Richard's hand. He put it to his ear and heard the soft hum of the dial tone. Then he hung up.
That night Richard and Tim sat at the corner table of a small, dimly-lit blues bar five blocks from Mrs. Sutter's house. It was a pleasantly run-down establishment, advertising Local Blues Entertainment as a week-end attraction, presumably to contrast with the 'no entertainment' it offered during the week. Friday and Saturday nights the bar was filled with cheering friends of whatever band was playing; but tonight, as on most week-nights, the tiny stage opposite the door was empty, and the place was quiet.

"Do you ever think about how little control we have?" Richard asked suddenly. Two half-filled glasses of beer stood waiting on opposite sides of the table, and between them a recently emptied pitcher dripped foam from its cracked spout.

"Control over what?" Tim replied, not looking at his friend. His attention was focused on a table across the room where two women in short skirts had just seated themselves.

Richard went on. "Over anything--what we do, what we say. What we think? Does it ever bother you?"

Now Tim turned toward him. "I don't know, I guess not. Why?"

"Because it bugs the hell out of me. Do you know that
we can never really be sure if anyone understands us? Take me. I'm talking right now, but I can't have any real idea if you're following me at all. Even if you tell me you understand what I'm saying, I can't really know for sure. Neither one of us can possibly know."

Tim's face tightened into a thoughtful frown. "Well, yeah, maybe that's true. But a misunderstanding isn't a problem unless one of us gets hurt by it."

"No, that's where you're wrong. It is a problem, no matter what." Richard took a sip of his beer. "You have to admit that when I use words--any words, like I am right now--there's no way for you to be sure if you're interpreting those words the right way, or at least the way I'm intending them."

"Yeah, O.K."

"When you talk, the same thing goes for me, even though we're speaking the same language."

"Right."

"Now let me ask you this. Did you have a choice in learning this language? Do you have any thoughts that aren't in this language, or at least some kind of language?"

A smile broke out on Tim's face. "What are you getting at? Who've you been reading this time?" Tim was a year older than Richard and half-way finished his Masters in Biology.
"Nobody, I'm serious. Just listen to me. If we can't think outside the language, and the only way we learn the language is through people we can't even be sure we understand, then who's controlling who? Are we using the words, or are they using us? You see? The words get into our heads without our consent, they structure our every thought and perception, and then they fly out of us to wreak whatever kind of havoc they want." Richard's voice had grown loud and excited, and his mind swam behind the flow of his own speech. "We might pretend we control them, but we know damn well we don't. We're trapped. The language controls our thoughts, and our thoughts are our reality. It's a cage we can never think our way out of, because the walls are the language that make thinking possible."

Richard's legs twitched excitedly under the table.

Tim shook his head. "Man, you're in pretty deep. I don't know what the hell you just said." He finished his beer in a single gulp and set the glass down heavily.

Richard gaped for a long time before his face fell to a drunken pout. "That's exactly my goddamned point," he muttered.

Tim was looking in the direction of the short-skirted women. "Do you know them?" he asked.

Richard glanced up miserably. "No."

"Well the blonde keeps looking over here. Maybe you
could lay some of that mean philosophy in her lap."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Listen, man, don't worry about that stuff. If you really want to depress yourself you should go into biology. Then you find out all we are is a bunch of compounds and chemical processes and nothing means anything anyway." He smiled encouragingly. "You want another drink?"

Richard swallowed the last of the beer and wiped his mouth on his arm. "Yeah, I'll go up. Another pitcher?"

"No, I have to drive. Just grab me a glass. And tell the red-head I love her."

Standing up made Richard fully aware of how much beer he had drank, and a cautionary voice, muffled beneath the hum of digesting alcohol, reminded him that he had to work in the morning. But sitting down again meant renewing the conversation with Tim and Richard felt the need to delay that as long as possible. He had revealed too much already. The beer had transformed his greatest concerns into rash, garbled bar-talk, and a part of himself was wounded by the betrayal. He searched his pockets for a last ten-dollar bill and approached the bar.

Surprisingly enough, Tim had not been exaggerating about the blonde. She was keeping good track of Richard, and turned her head twice from a discussion with her friend to monitor his progress across the room. Richard allowed
himself a quick glance at her in return, remembering not to keep his head up too long for fear of stumbling. The floor felt slanted and uneven beneath him, as if someone had chopped it up and laid it down again at varying levels.

By the time he reached the bar he found himself needing to sit down. He pulled back an empty stool and leaned his elbows forward on the counter-top, waiting for the absent bartender. The blonde and her friend were now two tables directly behind Richard, and he knew he was being watched. It was very strange. He was not accustomed to being a target, and his mind raced to uncover all of the possible implications. Why was she watching him? If she did not know him, then this was an invitation to act. But was he prepared to resort to the inane banter that the situation demanded? He could not believe he was, and yet in remembering the flash of long white legs he'd glimpsed beneath the table he felt an oppressive weight of longing descend upon him, and he knew he would act. And then a final possibility: what if she were someone he should have recognized? Maybe he had insulted her already. Perhaps it was too late. He turned around for verification of this and met her even, expectant smile. It was not a smile he knew. He looked away quickly.

The bartender appeared and asked Richard for his order. Richard heard himself say "two small drafts" as his mind
wrestled with interpreting the smile, identifying its probable cause, isolating its brief factual reality from the hypothetical lust that lay behind it—long and undying lust for Richard alone. He heard the soft click of shoes on the floor behind him and he realized there was no music in the bar tonight. The radio was turned off. Every halt in the dialogue, every nervous pause between her and himself would be amplified into a vast gap of uncertainty and doubt. Then a female voice: "Hi there, how's it going?"

Richard flung around on his stool. "Fine. Fine. How are you?"

"Great. I've never seen you in here before."

"Sure, I'm here every now and then."

"Oh, do you live around here?"

"Not too far away."

She was smiling and held a tall glass smeared with lipstick along the rim. Her hair was long and straight and pushed back behind her shoulders, and her eyes did not leave his. Richard searched the counter in vain for the beer he had ordered. The bartender was leaned against the cash-register talking to a tall, middle-aged waitress.

"So are you all finished school now?" the blonde asked after a sip of her drink.

"Uh, yeah, just finished, actually." A twinge of discomfort passed through Richard. She knew him from
university. Had she been watching him there? How could he have missed her? His eyes dashed down to the white legs and wedge-heeled sandals and his heart quickened painfully.

"So how about you? Do you come here often?" he asked.

"Every now and then. My friend really likes blues."

"Is that her over there?" Richard indicated the red-head still seated at the table.

"Yes. Do you recognize her? We were in a class with you a couple of semesters ago."

"Really? I guess I didn't..." He trailed off deliberately. Confusion was setting in. No one who looked like her could possibly have escaped his notice, especially in a classroom he attended week after week. A voice inside him whispered: "She thinks you're someone else." His beer appeared on the counter before him and he lifted his glass to drink.

"Actually it might have been a couple of years ago," she said. "Do you remember? Eighteenth-century literature? With Professor--?"

Richard dropped the glass. He felt it slip through his thumb and middle finger and watched it fall straight down, the level line of beer parallel with the floor, the narrow bottom of the glass bouncing on impact, the sides exploding, the foaming flower of beer and shards disintegrating, splashing over floor, stool-legs, sandaled feet. Two years
ago they had sat at the front of Richard's eighteenth-century literature class—a short-haired blonde girl and her red-haired friend, never late for class, always first with their hands up to answer any question, always first to laugh at the professor's stale jokes. Their forced giggles came back to Richard in the sound of crashing glass. "I think the beauty of a language is how it sounds, sir." "Rasselas should have just stayed in the Happy Valley." "What's so bad about Cloe anyway? Pope doesn't understand women."

"Will 'The Progress of Poetry' be on the exam?" There in the slowly spreading puddle of beer was the professor's smiling face, more delighted with each blonde and red-haired comment, and again Richard was seated in back of that awful classroom, bitter taste of coffee in his mouth, tired and angry and unable to have his raised hand acknowledged.

"I think you're cut off there, buddy," the bartender said.

Richard looked up in a daze. "Sorry..." he mumbled.

"Ah Jeez, these are my new shoes," the blonde complained. She backed away from Richard and he saw the thin leather straps of her sandals darkened with beer.

"I'm sorry, it just slipped--"

"It's all right," she said in a tone that contradicted her words. She stepped carefully over the puddle on the floor and set her drink down on the bar several feet from
Richard, as if to emphasize the danger of leaving him alone with liquid. She left wet footprints behind her as she walked to the bathroom.

Richard looked across the room and saw the red-haired friend stand up suddenly from her unfinished drink. She smoothed her skirt and cast a disgusted glance at Richard, then hurried with a purse in each hand to the bathroom. Behind her Tim was approaching wearing a broad grin and slowly shaking his head.

"So when's the wedding?" he called. When he reached the bar he picked up the glass of beer Richard had bought for him and drank a third of it in a gulp. "I assume I'll be best man."

Richard did not laugh. He leaned down to inspect his own shoes for beer and saw that his feet were tucked up safely behind the legs of the stool, away from the splash. "At least it missed me," he said sullenly.

"Who was she?"

"Just somebody in one of my classes."

"Pretty nice-looking somebody. I knew I should have taken English."

The waitress came from behind the bar and kneeled down in front of Richard's stool, mopping up beer and large chunks of glass with a wet cloth. When she was finished she said maliciously: "That's not a very smooth way to pick up
Richard smiled ironically and turned to watch the door marked 'LADIES.' It remained closed. He was beginning to feel more alert now, but when he asked himself why he was waiting for her he could find no answer except that he should, that the situation demanded one last effort from him. A voice inside him said "you knew what you were getting into" and the realization of his own helplessness made him dour and angry. Beside him Tim worked slowly on his glass of beer and made a few comments Richard ignored.

Tim had finished his beer by the time the women reappeared. They walked toward their table in stoical grace and Richard had to cut them off in the middle of the room before they noticed him.

"Look, I just wanted to say I'm really sorry about that," he said to the blonde.

"It's no problem," she replied. Her voice was high-spirited and she smiled at him again; but it was now the uninterested smile she reserved for strangers. Richard knew the situation was concluded, and yet still the words fought their way out of him.

"Could I buy you a drink to make it up then?"

Her smile faded. "No. Thanks anyways, but we've got to get going. Maybe I'll see you on campus, though. I'm going back for my Masters. How about you?"
"No, I'm finished."

"Oh well then, that's too bad. Bye."

The red-head gave him a concentrated stare before turning to follow her friend. Richard watched them go. He was astonished at his own ridiculous disappointment, and even had to struggle with himself to refrain from following. When they were nearly out the door he noticed that the blonde's skirt was pulled up two inches higher than before, and the sight of such slender untouchable whiteness stung him as a last cruel act of revenge.

He felt Tim's hand on his shoulder. "No luck?"

"No."

"Ah, who cares. Let's get out of here. You want to get some food somewhere?"

Richard shook his head. "I'm not hungry. I think I'll just head home."

"Are you sure? You want a lift?"

"No, I'll walk it. I've got to work in the morning."

"I can give you a lift."

Richard stared at the closed door of the bar. "No, I'm fine."

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The common green iguana is entirely without vocal chords. Despite having an acuity of hearing that far exceeds most lizard species, inter-communication between
adult iguanas is almost entirely visual in nature, taking the form of a waving head, opened jaws, extended dew-lap, or upraised tail. Similarly, while not as adept at colour-changing as the African chameleon or even the North American green anole (Anolis carolinensis, also of the Iguanidae family), the common iguana shares with its distant cousins the ability to alter its basic colouring to a limited degree. These changes are most readily observable in the head and body flanks, which may range in colour from grey to light brown to black on the head, and from bright yellow-green to spotted black and wintergreen on the body. In captive situations, it has been observed that a typical iguana is darker in colouring at night or when cool, and brightest when most active, warm, or aroused. The changing of colour appears to be more an indication of mood than a spontaneous camouflage ability. Limited testing conducted to determine how or if captive iguanas respond to changes in one another's body colouring have proven inconclusive.

When Richard returned to Mrs. Sutter's house he found the back porch light on and a newspaper clipping taped to the door. He read only the headline of the column while searching through his pockets for keys to the house. The large black letters read, 'No Reptiles By-Law Likely to Be Passed.' He stumbled downstairs to his room, where he found Andromeda still awake and restless in her cage. He had
forgotten to leave the door open for her and the heat and light of the cage-lamps had prevented her from sleeping.

He stripped off his shirt and lay down on the bed. The room was spinning slowly around him. In the faint gray patterns of dust on the ceiling he saw faces staring down, their lips slowly moving. Tim, Mrs. Sutter, the woman from the deli, Lou, the short-skirted blonde, his father, his eighteenth-century literature professor. One after another they appeared and vanished, leaving only the remembered echoes of their words in Richard's mind.

Andromeda struggled at the door of her cage. Richard shook his head and rose suddenly. He twisted open the first tie on the cage-door and Andromeda butted her head anxiously against the wire mesh, re-opening the cut that had healed through the evening. The sound of her head shaking the cage reminded him of the crickets he had fed her when she was small—the brown field crickets that had launched themselves repeatedly into the walls of her aquarium looking for escape. Richard had bought them at the pet store downtown and smuggled them into the house in his school-bag. Mrs. Sutter had said she would not allow insects. The dull rapid thudding of their bodies against the glass came to Richard as something beautiful and lost.

He unfastened the second tie. He remembered Andromeda, only a foot long, stalking the unsuspecting crickets across
the green turf floor of the aquarium, tongue flicking slowly, one eye trained on the insect, the other staring off and out through the glass at Richard. Had she ever really been small enough to fit in an aquarium? Her past predatory life seemed that of another animal altogether. And how had she known to hunt? There had been no one to instruct her. Her mother had left her in an egg to hatch with her siblings in the sand on a beach somewhere in Central America. Yet she had known.

Richard loosened the third tie and the cage door was now open at the top. Andromeda crawled upward along the inside and found sufficient space to poke the tip of her nose through the door. Only the two side-ties remained.

Once Richard had attempted to save money by catching his own crickets in the small garden behind Mrs. Sutter's house. There in secret he had found the meaty black house crickets trained in every survival tactic, hardened with thick shells against predators and gardeners alike. These were faster than the brown store-bought crickets and more agile, with strong furry legs that sent them rocketing into the walls of the aquarium with a sound like rapping knuckles. With such feverish intent to live, they had proven difficult prey for the young iguana, and even when eaten they continued to fight back. Richard recalled one incident in particular when Andromeda, troubled by a
recently devoured cricket still squirming inside her, had
coughed up the insect only to have it hop away, shiny with
digestive fluid, to the other side of the aquarium.

Richard was working on the last tie now and Andromeda
was rigid with anticipation of being free. As he pulled
away the tie she leapt suddenly onto the unsupported door,
clinging fast against the panel of wire mesh as it swung
downward into Richard. He caught the panel with one hand
and eased it slowly to the ground. On the floor Andromeda
stood, claws curled tightly through the door, ready to bolt
in an instant to safety behind the bed. Richard watched
without moving. Almost a minute passed. When he saw her
grip loosen on the wire he slipped his hand deftly beneath
her belly and pried her gently from the door.

Her legs waved helplessly as he lifted her. He did not
speak. He refused now to resort to the artificial female
voice so many books had said she liked. Dimly he wondered
why this was, why he was not now wearing gloves as he
normally would have and what had inspired this strange
confidence in his ability to subdue. The iguana struggled
ferociously in his hands and her long claws cut him twice,
leaving a thin red line on each wrist.

Before he could think about it, before any voice could
reason against him from within the murky depths of his mind,
he was mounting the stairs to the back door with Andromeda
in hand. She fought harder against him and her neck stretched to place her head in biting position; but Richard was careful. He left no outstretched fingers to be grabbed by the snapping jaws and he held her far from his body, out of range of her tail. When he reached the back door he had to turn the knob in the crook of his elbow, keeping his face as far as possible from the angry lizard. Then the door was open and he was outside.

Andromeda grew quiet in the dark, but she was not at rest. Richard could feel her cold reptilian heart pounding against his palm in fear of the strangeness of the night. The stars were out above the silent neighbourhood and everywhere common people slept for the working day ahead. Richard thought of this and a laugh caught in his throat with a sharp pain. Then he knew it was not a laugh at all and that he was going to cry. Tears ran down his cheeks as he carried Andromeda across Mrs. Sutter's small back yard to the garden, stumbling along the way. He set her down amid the sprouting rhubarb plants and watched as she stood, tongue flicking, still too fearful to move. Richard saw in the dim illumination reaching the garden from the back porch light that her colouring had already darkened to suit her new environment. An impulse arose within him to pick her up again. A voice shrieked inside of him to grab her and go back inside. But he stayed where he was.
Beyond the garden was a short chain-link fence and a narrow alley and another fence and another yard and another house. Richard and Andromeda saw this together, and their eyes (only one of the lizard's) remained trained on the pattern of confinement in considering its implications, its ultimate effects. Another voice in Richard's mind told him that tomorrow he would pay for all of this, that he had escaped nothing and that a mess of consequences was already brewing for him somewhere in the dark. He looked down at Andromeda. She was moving away from him in the direction of the fence, steering her dark body slowly through the rhubarb stalks in a long lithe effort to be unseen.
TRUST
Trust

The People's Trust Bank of Canada occupies over half of the first floor of a two-storey building on the corner of Central Road and Windsor Street East. For this reason the entire building is often referred to as the People's Trust Building, though the majority of the offices within it are leased by agencies having no affiliation with the Bank. The easternmost offices on the first floor are occupied by a subsidiary division of a large telecommunications company, while the second floor houses both a fledgling law firm and an independent credit brokerage.

There are two public entrances to the building. The main entrance is a set of double glass doors recessed in a shallow alcove facing Central Road, opening with some effort into a small foyer where a framed directory of the building is fixed to one wall. Here amid several tall potted plants an oak desk faces out toward the doors, and a blue-uniformed security guard sits smiling behind it, glancing occasionally over his paper and lifting his coffee cup from the brown
circular stain on the desk's surface. To his left the foyer narrows into the main hallway of the first floor, which, if followed around a corner past the People's Trust Bank and several doors marked 'City Communications,' ends at another glass door through which the rear foyer and parking lot may be seen.

This second foyer is even smaller than the first, containing only a black rubber mat and a shiny garbage receptacle in one corner. When the glass door of the rear entrance is pushed open, its inward swing spans nearly half the foyer's width, exposing the room to the incessant sound of traffic on Windsor East. In this foyer one finds no building directory or smiling security guard; but a sign that reads 'No Loitering' is fixed with tape to the inside of the entrance door, its stencilled message facing out.

It is nearing four o'clock on an afternoon late in November. The sky is overcast and sheds a cold, gray light over the city, so that the cold one feels in exposed fingers and ears is matched by a depressing inner coldness. Along Windsor Street East cars move slowly from intersection to intersection, their drivers staring straight ahead and wondering idly what to make for dinner, what's on television tonight, where the kids are, when to get their engines tuned for the coming winter. One of these drivers, signalling a change of lanes, steers his car toward the northern curb of
the street and notices a man standing shivering on the edge of the sidewalk, hands half-hidden in thin coat pockets as he waits to cross the road. Suddenly the driver envisions himself on that sidewalk, his mind numbed by the cold, his body crying out for a warm jacket and gloves. He imagines stamping his feet to keep circulation in his toes and soon feels quite sorry for himself. He turns up the heat on the dashboard and drives on.

The man on the sidewalk is in his late twenties, thin, almost gaunt, with an angular face unshaven for days and brown hair hanging just above his shoulders. He wears a black and blue flannel jacket which is too short in the sleeves for him, and he has been outside long enough that the uncovered flesh on his wrists is pink from the cold. His ears and nose are also an angry shade of pink, and his toes, hidden within old high-top running shoes, are numb. His breath is an intermittent stream of vapour through chapped lips.

He pushes his hands farther down in his pockets and waits for traffic to clear. He could walk west half a block and cross the street at its intersection with Central Road, but he seems intent on taking the shortest route to his destination, which is the People's Trust Building directly opposite him. Over the roofs of passing cars he can see the building's parking attendant shaking his head regretfully in
the open doorway of the toll booth, pointing with gloved hand and indicating to a hopeful driver the already full lot.

"But my daughter works here. She works at City Communications," the driver argues. She is an auburn-haired woman in her late forties. Her daughter sits in the passenger seat beside her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, no space. We're full up."

"No space for employees! I think that's ridiculous." She yanks the gear-shift into the 'R' position and turns to her daughter. "Do you want to get out here? It's almost four o'clock."

"I've still got ten minutes. You can park back there in the alley."

Her mother plants her foot hard on the gas pedal and the car, a glossy white sedan, lurches with a squeal of rubber down the ramp onto Division Street. "Where's the alley?"

"Right here," the daughter answers. She directs her mother toward a narrow service-way extending from Division along the south side of the People's Trust Building, where an old green Camaro is also illegally parked. "You won't get a ticket here if you're not too long."

"Wouldn't your father just be thrilled to know I parked the new car in an alley."
"It's no big deal. What do you have to come inside for anyway?"

"I have to deposit a cheque. Come on, you're going to be late."

"It's only ten to four."

In the rear foyer of the People's Trust Building the man in the flannel jacket pulls his hands from his pockets and slowly unclenches his fingers. A vent in the ceiling above him blows heat steadily downward into the center of the room, and he positions himself directly in the midst of this warm current, stamping his feet to stir feeling in his toes. He coughs loudly into the cold palm of one hand and wipes his nose on his index finger, pausing afterward to study the clear streak of mucus left behind. When he raises his eyes again he can see through the glass door two women approaching the building together, one middle-aged and sophisticated in appearance, and the other much younger but with similar features. The older of the two wears a double-breasted wool coat that hangs to mid-calf, and clutches in one hand an expensive leather handbag of the same rich brown as her scarf and gloves and narrow-heeled pumps. Her hair is tastefully dyed auburn, framing in loose curls an expertly-powdered face. Her expression is fixed and stern as she walks, and her thin lips move little when she speaks.

Her companion is in her early twenties, slightly taller
and without make-up but with the same stern expression as
the older woman. Her hair is long and blonde and she wears
a soft leather jacket over jeans and ankle-high boots. The
women are obviously mother and daughter, and even from a
distance their discourse appears terse and strained.

"You better hurry, you're going to be late."

"I don't start until four o'clock."

"Well what's the good of getting there right at four?
You won't have any time to get ready."

"I am ready."

The mother glances sideways at her daughter. "With no
make-up and wearing those--"

"Don't start with that! I've told you a thousand
times."

"Fine."

They are nearing the building now and the mother sees a
man watching them from inside the foyer. In an instant her
eyes take in his unshaven face, too-small jacket and
shoulder-length hair. She leans close to her daughter.

"I see the undesirables are getting in early this year.
It's not even that cold out yet."

"Now how do you know he's undesirable, Mom? Just
because he's not in a suit and tie?"

"My God, Karen, I can't say a thing to you without you
getting angry!"
The daughter is about to retort but they have arrived at the door of the building. She pushes it open and steps into the foyer, casting a smile at the man who has moved to safety along the wall, out of reach of the door. Her mother purses her lips into a tight burgundy line and does not look at the man.

When they have passed through the foyer and into the main hall, the mother again leans close to her daughter's ear.

"That's not very bright, Karen. That's exactly how to get yourself in trouble."

"How? What are you talking about?"

"Smiling at guys like that, you're just asking for it. He's probably waiting there for exactly that kind of response. He could be some sort of pervert and you're leading him on!"

The daughter stops before a door marked 'City Communications--Employees Only'. She looks incredulously at her mother, then shakes her head.

Her mother is indignant. "You can look at me like I'm crazy, but I'm going to say something about him. There's a sign right on the door that says 'no loitering.'"

The daughter turns the handle of the door and steps inside. "Do whatever you want, Mom. I have to go to work."

The door closes abruptly on the auburn-haired woman.
She recoils as if stung, stepping backward and turning without thought to the left, where her eyes find those of the man in the rear foyer. He looks away at once but she knows what he has seen: the door slammed in her face, the barrier between herself and her daughter made evident in solid wood—a barrier of twenty-five years separating experience from naïveté, prudent judgement from recklessness. Surely he is thinking of her daughter even now, cherishing that sidelong smile as if out of some half-remembered dream, the image fading but kept alive by his desire to impart to it a significance it never had, a perverse tarnishing only he can give it. She turns from him in disgust, heels clicking rapidly on the floor of the main hallway while behind him she knows with a growing sense of dread, a vague quaking sense of his own desires that his face is pressed against the glass in a bestial leer, that one hand has slipped into his unbuttoned pants, that his hips are now moving back and forth obscenely in slow, deliberate thrusts against the doors.

The security guard of the People's Trust Building is a short, overweight man in his mid-thirties, with closely cut hair and a fleshy, boyish face. He wears a blue visored cap and a gold-coloured badge bearing the name of his security company on his left shirt pocket. He sits at his desk in the main foyer and speaks over an opened newspaper to a man
slightly taller than himself, wearing a smoke-coloured wool suit, matching grenadine tie, and heavy-soled leather shoes. His suit-jacket hangs open casually as he speaks, and a white linen handkerchief protrudes from its left pocket.

"I’m telling you, Marty, there are plenty of opportunities for a guy like you," the taller man says. "You’re young enough to make a go of anything you want. You’ve just got to get off your butt a little. I always say it’s easy to live a mediocre life, but if you want something better for yourself you have to work for it."

The security guard shakes his head and attempts to smile. "You make it sound pretty easy. What do I do for money in the meantime, though? I’ve got a wife and kid to feed."

"Suzie’s not working anymore?"

"Well, sure, but it’s nothing much--"

"Marty, I don’t want to tell you what to do, but... Well, I’ll tell you anyway, because we’re friends. Get some cash together—just enough for a safety net. With Suzie working it won’t take too long. Then get out of here and give me a call. I can set you up in delivery, stock, whatever you’re comfortable with, and it’s only uphill from there." He tosses one hand forward as if to lay out a draft of his plans on the desk between them. Gold from two large cuff-links gleams in the overhead lights of the foyer.
"I don’t know, I mean—"

"Do you know I brought in a million and a half in sales last year?"

"Really?" the guard answers dully.

"Yes sir, and there’s no reason why you couldn’t do the same with a little more ambition. It’s about time you started thinking about your future, Marty. You don’t want to be a security guard forever, do you? Weren’t you telling me just last week about some lady who nearly filed a complaint because you wouldn’t walk her to her car?"

The guard barely nods assent.

"Think about it and let me know. I want to give you a hand." He presses his hand to the guard’s shoulder and walks swiftly to the main doors, pausing to button his suit-jacket before exiting.

The guard stares after him weary and resentful. He watches until the doors swing closed and then turns the page of his newspaper. Footsteps come clicking toward him rapidly from the direction of the main hall.

"Excuse me."

The guard lifts his head from his paper and finds a middle-aged, auburn-haired woman before him.

"I’m sorry, but there’s a loiterer at the other end of the building I thought you might want to know about."

His eyes flash briefly over the woman’s attire.
"Inside the building, ma'am?"

"Yes. Right down there at the end of the hallway, near the back entrance. I don't know if you'd want to say anything to him. He just looks... Well, you know. I just don't trust him."

"Did he harass you, ma'am?"

"No, I suppose not." She lowers her voice and takes a step toward the desk, leaning over it slightly to speak in confidence: "I know from the sign that there's no loitering in here." She holds her leather handbag tight against her stomach and glances in the direction of the hallway.

The guard rises slowly from his chair and steps out from behind the desk. The smell of the woman's perfume is sweet, and the guard is reluctant to move from the close presence of her turned and fragrant neck. He is not as tall as the woman when he stands and has to incline his head slightly to speak. "Thank you for telling me. I'll look into it."

She smiles appreciatively. As she leaves the foyer he takes note of her long, confident strides and straight-backed posture. A rich woman's walk, he thinks. He savours for a moment the fragrance that hangs fading in the air behind her; but in that subtle diffusion he recalls the sight of gold cuff-links displayed arrogantly before him, the condescending pat on his shoulder, the word ambition
tossed like a petty token in his lap. She is a part of that world he will never touch—a world that all his experience has taught him to covet yet prevented him from attaining, filled with people like this woman and his old high-school buddy boasting about a million and half in sales per year and knowing that his bluff will not be called.

She has taken her place in line within the People’s Trust Bank and now stands watching him expectantly. He knows what she is thinking. Will he dare to ignore me? Will he dare defy my request and remain there without moving, without fulfilling his simple duty unto me? She is planning even now her revenge for such an outrage, how many phone calls to certain administrators it will take to strip him of the tiny piece of security to which he clings. He grits his teeth and walks through the archway into the hall.

As he rounds the corner he sees the object of her concern standing slumped against the wall of the rear foyer: a thin, unassuming figure in ragged clothes, unshaven, no doubt looking for refuge from the cold. The guard feels a moment’s pity for him and then pushes this sympathy from his mind. Behind him he knows she is still watching, studying the imminent encounter as she might study the miniature battling of two insects before bringing the fly-swatter down on them both. How many times has he fought this battle? Politely and without objection he has enforced their whims,
expelled whatever threat they found in jacketless men in the midst of winter, stooped to pick up their scarves and gloves—all of this lest that swatter be brought down in the grip of the soft white hand and polished fingernails, the hand he has been taught to love though it remains forever fisted against him. He knows as he walks that she is aware of his love, that she has worn her perfume and leaned across his desk to ensure this blind obedience, to set him upon the man in the foyer like a dog upon unsuspecting prey.

"Excuse me sir, are you waiting for someone?"

The man in the rear foyer is startled by the question. He turns to find a short, uniformed guard in the open doorway to the hall. "Uh, yes," he answers.

"Someone in the bank, or somebody who works here?"

The man puts his hands in his pockets and shifts his feet. "She works here. She gets off at four." He looks out through the door and then back at the guard.

The guard's eyes move slowly over the figure of the man. "I see. Well, it's about five to four now. I guess she should be out pretty soon then, right?"

"Yep."

The guard looks him over once again and backs out of the doorway.

Standing in line at the People's Trust Bank, the auburn-haired woman clutches her hand-bag and watches the
guard's approach. He has failed as she might have known he would. She had no reason to expect that such an unimposing little man would be any more perceptive than her own daughter; but there is something inexcusable in his failure to recognize such a blatant threat, to permit its presence to go unchecked in a manner as naive as her daughter's inviting smile. It is clearly another symptom, she realizes, of some growing tolerance to small injustice which allows women in expensive cars to be denied parking, daughters to slam doors in their mothers' faces, homeless men to leer at well-dressed women. She will not give her enemy the pleasure of even a glance but she knows he is staring from the end of the hall, leering lustfully through the glass doors of the foyer, licking his lips and mocking with obscene gestures the feminine dignity which endures his rude appraisal.

At his desk in the main foyer the security guard sits staring at the open newspaper laid out before him. In the past few minutes his eyes have risen several times to scan the line inside the People's Trust Bank, and each time his attention has lingered long on the cool confidence of the auburn-haired woman. Again and again his eyes lift to find the coiled softness of her cashmere scarf, the sleek sheerness of her hose, the firm points at which her narrow heels press the floor. She stands with such grace, and her
manner even as she waits is so elegant, so refined—not the erratic, fluctuating beauty of a young woman but more controlled, more dignified in her possession of herself. And with each glance at her he becomes more acutely aware that his attention will not be reciprocated. It is not his fault, he thinks. Even though he knows the man in the flannel jacket is a liar he cannot simply throw him out—at least not before his lie can be proven. Yet he knows she will not understand this just as his high-school friend cannot understand what it is to depend on a steady ten-dollar-an-hour job, to fear losing that job so much that one holds doors open for painted women and stoops to pick up their fallen gloves. She will complain to someone, he is sure.

The watch on the guard’s wrist reads ten minutes past four when he pulls open the doors to the rear foyer for the second time. "Your friend hasn't shown up yet?" he asks the man in the flannel jacket.

"Nope."

"It's almost quarter after four. What do you suppose is keeping her?" The guard blocks the doorway with a forced smile.

"Don't know."

"If you give me her name, maybe I can find her for you. You said she works at City Communications, right?"
"That's right." The man stares out into the parking lot as he speaks.

"So what's her name?"

He does not answer.

The guard steps into the foyer and closes the door behind him. Still attempting to smile, he says: "You know there's no loitering in this building, don't you? The sign's right there." He points to the back of the 'No Loitering' sign taped to the outside door.

"Yeah, I know. I'm waiting for somebody."

"Who?"

Again the man does not answer. The sounds of rush-hour traffic on Windsor Street filter through the door to fill the silence.

"I think you're going to have to leave," the guard says. "We can't have loitering on the premises." The smile has faded from his face and his arms are crossed in front of him.

The man in the flannel jacket murmurs something under his breath. The guard takes a step toward him.

"What was that?" he asks.

"I said I'm waiting for someone."

"Well how about you wait somewhere else, O.K.? Because I'll tell you something. I don't believe you. I don't believe you, and I don't trust you."
The guard is so close now that he must tilt his head upward to meet the man's eyes, and his arms have dropped straight down at his sides. His attention slips for an instant to the left, searching the opposite end of the hall and the line inside the People's Trust Bank, and then returns to the man before him.

"Fine," the man says at last. He maneuvers his way past the guard and opens the door to the parking lot outside. When he is half-way through it he mutters something not quite loudly enough for the guard to hear. He does not look behind him as he leaves.

The auburn-haired woman sees everything from down the hall--sees as if through the eyes of the expelled man the parking lot crowded with cars, the oppressive grey sky from which he has fled, the narrow path at the end of the lot that leads to the alley and her waiting car. She feels him studying that path, contemplating, knowing that it is she who has pushed him back into this leaden cold and wanting revenge to soothe the hot animal anger inside him. He will wait for her here, in his own world, where no one can protect her. She knows now that no one can protect her.

The security guard studies her from his desk in the main foyer. He watches her interaction with the bank-teller, the gentle manner in which she removes her suede gloves, the methodical way she sorts through her bag, the
provocative way one foot falls back to pivot on its heel.
These are the rewards of rich men, he thinks: the
possession of those gloves and the soft hands that fill
them, touching, caressing, clutching. She will not look at
him. She has forgotten him already--a mere servant obeying
orders couched in politeness, propped like a puppet on
strings that rise through a dark loft of unions and
workplace equity to end in the hands of men with ambition.
He must take her and awaken her to the fact of his own
existence as she and all her kind force themselves upon him,
leaning over his desk day after day with sweet perfumes and
expectant smiles. The collected memories of them all
resolve into a single image corresponding exactly to the
woman before him: delicately-styled auburn curls, soft
expensive scarf, long woollen coat, sheer stockings and
narrow-heeled shoes. Every aspect cries to him out of the
myriad condescensions of the past, rising in violent
crescendo toward some piercing, unbearable climax.

She walks quickly down the main hallway, trying to
force from her mind the knowledge of what is about to
happen. She passes the door marked 'City Communications'
left partially open and cannot resist a glance inside; but
her daughter is not to be seen. She finds herself envying
her daughter's naïveté and the invisibility that now keeps
her safe.
She passes through the first set of double doors into the rear foyer and stops. From inside the building she can see the full parking lot and the attendant in his booth by the entrance gate. She cannot go to him for help. She turns to scan the hallway behind her, searching without hope for some tall man to accompany her outside, and sees instead the security guard strolling toward her, his face stretched wide by a boyish grin. She pushes her way through the door marked 'No Loitering.'

He is waiting for her outside, leaning against the wall of the building, watching. She must pass him to get to the alley and her car. He stares at her. She knows that he cannot move yet—not here, not in full view of the street—but only when she is alone, in the alley.

She passes him without turning her head. She senses him following, rubbing himself grotesquely with paw-like hands, grinning. She tries desperately not to run but she knows her only hope is the car in that empty alley, and her pace quickens.

She is out of the parking lot now, on the narrow pathway between the service-way and the building. She hears his footsteps behind her, growing close. Her fingers are white from their grip on the leather hand-bag and she realizes she has forgotten her gloves in the bank. She forces one bare hand to unclench, to open the bag as she
walks, to extract the car keys which tremble in her grasp.

Her car is still there in the alley, a ticket pinned beneath one of the windshield wipers. He is very close now, only a few paces behind. She scans the alley in vain for the meter attendant who has ticketed her car. There is no one here. She can hear breathing.

She is at the car. Her hand fumbles with the door-key and pushes it into the lock. His hand reaches out to cup her mouth. His moaning is a sustained bestial whine. She pulls the door-handle.

On Windsor Street East, across from the People's Trust Building, a man wearing a flannel jacket too short in the sleeves for him stands shivering with his hands in his pockets. Seeing him, the driver of a passing car sees herself outside in the cold November air, and is sympathetic. She brings her car to a halt at the intersection with Central and locks her doors.

In the parking lot to her left, a weary attendant explains to the driver of a newly-arrived car that the lot is full. Closer to the building, shaking his head and panting as if from a jog in the cold, a short, blue-uniformed security guard makes his way to the rear entrance, clutching in one hand a pair of brown suede ladies' gloves.
WEDDING PLANS
Wedding Plans

Cheryl could not have anticipated coming home to the news that her younger sister was getting married. This was because, for some reason still unknown to Cheryl—and she knew there was a reason, there had to be a reason—her mother had taken great pains to make it a surprise. In the past week there had been several long-distance phone calls between Cheryl and Diane regarding Cheryl’s up-coming visit, and any one of them might have revealed Diane’s big news. But no. Their mother had orchestrated things in her typical insidious fashion, and Diane, soft-spoken and impressionable as she was, had given in to her demands. Thus when Cheryl walked through the front door of her parent’s house she was suitably shocked by the scene which greeted her: her mother and father arm-in-arm in the stairwell, Diane before them with arm extended, the engagement ring sparkling on her finger. And Cheryl’s first thoughts, while she tried to feign excitement, were: Very well, mother, so you’ve won the first round! But battles are yet to be fought. You will not control this wedding!
That had been this morning. Now, seated at the dining room table for a celebratory dinner, Cheryl realized the full significance of her mother’s early victory. Diane’s fiancé was a salesman. He exuded salesmanship in so forceful a manner that every sentence he spoke stank of a willingness to go back on itself, to retract itself out of existence if only it were shrewdly challenged, matched by counter-proposal, incorporated into some bartering game. Cheryl had met him only once before tonight and had immediately disliked him; but now, watching him work on her parents and her sister and Diane’s best friend, Laura, Cheryl saw how truly crafty her mother had been. Brian was precisely the kind of man Cheryl despised and her mother loved. And her mother now had a head start of days, even weeks, using his salesman’s ways to her own advantage.

“These mashed potatoes are delicious, Mrs. Burton. Far better than my mother’s, but don’t tell her I said so. I come from an honest background and I just can’t keep my mouth shut when the truth is there before me. My mother’s are just lumpy compared to these. These are like whipped cream.” Brian shook his head in disbelief at the creaminess.

“Thank you,” Cheryl’s mother said.

“I sure hope your daughter is as good a cook as your wife, Mr. Burton. Call me traditional, but I just think
there are certain things a woman does better than a man. And vice versa, of course. Ha ha. What do you say, Mr. Burton?"

Cheryl's father shrugged his shoulders and speared a stalk of asparagus.

"The way I look at it," Brian went on, "is a woman takes care of the little things—the cooking, the cleaning—and the man does the big jobs. Tell me if I'm wrng! For example, last week the power windows in my car stopped working. Now would I send my wife out there to fix them?"

Beside him Diane giggled. "Oh Brian," she said.

"Of course not! I went out there myself and took them to a good mechanic."

"I've never believed in those power windows," Mr. Burton said, putting down his fork. "Power windows are for fools! I'll tell you something, the day I can't roll down a goddamned window on my own is the day somebody takes me behind the house and shoots me!"

Brian did not even blink. "I completely agree, sir. I'm getting rid of mine."

Cheryl stared at him from across the table. Had Diane lost all sense? Had Laura, Diane's best friend since high school, never taken her aside, never opened her eyes? But Laura sat beside Cheryl calmly eating, apparently as oblivious as Diane herself. Cheryl's mother seemed
particularly content.

"Now why don't you tell us your plans for the wedding, Brian?" Mrs. Burton asked. "We all know what Diane wants, but let's hear it from you."

"Well, as you know I'd like to have a traditional wedding, Mrs. Burton. Only tradition for my Diane. Nothing but. Of course it's up to her. What would you like, sweetie? Oh that's O.K., I know what you'd like. Long veil, lace—to be the center of attention, of course. Ha ha. And why shouldn't she be? My family taught me it was the bride's day. Who am I to get in the way?"

"Who indeed," Cheryl's mother said.

"Nothing but the best for my darling wifey sweetie-pie. What a precious little tid-bit, no?"

"Damned right," Cheryl's father said.

"Delicious beets. So firm."

"Oh Brian," Diane said and sighed.

Cheryl's disgust made it hard to follow the conversation; but it was clear as Diane nodded and panted over Brian that she had bought the whole package—been suckered completely by the Big Sale. She would pat his arm occasionally, bat her eyelashes, pucker her lip-sticked mouth in his direction. Cheryl felt that she would vomit. Each swallow of her mother's cooking was a chore. Gradually, as she endured the outlining of an enormously
expensive traditional wedding for which her mother seemed
eager to foot the bill, Cheryl realized what she had to do.
She must do her best to thwart this Brian, this self-selling
chauvinist on whom her mother's hopes depended, whose goal
it was to transform her impressionable baby sister into a
doll to be paraded before the entire world. No sister of
Cheryl's would have her dress lifted in full view of a
drunken reception, for the sake of some time-honoured
garter! Diane must be made strong, as Cheryl herself was.
Cheryl lived alone, had short hair, never wore the skirts
and cosmetics for which she had once shopped compulsively.
Her full make-up drawer, in which sat hundreds of dollars
worth of Lancôme, Estée Lauder, and Clinique, had remained
closed these last three years. Diane was only twenty-four--
three years younger than Cheryl. There was still time to
save her. If Cheryl was too late to stop the wedding, she
could nonetheless transform its darker implications.
Visions of bridal party pant-suits and flat-heeled shoes
danced in her mind. Surely this was her sisterly duty.

"So I understand you're a social worker, Cheryl," Brian
said. "Now what do they do, exactly?"

"Oh, a number of different things. They hate
traditional weddings."

"Cheryl!" Mrs. Burton scolded.

"Ha ha ha," Brian laughed, tilting his head back,
placing one hand on his stomach. "Hate traditional
weddings! That’s so funny!"

What Cheryl had said was true; she came from an honest
background.

Her mother continued to stare at her. "Now look,
Cheryl, we’re out of mashed potatoes. Why don’t you run
into the kitchen and get some more?"

"Nonsense, Mrs. Burton, I’ll get them," Brian said. "I
have to take care of some other business, if you know what I
mean. My mother always says, ‘When Nature calls...’"

"...you might as well tell everyone," Cheryl added.
Mrs. Burton glared at her and Brian rose from the table
laughing.

Mrs. Burton, of course, knew that Cheryl was jealous.
It had been obvious from the moment Cheryl walked in this
morning to find the sparkling ring, the proud parents
looking on, every detail Mrs. Burton had so carefully
contrived. Yet she did not fault Cheryl for her feelings.
As the older of two sisters herself, and the second to be
married, Mrs. Burton knew that Cheryl’s reaction was
perfectly normal. In fact, she was relieved to find such
good feminine feeling in the daughter who railed so loudly
against everything traditional. Nevertheless, Mrs. Burton
would not tolerate rudeness. This psychological clap-trap
they talked on TV could only be taken so far, and Cheryl’s
wounded ego would be pampered no further. Mrs. Burton had plans for this week-end, and she would not allow their success to be jeopardized.

Mrs. Burton knew what a wedding must be; she knew that, as the bride’s only sister, Cheryl must be the maid of honour. The main problem was distance: since Cheryl had moved away, the girls rarely spoke, saw each other only on holidays, had little opportunity to stay close. And in Cheryl’s absence a new threat had arisen: Laura.

“You know, Diane, I was at the cutest little shop last week-end,” Laura said. “It would be such a great place to start looking for your dress. I’d love to go with if you’d let me. I’d love to help you choose which one. I’d love to help you with the fittings. I’d love to do everything I can possibly do to help you.”

Had Diane never seen what a busy-body Laura was, meddling in affairs that did not concern her? And that red hair! Lord! Would Laura never change it? Diane had so many less obtrusive friends. Why must it always be Laura this, Laura that, Laura thinks this and not this?

“And have you thought about shoes, Diane? I know a lovely little place for shoes. I shop there all the time. You can get anything you want there, but I know what you want. Something modern, of course. Nothing too traditional. Oh, that’s just no good for today’s working
woman. I know all about working women, of course."

Mrs. Burton set her jaw and picked through the items on her plate. It was all so clear: Laura was competing ruthlessly for Cheryl's role. In the face of such outright manipulation, Mrs. Burton would have to bring all her subtle motherly influence to bear. But it would have to be done delicately. She vowed not to be controlling in the matter, as her own mother had been. She swore she would only get the ball rolling, see to it that her daughters spent time alone together, renewed their friendship, resealed the sisterly bond. Surely this was her maternal duty. Beyond that, she would trust Diane to do the right thing.

"And you know, Mr. Burton," Laura went on. "You should talk to my father about your tux. He just rented one and got a 25% off coupon good for a year."

Mr. Burton shrugged his shoulders, scooping a forkful of mashed potatoes.

"And you, Mrs. Burton. I know a wonderful place where they specialize in dresses for the mother of the bride. Now you'd want something floor-length, perhaps a little slit up the front. Of course even the mother of the bride can be a little daring--"

"I have no intention of being daring, Laura. A traditional dress is good enough for me and a traditional wedding is good enough for my daughter." Oh dear, had she
really just said that?

"So Diane has no say in what she wants, is that right, mom?" Cheryl asked.

"Of course not. She has all the say in the world."

"I think--" Diane began.

"I think Laura has made some wonderful suggestions," Cheryl went on. "What's wrong with a little change, mom? Does everything have to be lace and roses?"

"I think--" Diane began.

"It's the bride's day, Cheryl. What would you have? Your sister in blue jeans on her wedding day?"

"Maybe. Maybe I would."

Mrs. Burton's face went red with restraint. This was getting out of hand already, all because of that meddling, talky, flame-headed little--well, even angry as she was, Mrs. Burton would not think beyond what she could see with her own two eyes. Clearly, this was going to take more planning than she thought, especially if Cheryl was determined to support the enemy. Mrs. Burton was not worried about Diane: only the right suggestion at the right time, mixed with a healthy pinch of guilt, would be required to set her straight. But how to complete the recipe? How to knead out that awful sibling jealousy?

"And you know," Laura added, "there's a bridal extravaganza tomorrow night that we could go to, Diane.
They've got everything there! I went to one last year! It was so wonderful! They had all the major dress-makers in town, all the flower shops, the limousine rentals, the tuxedos, everything! Oh happy day!" She stifled tears of rapture.

Aha! Mrs. Burton thought. You unwise little vixen! What better way for Diane to see the true significance of her wedding? It was perfect, and it gave Mrs. Burton all day tomorrow to prepare. Before Cheryl went home it would all be arranged: she and Diane side by side at the head table, two gorgeous sisters in make-up and traditional gowns, displaying to the whole world of invited guests what a distinctly functional family the Burtons were and what love and loyalty could exist between sisters separated by hundreds of miles and countless differences of opinion.

What else were weddings for?

"That sounds like a good idea," Mrs. Burton said.

"I completely agree," Cheryl said.

It was perfect for Cheryl's plan. Where else would Diane see the range of possibilities beyond the ten-foot train and white veil and merry widow? How else would she ever escape the iron control of her mother and fiancé? Brian would get a surprise on his wedding night, if Cheryl had anything to say about it. No garters and stockings for him. Cheryl imagined full cotton briefs and opaque tights
and smiled to herself. She couldn't imagine any better way of liberating her little sister.

"What's this about an extravaganza?" Brian asked, returning with the dish of mashed potatoes. "You can count me in for that. I wouldn't miss it."

"Maybe we could all---" Diane began.

"Maybe we could all get some eating done around this table," her father interrupted. "Somebody pass me those potatoes. You women are going to starve yourselves with all this planning! No offense, Brian."

"Absolutely none taken, sir. None at all. Not a drop."

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The next morning, Sunday, Cheryl found Diane and her father alone in the kitchen. Diane was flipping through a bridal magazine while Mr. Burton concentrated on his breakfast, wiping the remaining egg yoke from his plate with a piece of bread. It was only ten-thirty and Diane was already wearing lip-stick.

"What are you looking at, Diane?"

"Just a few dresses. This magazine was sitting here when I got up. What do you think of this one, Cheryl?" She held up a picture of a model in a satin wedding gown poised at the top of a staircase. The train of the dress hung some ten or twelve feet down the stairs.
“Don’t you think it’s a bit much?” Cheryl asked.

“You think so? I don’t know. I kind of like it.” She turned the page. “What about this one?”

“Mmmm... no. Too frilly, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Diane flipped a few more pages. “There are so many to choose from.”

Watching her, Cheryl got an idea.

“Hey Diane, what do you say we go stock up on a few magazines down at the mall and go through them together? I know I’m no expert on dresses, but at least that way you’ll have something in mind for the extravaganza tonight.”

“Oh sure, that’d be fun. But I already have a stack of magazines in my bedroom. Laura brought them over last week. We haven’t even looked at them all yet.”

“Great. I’m ready whenever you are.”

“I wanted to ask you, Cheryl. Laura says I shouldn’t take Brian’s name when I get married. Brian says I should. What do you think?”

“I think you should do whatever you want, Diane.”

Bless that Laura.

“What do you think, dad?”

Her father shrugged and stuffed a yellowed crust of bread in his mouth.

“Well, let’s get down to business,” Cheryl said. “Let’s see if we can find you a dress.”
Perfect! thought Mrs. Burton, standing in the hall outside the kitchen. The planted magazine had worked! Without so much as a word of suggestion she had levered Cheryl into position. The longer Cheryl was alone with Diane, the better. They would be the best of friends in no time. Laura’s magazines would be her own undoing. And all this without the slightest interference on their mother’s part! Mrs. Burton was so excited she accidentally clapped her hands, alerting those in the kitchen to her presence.

"Mom?" Cheryl asked, peering into the hall. "Who are you spying on?"

"What do you mean, spying? I was just coming in to see if you girls wanted any breakfast."

"We’re going to look at bridal magazines," Cheryl said.

"Well isn’t that nice! I’m too old to be helping Diane with these new styles," Mrs. Burton said.

"Not that I’ll be any help. Did you know I haven’t worn a dress in three years, mother? Three years." Cheryl could not resist rubbing it in. Why had her mother not come in sooner? Cheryl would have Diane wearing pants and loafers to her wedding by the end of the day.

"Now don’t you go being jealous, Cheryl. Your time will come too."

"Jealous?" Cheryl laughed. "Are you kidding me?"

"Cheryl, you’re not really--?" Diane began.
"Look at you two!" her mother interrupted. "Thick as thieves already. You'd never know you lived so far apart."

Just then the phone rang. "That's probably Laura," Diane said, moving toward it.

Her mother was faster. "Nonsense. You two run along and do your planning. I'll get it."

"But it's for me--"

"Hello? Hello?" her mother cooed into the receiver.

"Hi Mrs. Burton! Is Diane awake yet? I've got some wonderful news! I went to that dress shop I was telling her about, and you wouldn't believe they're going to be at the extravaganza tonight! Isn't that grand?!"

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Burton? It's me! It's Laura--"

"Oh no thank you, I'm not interested."

"But Mrs. Burton, I want to speak--"

"Thank you. Good-bye."

Mrs. Burton hung up.

"Who was it?" Diane asked.

"I don't know, dear. Solicitors of some kind."

This enraged Mr. Burton. "On a Sunday morning, for God's sake!" He slammed his fork and knife on the table.

"Jesus Christ! Is there no respect for a Sunday breakfast left on this planet?! I'll be good goddamned if that isn't the most..."
Mrs. Burton whispered under the tirade: "You girls go look at your magazines. I'll tell you if she calls." Then, to her husband: "There there dear, shhh, it's all over. More coffee? Did you have enough to eat?"

"...good Christ if that doesn't burn me up! If that doesn't get me right under the collar I'll be a no good goddamned..."

Diane's bedroom was hardly the atmosphere Cheryl would have chosen. It was utterly feminine, floral, pastel-coloured, prim, with the same stuffed animals she had been given as a little girl arranged neatly atop the pillows. The bed itself was perfectly made. The air was scented with perfume and incense and whatever else might mask a human body's natural smells. In fact, the whole effect seemed to stem from a denial of human presence. Cheryl found herself whispering without knowing why. She moved slowly, as if movement itself were an offense. Yet Diane appeared perfectly at ease. She flopped down on the bed.

"Have a seat," she said.

"Sure thing." Cheryl sat down carefully. The bedspread was very soft.

Diane leaned over one side of the bed to where a stack of magazines sat piled on the floor. Before she could transfer them onto the bed, however, the telephone rang again in the kitchen. In an instant she was out the door
and racing down the hall, shouting at her mother to remain where she was. Cheryl tuned out the ensuing scuffle just as her father called down the wrath of the Sabbath God.

Cheryl began moving the magazines herself, stacking issue after issue of Canadian Bride, Today's Bride, Bride's World, Brides Are Us. New piles soon covered the bed, but at the top of each was always a blonde-haired cover girl with pointed breasts and fifty teeth. The consistency of the images disturbed Cheryl, suggesting some impossible consanguinity between all of the models. She gritted her teeth and opened the nearest issue.

"Now that one's beautiful," Diane said when she returned.

"You think so? I don't know. Who was that on the phone?"

"Laura. Oh wow! Would you look at that lace?"

The day passed slowly. At first the prospects seemed futile; Cheryl had had no idea what she was up against. Diane liked everything traditionally feminine. The more glossy photographs of taffeta, chiffon, and satin, the better. She was entranced by down-turned eyes, lace decolletages, waif-like bodies. Even worse, she had no interest in the significance behind anything. While Diane oohed and aahed at the subtlest fashion details, Cheryl found herself explaining to a deaf ear the misogyny at work
behind virginal imagery or traditional female roles. It
didn't matter that Cheryl was making it up as she went; the
point was that it looked like her mother had already won.
Nevertheless Cheryl soldiered on through the afternoon,
exposing hidden truths and dismantling conventions. And
whenever she could, she praised the untraditional: off-
white colours, the simplest of simple gowns, models with
little or no make-up and short hair.

Then gradually—though progress was maddeningly slow—
Diane began to come around. Her sighs for hoop skirts and
Victorian lace quieted, disappeared. Her giggles at the
outfits Cheryl emphasized became raised eyebrows, then
thoughtful nods. From the living room across the hall came
the triumphant score of one of Mr. Burton's World War II
documentaries, and Cheryl took it as a positive sign. By
mid-afternoon the enemy's hold on her little sister was
slipping as slowly and surely as Germany's on post-1942
Europe.

But Mrs. Burton had not given up. In the hallway she
stood with her ear pressed against Diane's door. What on
Earth could they be doing in there? Earlier she had heard
talking, pages ripping, even giggling—so much that was more
encouraging than this disturbing silence. But wait! Had
she heard a whisper just now, perhaps a gasp? Was it the
sound of surprise, happiness, fond sisterly affection?
Perhaps Diane had just asked the question, and Cheryl had exclaimed with uncontrollable joy! But no, there was nothing further. The hall was filled with the noise of exploding shells and artillery fire. This whole thing was becoming intolerable. It was four o'clock already. They had to be getting along. They must be doing something in there! Enough! She rapped on the door anxiously.

"Come in!" Diane called.

"Well, I see you two are still at it," Mrs. Burton said. "You girls really amaze me. I don't know another pair of sisters so close."

"What could you possibly want now, mother?" Cheryl asked.

"Oho!" Mrs. Burton said. "Don't I have a say in anything?" She reached down for a magazine that had fallen beside the bed. "Oh, isn't this pretty? Just look at this one!" It was a picture of a lacy traditional gown Cheryl had fought against hours ago. Mrs. Burton held it out to Diane, whose eyes rekindled with desire. Cheryl bit her lip in anger.

The telephone rang in the living room.

"Do you suppose you could get that, mother?" Cheryl asked. "I mean if you're finished trying to brainwash us."

"It's probably Brian," Diane started. "I'll get it--"

"Actually, I'll get it," Cheryl said. "You two keep
looking at the gowns."

In the living room Cheryl's father sat reclined in his easy-chair, eating a ham sandwich as he watched his program. Hitler's black-and-white Panzers were making their last offensive in the Battle of the Bulge. Pointing to the phone on the coffee table three feet away, Mr. Burton took a bite of his sandwich. "Can you get that?" he asked. "I'm chewing."

Cheryl picked it up. "Hello?"

"Diane! How's my sweet little dumpling? I've just been thinking of you all day and--"

"You've got the wrong person," Cheryl said.

"Oh! Oh Jeez, ha ha ha. Cheryl! You sound so much like Diane. So mellow! You could give a man ideas, ha ha! Is Diane there? Can my tender little blossom come to the phone? Can my sweet tender tasty little--"

"No, I'm sorry, good-bye."

"But Cheryl! Cheryl, wait! It's me! It's Brian--" Cheryl hung up.

At the sound of the click her father flung around, his eyes aflame, his mouth spewing bits of chewed sandwich. "Was that another one of those goddamned no good dirty--!"

"No, dad," Cheryl said, retreating from the range of his spittle. "It was just a wrong number. Really."

"Oh." He swallowed his food.
In the bedroom Mrs. Burton knew she had to work quickly. Cheryl might be back any minute; there was no time for subtlety. The discarded magazines and ripped pages strewn about the room told her that things were taking shape, but she had to be certain. Had they reached an understanding? Had the question been asked? Why was it all taking so long?

"Diane, sweetie, I've been thinking. I know it's a long ways off, but have you thought about who your maid of honour will be? Just to help in the planning, of course. It's your day. I'm only thinking of it for your sake."

"Well, I have been thinking--"'

"I see! I knew you would be. You've always been so responsible that way. Now tell me, have you chosen anyone yet? Have you asked anyone?"

"Well, no..."

"That's fine dear, that's fine. I won't ask you to tell me. I'm not going to pressure you. That's the last thing I would do. It has to be your decision. But you should think about who means the most to you. I mean the person who'll stick with you through thick and thin, rain or shine. You wouldn't let a little thing like jealousy get in the way of a wonderful relationship, would you? You have to be forgiving, dear. Now, do you understand what I mean?"

Diane looked puzzled.
"Oh dear, I don’t want you to think I’m telling you what to do. I know you’ve probably thought of these things already. You’re a smart enough girl to realize how important your wedding is to the whole family—even some of us who might be far away most of the time, some of us who might even be a little envious..."

Surely that would do it, Mrs. Burton thought. Any more would be too much. Yet how tempting it was to keep going! How easy she could make the whole thing with just a few more words! Glancing down at the warm smiles of so many gorgeous brides, Mrs. Burton felt young again, as if this were her own wedding. But then she heard Cheryl returning down the hall. No, it was not a mother’s job to interfere. Diane was sure to do the right thing now. The suspense Mrs. Burton faced was the suffering all thoughtful, caring mothers endured.

"Still here, mother?" Cheryl said. "You just can’t bear not to be in charge, can you?"

"Now Cheryl, really. Must you act this way about your own sister’s wedding?"

"Who was on the phone?" Diane asked.

"Wrong number."

Mrs. Burton turned to Diane. "Don’t you have anything else to say to your sister, dear?"

"Well..." Diane thought about it. "I think I know the
type of dress I want!" She held up a picture of an elaborate gown, its train a ten-foot weave of lace and satin.

Cheryl thought, You'll pay for this, mother! But she said, "Of course it's your wedding, Diane."

Mrs. Burton thought, It's that awful jealousy ruining everything! But she said, "It certainly is the bride's day."

The telephone rang again and Diane scurried to get it. From the living room Mr. Burton shouted, "Hey in there, the phone's ringing! And what about dinner? I'm starving to death!"

-----

Dinner was an ordeal. Mrs. Burton could hardly eat for her anxiety. The day seemed to have gone so fast, and where was she now? Her confidence that everything would go well at the extravaganza waned in the silence of the dinner table, her husband slurping soup from his spoon, Cheryl squinting at every morsel on her plate, Diane sulking because Brian hadn't come for dinner. By dessert it was clear to Mrs. Burton that she had not been forceful enough in her handling of the situation. If Cheryl was going to be spiteful and selfish, then the onus was on Diane to see past this pettiness, into the true meaning of sisterhood. Perhaps Diane was only shy--yes, shy and filled with Laura's
ludicrous ideas. Mrs. Burton pulled her aside after dinner.

"Listen, honey, you know I would never tell you what to do. Everything in this wedding has to be your choice. But sometimes we don't realize when someone is trying to make our decisions for us--someone who might even care about us very much. For example, I know there are some people in your life--people very close to you--telling you about what kind of dress you should wear. Now I want you to think about what you want. You want a traditional dress, don't you, no matter what anyone else says?"

"Of course," Diane said.

"There. See? And the very same thing goes for your maid of honour. You want to honour tradition, don't you? You know that family always comes first, right dear? It always comes first. I'm only telling you this for your own sake. You don't want to do anything foolish in something so important as this. Imagine what your relatives might say. Imagine what the neighbours would think. Do you see what I mean?"

Diane nodded.

"Oh good. I'm so proud of you. We'll have such a nice time tonight, won't we? And who knows? Maybe you'll decide on your maid of honour tonight."

Aha! Cheryl thought, listening in from the hall outside the kitchen. So that was her mother's big plan! Her lust
Her lust for control had indeed no bounds. Cheryl herself as maid of honour? She would fight it to the bitter end. Her mother would not have her way! There was still time to save Diane! There was still time!

Five minutes later she was tapping quietly on Diane’s door.

"Come in!" Diane called.

"Shhhh," Cheryl said, closing the door softly behind her. "Now listen, Diane," she whispered. "I don’t have much time. I’m not trying to tell you what to do tonight, like Mom would. You know I’ve never been like that. You have to decide what happens in this wedding. I just want you to know I think it’s especially important that you pick the maid of honour you want most. Forget about tradition. Forget about—Oh! Wait."

Footsteps came on tip-toe down the hallway, paused at the door, then continued on to the bathroom.

Cheryl resumed under her breath: "You won’t hurt my feelings, believe me. Do you want to be a slave to your mother forever, or to your fiancé? Think about that too. Think about what some big traditional dress says to the world: I’m a woman who can’t make my own decisions. Really, Diane, I’m only saying this for your sake. Do you get me?"

"Sure," Diane nodded.
"O.K., good. And don't worry, I'll be there tonight to help you."

The five of them went to the extravaganza in the Burtons' car: Mrs. Burton driving, Cheryl in the front seat beside her, and Diane between Brian and Laura in the back. Mr. Burton stayed home; he considered it a women's event, Brian's attendance notwithstanding. All the way there Mrs. Burton watched in the rearview mirror for some hint of determination on Diane's face--anything that would indicate she'd resolved to do the right thing. But every time Mrs. Burton looked she saw Diane's head turned toward Laura, absorbed in a torrent of meddlesome advice.

"I bet I know where all of the good booths will be, Diane. I bet we can get all kinds of really nice ideas for the gown, and for the wedding party too, of course. I bet I know everything that will happen when we're there. I'm just bursting with wonderful insights! You just stick with me, Diane. You'll look so modern and beautiful, just like I know you want to! Oh I'm so pleased with myself!"

"Now let's not have a lot of notions before we even get there," Mrs. Burton advised.

"Oh but Mrs. Burton, they're not notions! I know! You just wait and see, I know all about it! You'll see how magnificent I am! I promise you will! I positively pledge it!"
Where Cheryl sat there was no sound but Brian’s voice.

"Your driving is quite impressive, Mrs. Burton. So calming. I feel completely safe. You’re not like some women drivers. Ha ha. My father always told me to watch out for them. That’s just part of my background--good honest fun. Good clean wholesome laughs. Just as fresh and pure as your own sweet daughter. Are you looking forward to tonight, precious? Of course you are. I bet you can’t wait to pick out some big beautiful gown. You know there’s nothing more beautiful than a young woman in a white dress on a summer day. Call me old-fashioned, but that’s my family tradition. I can’t go back on my family now, can I, my tender tulip?"

Cheryl could resist no longer. "You know, Brian, it’s tradition that the groom not see the bride’s gown before the wedding day. Maybe we should drop you off at home."

"Cheryl!" her mother said. "Don’t be so rude! You know Diane’s not making any decisions today--well, at least not about her dress." She checked the mirror for Diane’s reaction.

"Ha ha ha," Brian laughed, leaning his head back on the seat. "Drop me off! You’re so funny, Cheryl."

The extravaganza was being held in a large banquet hall just outside the city limits. From the off-ramp of the expressway Mrs. Burton could see the parking lot already
filling up with cars, and an enormous sign before the hall announced: *Annual Wedding Extravaganza: Stop in for Once-A-Year One-Stop Do-it-Yourself Shop-till-You-Drop Super Wedding Planning!* Mrs. Burton guided the car off the expressway and into the lot, where she had to maneuver carefully through the migration of women on route to the building, their eyes glazed over in anticipation of the treasures within. The few men in the lot were an even greater hazard, shuffling zombie-like among the cars, feet dragging and heads down. They seemed especially unconcerned at the prospects of being hit.

"Well, here we are!" Brian said. "Better hurry! My mother always says, ‘He who hesitates...’"

"We’re here we’re here we’re here we’re here!" Laura giggled. "Oh goody gum-drops! Come on now Diane, come on!"

Inside the building was mayhem: ten feet through the entrance it was almost impossible to move amid the crush of shoppers pressed in around flower stands, dress-shop displays, and tuxedo rental booths. Most of the crowd was beyond enthusiasm; girls fought with religious fervour for perfume samples and free flowers, while their mothers and grandmothers, using heels and beaded purses, stomped and scraped their way to any available coupons. The faces of the few men betrayed only a grim determination to survive, and soon one of these was Brian, elbowing a path through the
mob for Diane, Laura, Cheryl, and Mrs. Burton, who tried desperately to stay together. When they had battled about half-way through the building, they came in sight of a raised platform surrounded by drawn curtains, from which a long portable runway ran outward into the crowd. A sign high at one corner of the platform announced: *Annual Wedding Extravaganza Fashion Show and Big Bridal Surprise!* It was scheduled to start in an hour. Catching a glimpse of the runway, Diane stopped where she was and sighed. How perfect! Mrs. Burton thought, struggling to keep her footing. She leaned close to Diane. "Now listen, dear. In case we get separated, meet me by that runway in an hour, O.K.?

Diane nodded.

On the opposite side of Diane, Cheryl too had seen her sister's reaction. Whispering in her ear, Cheryl said: "Diane! If we get lost, meet me for the fashion show. I'll be waiting there."

Diane nodded again and then the crowd surged forward, pushing toward a flower booth whose owner was tossing roses javelin-style into the mob. Cheryl tried in vain to grab Diane but the current of bodies was too strong. When it was all over a few seconds later--the roses pulled apart, red petals strewn like confetti--Diane was nowhere to be found. Brian and Laura had also disappeared. Another shove from a
group of teenagers pushed Cheryl face-to-face with her mother.

"Where's Diane?" Mrs. Burton asked.

"I don't know. I lost sight of her."

"Humph! Well I hope you're pleased with yourself! I'm sure this was part of your plan all along."

"My plan! You're the one doing the planning around here. I just want you to know I've been on you from the start. I see through your scheming, mother!"

"Oh really? It's a wonder you can see anything through all that green!"

"Green? What are you talking about?"

"Envy! Jealousy! I know you're just jealous of your sister!"

"I can't believe you, mother. You've really lost it this time."

"Don't tell me what I've lost! All those ridiculous ideas of yours just reek of jealousy!"

"So that's it, then! All of this is about me! What about Diane? Isn't it her wedding?"

"Don't go trying to switch things around! It's all about me! You've been against me since the minute you got here!"

"And believe me, mother, I couldn't go home too soon--"

"Shhh!" Mrs. Burton hunched down to avoid being seen.
A determined-looking woman and her daughter came pushing their way through the crowd, drawing contemptuous remarks from nearby shoppers. They passed close to Cheryl and her mother but did not stop. When they were safely past, Mrs. Burton straightened up and said: “That was Mrs. Weston from down the street. Do you want the whole neighbourhood to know we’ve been arguing?”

“All right, mother, fine. You won’t hear another word.”

Cheryl turned and forced a path for herself away from her mother, thinking: Let her worry all night about what the neighbours think. I’ll be meeting Diane in an hour.

Watching her daughter vanish into the crowd, Mrs. Burton thought: Serves her right! Let her look all she wants for Diane. In an hour I know exactly where she’ll be.

Fifty-five minutes later Mrs. Burton collapsed exhausted into one of the last available fashion show seats, in the farthest row back from the runway. Diane was nowhere to be seen. Mrs. Burton had searched everywhere. Cheryl must have found her somewhere in the crowd, turned those ridiculous notions of control into some case against her own mother, brainwashed Diane completely. As Mrs. Burton craned her neck painfully for any sight of her youngest daughter, she thought miserably, Such was every good mother’s lot in life: accused for simply caring, made a criminal for loving
too much.

Far to the back on the opposite side of the runway, Cheryl, too, stood watching for Diane. No doubt Brian and her mother had gotten a hold of her somehow, led her to some traditional, misogynistic dress display of which the place was filled, mocking Cheryl and her suggestions all the while. Waiting for the show to start, Cheryl thought bitterly: Such was the fate of every strong woman--ridiculed for her self-respect, made a laughing-stock by those she tried to save.

A short older man wearing tails and an enormous boutonniere walked out onto the runway. "Ladies and gentlemen," he spoke into his microphone, "I am proud to be your master of ceremonies for this year's Annual Wedding Extravaganza Fashion Show! Here, in the next hour, you will find your every wedding dream and wildest bridal fantasy come true before your very eyes! Prepare yourselves--ladies especially--to be dazzled by the most beautiful gowns you've ever seen! Our motto here, as you know, is: A Wedding Day is a Bride's Day, and our models and gowns are about to prove it! But don't you be gloomy, grooms-to-be! There's also a handsome array of tuxedos to accompany those gorgeous gowns, so look sharp and stay alert! Now, is everybody ready?"

The audience applauded loudly.
"Then let the show begin!"

Down a set of stairs adjacent to the runway a podium awaited the short m.c., and when he was safely out of sight the music began. Popular dance tracks interspersed with slow, romantic medleys accompanied the parade of taffeta, chiffon, and satin across the stage. For an hour the audience sat breathless at the spectacle: the graceful strut of the models, the fluid trail of lace trains on the runway, the living sheen of fabrics that the bridal magazines, for all their photographic chic, could never capture. The earlier, near-religious fervour of the crowd was silenced into awe. And from his podium below the stage, the master of ceremonies itemized everything, describing each gown in the soothing tones of a hypnotist.

But Cheryl was not hypnotized. She stood sneering at the whole event—at the huge ridiculous gowns and veils, the formal canes and gloves and top hats, the stiff models with clown-like faces and smiles. She remained on constant lookout for Diane; she knew that, if she could find Diane before it was too late, she could expose the real nature of everything on stage as she had done with the magazines that afternoon. Impressionable as Diane was, she was not stupid. She could still be saved from this mindless subjugation, this audience of women cheering for waxed eyebrows and legs, for sore feet crammed into high-heeled shoes. This
completely traditional show could still serve Cheryl's purpose, if only she could find Diane! But where was she? What had her mother done? The show was almost over and still there was no sign of her!

In her chair Mrs. Burton was completely overwhelmed; but it was not simply the beauty of the models and gowns that impressed her. Unlike so many of the hopeful women in the audience, she had lived long enough not to be dazzled by theatrics alone. Rather, it was the general enthusiasm for so many white sequins and lilies that recalled to Mrs. Burton more forcefully than ever just what a wedding meant. What was the purpose of all this glamour if not to reflect a deeper meaning? What was a bride’s gown if not an emblem of her family’s love and solidarity, pure and soft and perfect, to be draped over her gently on the day of her departure into a new life? And what was a bride’s only duty but to honour that love, cherish that togetherness by reflecting it in the few simple choices she had to make?

On the runway the last models were now appearing in groups of three: a groom escorting a bride in an elegant traditional gown, with a bridal attendant behind her, holding up her train. The audience cheered loudly as these last groups appeared, and Mrs. Burton thought: If only Diane were here! How simple it would be to make her see everything! No matter what Laura said, no matter how much
Cheryl’s jealousy clouded the issues, nothing could refute the truth and rightness of the tradition there on stage.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, is the time for the grand finale. As you know, for the last three years we have ended each Extravaganza Fashion Show by presenting to you a real bride-to-be who has elected to register here with us and some of our own Wedding Extravaganza sponsors. She is not a model--so all of you young ladies in the audience take note! Feast your eyes on the transformations that are possible, the dreams that can come true if you let all of us here at the Annual Wedding Extravaganza take care of you!"

Cheryl looked around furiously for Diane. The show was almost over! Where was she?

Mrs. Burton craned her neck even higher, scouting for her daughter. Where could Cheryl have taken her?

Then on stage a young woman appeared wearing the richest, most elaborate bridal attire of the evening. Strolling out slowly from the curtained platform, her face was completely covered by a veil which hung from a virtual crown of white beads and sequins. Her dress, of satin and the heaviest lace yet presented, was short-sleeved, and one of her gloved arms supported an enormous bouquet of red roses. Her other hand rested gently in the crook of her groom’s elbow, who had barely enough room to move on the runway, his bride’s skirt was so full. Still emerging from
the curtains, and lifted from the ground by an unseen attendant, was the bride’s exceptionally long train. Growing, growing, it attained a visible length of some eight or ten feet before Cheryl and her mother realized what they were seeing. The face of the groom, smiling and self-important as ever, was Brian’s.

Cheryl stifled the urge to scream. Good God, mother, what have you done?

But there was no time to react. In a flash the master of ceremonies was back on the runway, his voice now the taunt of the cruellest torturer. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me explain what you have here before you! First, I draw your attention to this sparkling tiara--just look at its radiance, observe how it catches the light! Set with sequins, faux pearls, and the clearest crystal beads, it is the perfect ornament for a cathedral-length veil. Can you dare deny its beauty, its virginal appeal? But on to better things! On to the gown itself!" The words echoed in Cheryl’s mind, reverberating, haunting. The description of each item was the narration of a nightmare.

"I give you, good people, a bodice of Italian satin! Have you ever been witness to a fabric so rich? Notice too the hand-sewn sequins and pearl beads throughout, trailing delicately into the airiness of organza and tulle skirt ing. And don’t miss the French lace trim along the hem! Utterly
feminine and unquestionably dignified, positively begging for these opera-length gloves. But have I forgotten the train, you ask? No indeed, my friends. For here it is in its unfolding beauty, fully detachable, secured as you can see by this prettiest of satin bows. And here it comes--here comes the end, at last, of twenty extravagant feet--"

Mrs. Burton sat wide-eyed on the edge of her chair, waiting, waiting while the train made its slow appearance...

"And here it is, the end! Trimmed with more French lace!"

"Laura!" Mrs. Burton gasped, feeling herself go faint. But she went unheard in the applause of the crowd, which cheered at first sight of the red-haired attendant.

"Now isn't this beautiful, ladies and gentlemen? You have before you the very finest, the most truly exquisite example of the traditional bridal look! And worn by a future bride herself, accompanied by her real groom and maid of honour! Now what do you think of that?"

The audience roared. Mrs. Burton held tightly to the arms of her chair. Cheryl! Cheryl, my God, what have you done?

"And now this lovely bride-to-be would like to say something to the members of her family out there, who I understand had no idea what was going to happen here today! Go ahead, Diane. What do you have to say?"
Diane pulled her veil back gingerly. She stepped up to the microphone held out to her.

"Mom, Cheryl, I just wanted to say thank you for all your help. I know you both had a lot of hopes and I'm so glad you let me make my own decisions. Mom, thank you for leaving me to choose my own gown, and Cheryl, thank you for being honest about the bridal party. I want you to know you'll be my second attendant! Thanks so much to both of you! And by the way, surprise!"

The audience roared again.

"Well what do you think, ladies and gentlemen?" the master of ceremonies went on. "Should we bring these two wonderful ladies up here so you can meet them?"

The enormous applause grew even louder.

"Then come on up here, ladies! Come on up and receive your prize! You're this year's winners of the special 'A Wedding Day is A Bride's Day' award!"

The rest was a blur. In her delirium, Cheryl saw only a sea of lip-sticked mouths beneath her, cheering her name as an example for all sisters. Mrs. Burton felt nothing but the eyes of the Westons, staring dumbfounded at the hands on Diane's train. Cheryl and her mother did not acknowledge one another until asked for a comment by the master of ceremonies. Then, stepping forward, they smiled and said in unison: "Of course we've always believed it's the bride's
day first." But glaring at one another over the microphone, they mouthed the words: Look what you've done. I hope you're happy.

And the audience did not stop applauding.

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Later that night, driving home alone together, Cheryl and Mrs. Burton fell to contemplating what had happened. However you looked at it, Cheryl thought, at least her mother had not gotten everything the way she wanted it. This was certainly a first. Mrs. Burton thought, Well, despite everything else, at least Cheryl was going to be an attendant. It would certainly be nice to see her in a dress for once. And beside that, they both thought, there was still the shower to plan.

When they got home, they found Mr. Burton watching television in the living room, chewing on a stick of pepperoni. Both wanted to be first to tell him what had happened, and nearly knocked each other over coming into the room. On the set a new documentary had just started, and Germany was invading Poland all over again.

"Well dad, you'll never believe what happened, all because of mom and her--"

"Don't listen to that, dear. Your oldest daughter is solely responsible! Diane has decided--"

"No dad, it's all mom, I swear--"
"Honey, just listen to me--"

"Shhhhh! Both of you!" Mr. Burton yelled, wielding his last bit of pepperoni like a sceptre. "Can't either of you see the television's on?"
PRELUDE TO THE PRELUDE OF PART ONE
OF ONE THOUSAND OF THE FETISHIST MANIFESTO
For it is also the case that we look for something in a face seen at night in Montparnasse, or in a voice on the telephone, something that will appear, a contour or a tone in the voice, a silence, a fixity, a sudden flash, and we never get it. And that, far from feeling resentful or disgusted, we love this reserve, with the greatest feeling of impatience.

--Jean-François Lyotard, "The Tensor"
A spectre haunts me—the spectre of fetishism. All the faculties of my old self have failed in trying to lay this spectre: guilt and memory, shame and reason; faith in a world of depth and meaning.

But I am going too fast. You see, this is half the problem: there is no going slow enough, no relating of details in so thorough a manner that nothing will be left out, that at times the most essential pieces of the puzzle will not be misplaced. And yet the compulsion is there, unrealizable, to write it out, to think it out, to speak and paint and masturbate it out. For the spectre inhabits symbols, you see; to write about it is to play its own game, to try to win where it has never lost. How many times, in the throes of sexual climax, has the spectre appeared before me, close enough that I might ring its shapeless neck? How many times has it lain prostrate on a page, motionless at last in its pure horrific beauty, while I laboured to trap it in a web of futile words? It is always I who am left ensnared, while just beyond my reach the spectre beckons
with new signs. This Manifesto is thus a chronicle of frustration—one thousand parts each of a thousand pages that communicate nothing beyond what you have already read. Understand this: I write it, then, not to find closure, not to convince; but instead to repeat, paragraph after paragraph for one thousand thousand pages the perpetual, unavoidable rebirth of the spectre. In repetition may you feel its seductive power, and be afraid.

But first things first. Why this prelude, you ask? Why a prelude to the prelude? Let me answer your question with a few of my own. How would you feel if I told you that the Manifesto I have promised can never be read? What would you say if I explained to you that my Manifesto is both too simple and too complex to be understood, that only by approaching it through an elaborate introduction can you hope to catch a glimpse of its meaning? Indeed, what if that very introduction were unreadable, requiring a prelude of its own to be understood, and that this in turn required another, until an infinite regress of preludes were required? I know what you would say: you would not believe it. You would insist that one of them must contain the meaning, that the displacement cannot continue forever. You would demand to examine one of these preludes yourself, to ascertain by your own judgement whether or not you might approach the Manifesto. This spectre of fetishism is not so
crafty, you think, that it can flee forever and never be
cought. A good writer could capture it in a story, you
argue. A good writer would paint scenes, use metaphor, make
it real. Very well then, you see now why this prelude must
come first. Consider it an indulgence of your most naive
hopes—hopes which, long ago, I subscribed to myself.

Some short while ago I met a woman, and, to put it as
plainly as possible, I fell in love with her. She had been
a regular for some time at the coffee shop I frequented not
far from my downtown abode; but one morning I found myself
staring at her as she readied herself to leave. She was
dressed in a fashionable coral coloured suit, the skirt of
which hung no lower than mid-thigh, revealing long sheer-
stockinged legs which ended in patent leather pumps. Now
what was amazing about this woman as I watched her that
morning was that she commanded, or so it seemed to me,
extactly the description I have just presented. You see, I
did not at that time believe myself to be more interested in
one part of the female anatomy over any other. Indeed, due
to a certain insecurity I felt when speaking with women, the
vast majority of my adult life had been spent with only
sporadic access to their anatomies at all. I had certainly
never been successful enough to make selections on the basis
of specific physical traits; so I was therefore as surprised
as you are to find myself in love with a woman simply for
her legs. And yet that is the fact: I loved her at once. It was only by good luck I remembered to check her face, for those legs in their sheer nylons positively glowed. As she strolled to the counter to return her cup, I studied her knees, I worshipped her ankles, I savoured every flexing muscle in her calves. Her shiny black heels made sweet music as she walked, and in the wake of their seductive click and scrape I found the most improbable fantasies springing to mind. I was a stocking pulled softly, delicately up her calf, over her knee, farther up and up her thigh. I was a black high-heeled shoe into which she wriggled her toes, bearing her weight deliciously as she stood upon me. Strangest of all, and most disturbing to me at the time, was a vision of myself as the floor on which she walked, her heels stabbing down at me as I stared upward at her legs, into the black unfathomable space beneath her skirt. By the time she had left the shop I was weak with the power of my visions, and deeply ashamed of myself. Had anyone seen me staring? Had she--God forbid!--noticed my strange attentions? In vain I tried to return to my newspaper; my first encounter with the spectre had left me numb.

Had I then any idea of the dreadful path down which I was starting, I assure you I would never have set foot in that place again. But you see, I was like you then--I
believed my experience had a deeper meaning, and I was determined to prove to myself I was not depraved. I loved this woman—if that much I was certain. Her legs were no less respectable a sign of inner beauty than the more conventional media of soulful eyes or a gentle voice. I would speak to her tomorrow, get to know her, ground my love; yet even as I planned, my new-found confidence should have given me pause. A part of my old self had already died in viewing those legs; what more was I hazard ing to find out what they meant?

I took the liberty of sitting beside her the next day. She was wearing pants this morning, much to my relief: I doubt I could have spoken had her legs been exposed. From the outset our conversation was remarkably smooth and easy. In the past I had always been worried when I talked to women, and at least half the energy I used in a discussion went into imagining what they thought of me. But with her, everything was different. At the slightest hint of self-doubt I could think of those legs and forget myself utterly. Indeed, such a tonic were they to my fragile ego that our first conversation became a morning ritual. Soon talk over coffee blossomed into lunch, then dinner, then a string of serious dates. I had never been happier with any woman. Though I might never know why I had been singled out for such bliss, I had no doubt that those legs were a sign of
deepest meaning, the revelation of which I was living every
day.

Oh disillusioning spectre, despoiler of dreams! How
could I have known the price of that cure-all sign? You
see, it was so effective that I could not help but rely on
it, with the result that it never faded from my mind. In
fact, the remembered vision of those legs grew clearer:
their shape grew more exquisite, their stockings more sheer,
even though I had not seen her wear that skirt again.
Gradually the time we spent together began to pale in
comparison with my memory of that morning, and even the
real-life embrace of her legs could not instill a similar
satisfaction. My dreams became haunted by imagined details:
I would awake in a cold sweat, my heart furiously pounding,
to find the feel of silky thighs still alive on my
fingertips. I began to doubt that I had any deep feelings
for her at all. I was sick, perverted—I loved her as an
object, and not even all of her body at that. In my despair
I turned to the only thoughts that could soothe me: sheer
hose stretching over taut calf muscles, shiny black high-
heeled pumps. If I could only see her in those stockings
and shoes again, maybe I could recapture what I had felt in
the coffee shop that morning. If I could reconstruct that
very first sign, perhaps I could isolate the meaning it
held.
This was the state of longing to which the spectre had reduced me; but I held on to the belief that I could beat it at its own game. I still believed that I loved her, you see, even if that love required additional objects to make it strong. Of course I knew that recreating my experience would not be easy. Out of shame at my deviant fantasies, I had never told her what effect her legs had produced in me that morning. To do so now would be unbearably awkward; yet how else could I justify my request for that skirt, those shoes, that specific shade of hose? How could I soften the truth—necessarily harsh—that she shared my esteem with several items from her closet? And yet it was not for the sake of cheap thrills that I wanted to see her so dressed again: in that image was the very symbol of my purest love!

Weeks passed and I could not bring the issue to a head. The best I could do was encourage a few trends—short skirts over long ones, high heels over flats. At first she did not take well to my interest in her wardrobe; but at my earnest entreaties her suspicions soon gave way. Perhaps this was good enough, I told myself. By the laws of probability it was only a matter of time before the proper combination of hose and shoes recurred. In the meantime, however, I grew increasingly irritable. I fended off nightly dreams about that fateful first morning, in which shoes now walked without legs to guide them. When I visited her I found it
difficult to concentrate, for the closet door beckoned with the promise of black pumps, and her top dresser drawer was bursting with sheer hosiery. I felt my patience wearing thin—soon I would have to tell her everything.

Then one night it finally happened. I mounted the stairs to her apartment one evening to find her ready and waiting in her coral skirt, her long legs wrapped in the sheerest nylon stockings, her feet in a pair of black velvet pumps. I caught my breath at how near I had come—all that lacked was the shine of those patent leather heels! I tried to ignore the difference, but it was simply no use. The heels were the same height, but they reflected no light, gave off no heavenly glow! I was overcome with disappointment; I would have to wait yet longer for my sign. And then suddenly I realized I would go mad with more waiting. It had to be tonight, no matter the cost. I would construct my symbol regardless of the consequences.

Please do not think me despicable for what I did. In one sense it is something of which we have all been guilty: denying the reality of another for selfish ends. Yet in my case the denial of her person was absolute—she became simply a living prop for my desires. We went to a restaurant for dinner as planned, and I set about trying at once to intoxicate her. At first she seemed startled by my determination that she drink. She accused me of having
lascivious plans. Oh how that accusation tortures me now—the very last words from her mouth I can remember! But I would not be put off or delayed any longer. I would find the shoes, relive that first moment, find at long last the meaning beneath it.

Let me remind you, now, as this tale draws to a close, of the reason why I elected to write it. If I have lingered long over specific details, repeated key images to the point of trying your temper, remember that this is what you asked for at the start. You wanted specifics, elements that would make the meaning clear—and this is exactly the object of the quest I describe. I have hitherto indulged you, catered to your expectations, but for your own sake those indulgences end here. Make no mistake about it: your frustration has been my goal from the start, and I assure you there is no way to put the story back on track, to realign the misplaced focus that offends you. Do you think I have not tried to make things right? Have I not exhausted every possible avenue, sacrificed myself to recover what I lost? Only when you accept defeat can you save yourself from what befell me next. Do not let despair push you to search for depth in the utterly depthless.

I carried her up the stairs to her apartment. She was drunk nearly to the point of unconsciousness, and I hurried to get her in bed before she stirred. In her room I laid
her down as gently as I could, my heart pounding with anticipation. Then I gave myself one final chance to leave: but I could not—I had come too far. Slowly, carefully, I removed her velvet pumps. Her feet looked soft and helpless as she slept; but they aroused no interest in me at all.

I went to her closet and opened the door. On the floor was her shoe-rack, which I pulled out at once. I knew immediately which pair I was after: they were propped at the back, neglected for some time, their black patent leather a beacon in the dark. With trembling fingers I pulled them from the rack. Behind me her feet lay ready to receive them—the final pieces, the missing fragments of the puzzle made whole at last.

I turned around with shoes in hand. I slipped her toes inside them, pressed the heels into place. My eyes burned with dryness—I was too anxious to even blink. I stood up and cast my eyes upon her legs, restored to the exact perfection of my dreams. I waited for the feeling I had known that first morning. My mouth grew dry as I watched and waited. She did not awaken, did not know she was being watched. But nothing happened.

I waited several minutes, but still the feeling did not come. I tried to think of what might be missing, what last fragment eluded me still; but my memories told me emphatically that there was nothing more. I had
reconstructed it perfectly; where had the meaning gone? Perhaps she had to be standing! I grabbed her by the arms and began to pull her up. At my touch she groaned briefly; one shoe came loose from her foot. Its heel struck the floor with a sound like a thunderclap. My arms went weak, a chill ran up my spine, and her body sank back asleep onto the bed.

It was then, at that moment, that my revelation came--the terrible string of visions that makes me write this Manifesto, the horrible reality my words can never speak. All at once, looking down at that fallen shoe, I saw in its seductive shape the brutal truth I had sought so long. I had never loved this woman--not her person or her legs, not a single thing about her except that she owned this shoe. In fact, it was not even the whole shoe that I loved, but only the tip of the heel I had heard clicking that morning, pressing the floor I had longed to become. Yet still I sought to deny it, even beyond the realm of hope. This is fine, I told myself, at least I know I love something! I know my love is real! It has a real object!

I snatched it off the floor, squeezed its shiny leather sides, while my desire for it burned hotter and hotter every moment. I loved this shoe--this was my meaning, my purpose! But even then its shiny heel seemed to point to something else, to signify something beyond what I could see.
I held it to my face, its toe pointing down, and stared along the heel toward the tip I so desired. For an instant the entire room, the entire world, went flat. I had no consciousness of place, no memory. The spectre's wing brushed past me in the dark, and I was shadow, two-dimensional, as depthless as a silhouette. Then, poised as it was like a dagger to stab the world, I knew where the heel had always been pointing. There in the space just beyond its glowing end I saw, in all its opaque, unmitigated horror, Nothing.
The Pledge

It was a quarter to nine when Steve and Murray returned to the drug store from their last delivery run of the evening. Steve parked the truck in its reserved space beside the store and shut off the engine, pausing for a moment to treasure the relative silence. In the passenger seat beside him Murray held a small leather change purse filled to bulging, and peering inside, asked: "You think the tips'll be good? This baby's full up." Steve stared through the windshield and did not respond.

Outside the truck he stayed several paces ahead of his new partner. Steve was a tall, thin man in his early twenties, with immaculately-kempt hair and a stern expression that softened little when he smiled. He was tired after six hours of driving in the mid-July heat; but as he approached the store a smile spread over his face. Tonight was his last night on the job. The day after tomorrow he was to start work at a plastics factory in the industrial section of LaSalle--the small town just south of
Windsor in which Steve had lived for the last six years. In celebration of this change he and a group of his friends were meeting tonight in one of Steve's favourite Windsor bars. Steve had spent the afternoon delivering pills and diapers to the ailing grandparents and haggard new mothers of LaSalle; but in his mind there was dark ale poured into pint-sized glasses, music so loud that his ribs reverberated, long female legs glimpsed beneath dancing bodies. He carried the empty prescription basket swinging from one hand, while Murray trailed behind him still clutching the leather purse.

"Do you normally take the tips out right away?" Murray called.

"Usually," Steve replied, not turning around.

Murray was nearly twice Steve's age and several inches shorter, and he wore a Detroit Tigers baseball cap to cover his thinning hair. He was to be Steve's replacement on the job and had accompanied him tonight to learn the secrets of the evening route: the addresses of the big tippers and chronic complainers, the unpatrolled highways where it was safe to speed, the short-cuts through parking lots and closed-off roads. Murray had quit his position at a local garage the previous week--the only time in his life he had ever left a job by choice. Behind him stretched twenty years of lay-offs and insecurity, first as an autoworker on
the line at Chrysler's, then as a furniture mover, lawnkeeper, garage hand. Tonight he had been taught how to organize a delivery run; but Murray had found the training process hurried and confusing, and he already missed the regularity of garage life. He was sweating heavily beneath the white polyester shirt of his drug store uniform, exuding an acrid body odour that had offended Steve in the cramped cab of the delivery truck.

Steve entered the store without waiting for his partner. Inside it was air-conditioned and the cool atmosphere was a welcome relief from the July humidity. Steve felt an inexplicable surge of warmth for the store and all of the people in it that he would be leaving, which lasted only until Murray opened the door behind him and clapped one thick, hairy hand on his shoulder.

"Guess you're finished now, heh boss?"

"Yeah," Steve said, his smile fading. "As soon as we cash out, you're the new man."

"Sounds good, buddy."

The entire evening had been punctuated by manly remarks of this sort, and both men were now relieved that the role-playing between them was coming to an end. Steve had not enjoyed playing the teacher, having to speak with authority about a job and a clientele he had largely resented. He hated to make the job seem any better than it was. Despite
this, after six hours of one-sided talk about dual-quad carburetors and forty-year-old girlfriends and goalies who had last skated when he was teething, Steve had found it easy to gloss over any problem Murray envisioned.

Murray, for his part, had not relished playing pupil to a kid fifteen years his junior. To compensate, he had spent the afternoon trying to win Steve's respect—an endeavour which he now realized had failed completely. His relentless attempts at conversation had not concealed his embarrassment at how little he knew about his own home town. The countless new subdivisions into which he and Steve ventured had opened his eyes to a vastly more complex LaSalle than the one in which he had grown up. The prospect of journeying into that forbidding maze of streets and cul-de-sacs on his own tomorrow only heightened his growing sense of dismay.

The delivery counter of the drug store was a narrow ledge fixed to the back of a four-foot wall which extended from the stock room to the pharmacy. On the front face of the counter a blue-lettered sign was posted:

THE PLEDGE

We guarantee complete customer satisfaction with every item in this store. If you are not 100% satisfied with your purchase for any reason, we will be happy to refund your money in full. Our employees are here to ensure that you
receive the special, individual attention you deserve.

Steve and Murray walked behind this counter and placed the empty prescription basket and the change purse upon it. Steve tore a page from a pad marked 'Delivery Record Sheets'.

"What's the date?" he asked Murray.

"The nineteenth. Listen, buddy, do you mind if I go grab my food out of the fridge while you fill that out?"

"Sure, no problem. There's not much point bringing a full dinner on Mondays, unless you plan on eating in the truck."

Steve pulled the wad of bills out of the change purse and dumped the remaining contents on the counter. The coins formed a large pile--so large that he had to cup his hand against the edge of the counter to prevent the loonies and quarters and dimes from rolling off. Monday was always a busy night; but tonight had been the most hectic shift Steve had worked in eight months with the store.

He began sorting the coins into separate piles by denomination. He would have to split his tips for the night with Murray and the thought made his hand pause over a scattered group of loonies. It was still Steve's job after all, and Murray had done little to earn his share of what promised to be an unusually large gratuity. Even some of the customers who never tipped had given extra on hearing
that it was Steve’s last night.

As he was debating whether or not to pocket the loonies, a door opened suddenly behind him. A short, heavy-set woman appeared, wearing a white lab coat to which a plastic name-tag was pinned: 'Diane, Manager and Head Pharmacist'. Steve’s hand tidied the coins hastily into a pile.

"Did you do those last few deliveries already?" she asked him. Diane’s voice, even when intended for a single person, always seemed to address a congregation.

"I just finished my last run," Steve replied.

"Janie!" Diane bellowed. A red-haired woman peered from behind the pharmacy, telephone receiver in hand. "Did you get those last prescriptions ready yet? It's almost time to close!"

Janie cupped the phone’s mouthpiece away from her.

"They're just about ready. Sorry, Steve, I meant to tell you when you came in."

Steve looked at his watch.

"You might as well save cashing out till you get back," Diane said. "Looks like you were busy tonight."

Diane walked away and Steve saw himself wiping the counter clean of coins, spraying Diane’s office with a shower of silver pellets. He should have expected this from Janie. Anyone else who worked the pharmacy on Monday
managed to get all of the prescriptions ready in time; but Janie had a telephone habit worth thousands in overtime wages.

Murray reappeared with his unopened lunch bag at his side. "How's the tips look?" he asked.

"Don't know yet. We're not finished."

Steve walked past him to the cash register and waited while Janie printed the receipts for two deliveries. She held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she typed.

"Jim, make sure your father's still coming to pick me up, O.K.?" She hit the 'print' button on the register. "No, tell him about quarter after. We had a busy night." She tore the printed receipts from the top of the computer and stapled them together. "Well you tell him he better come!" she laughed, winking at Steve. His cold stare did not waver and her smile vanished. "Hold on a minute," she said into the phone, then stapled the receipts to their bags and handed them to Steve. She spoke solemnly over the cupped mouthpiece: "There are two in this first bag, and don't forget about Mrs. Best's--it's under the counter. I'm really sorry about that." Steve took the bags and did not reply.

Outside it was beginning to darken but the heat and thick humidity of the day remained. Steve walked around the store to the delivery truck and Murray hurried to keep pace
with Steve's long strides.

"I can't believe this shit," Steve said.

Murray took his cue. "I don't like working late, that's for sure. I'm a straight-hours sort of guy. How often does this happen?"

"All the time. It's part of the store Pledge: everybody gets what the hell they want except the drivers. Better get used to it."

Murray chuckled sardonically and they arrived at the truck. It was a white Chevy S-10 pick-up emblazoned with the drug store's red and blue graphics on sides and hood, and on both rear quarter panels the words 'Free Delivery' told the world that this vehicle was operating as a community service and that its driver was not expecting a tip. The store for which Steve and Murray worked had only recently been taken over by the larger chain which controlled it, and in less than two years its isolated location and sprawling clientele had necessitated a delivery area larger than any other in Essex County. Steve never understood how his store could make a profit delivering prepaid prescriptions to houses thirty kilometres away, but he knew that the bright red letters on either side of his truck had cheated him out of much personal gratuity. He could not count the times some well-dressed lady had reached for her wallet only to notice the words 'Free Delivery'
shining in red at the foot of her driveway. "Oh, it's free? Well isn't that nice! Have a nice day." And the wallet and the door quickly closed.

Steve unlocked the door of the truck and sat down inside. When he turned the key in the ignition, a green digital clock displayed the time in the center of the dashboard: 8:51 p.m. Only a half hour more, he promised himself. Murray placed the prescription basket on the seat between them.

"You sure you don't want me to drive?" he asked.

"No, I just want to get this over with. You can read off the addresses."

"No problem, buddy. Thirteen eighteen Reaume is the first."

"Yeah, the Benders. It'll be all old people this late. Who's after that?"

"Wilson and Best."

"Yep, all old. Super slow and no tips." Steve shifted the gear lever into drive and the truck groaned and lurched and began to move.

"Should we report that?" Murray asked. "Diane told me we should report anything wrong with the truck."

"I'll tell you something about Diane: she's not a driver. She's got no clue how long a run takes. Believe me, you don't have time to report everything."
Steve maneuvered through the parking lot toward the exit. He steered angrily around a woman who stopped pushing her baby stroller to shake a stone out of her shoe, and then the truck was merging with traffic on Malden road.

"You'll see what I mean," Steve said when they had reached cruising speed. "If you try to do this job by the rules you'll get about five deliveries done in a shift. I can do forty in a night, but not when I'm filling out a form for every goddamned stone that hits the truck."

"I'll just have a look at the form," Murray said. He did not think of himself as a stickler for discipline, but he had no desire to make enemies with Diane. When he clicked open the glove compartment he saw Steve's eyes flash in his direction. Murray withdrew the thick pad of Vehicle Record Sheets and surveyed the top page, scanning quickly over dozens of imposing blank lines. Maybe Steve had a point after all. Murray had never had a job with so much paperwork. His mind reeled at the number of record sheets and stock lists and credit print-outs he had seen in the last week. He returned the pad to its place in the glove box.

"I'll fill it out later," he said.

Steve suppressed a smile. "Whatever you want."

There was silence in the cab and Murray was thinking. Back at the garage he had known a veteran mechanic who
shared his dislike for paperwork and detail, and who railed so fiercely against the gadgetry of modern vehicles that the younger mechanics called him 'Defender of the Past.' Expounding on the good old days before catalytic converters and standard fuel injection, he would lament the lost art of tuning a carburetor in language that was truly inspiring, even when interrupted by the laughter of his co-workers. Murray had been a mere assistant at the garage, and unqualified to take part in the mechanics' technical discussions, but he had often felt moved to side with that old rebel, however much abuse he took from the younger faction. One day about a year ago, arriving earlier than usual to work, Murray had found the Defender alone with his cup of coffee. In the ten minutes before the other mechanics arrived, he said something which had stayed with Murray ever since: "There's something noble in trying to stay simple, Murray. Complexity only makes you cold."

Since that time Murray had felt the spread of this threatening complexity into places far beyond the garage. His new job was the freshest example. He had spent the afternoon struggling to reconcile the ideal methods prescribed by Diane with Steve's hardened means of getting the job done; yet for all of his effort the disparity between what should and what must be done only deepened. His instincts on this matter failed him utterly. In his
moments of greatest self-doubt he convinced himself that the
very manner in which he had been taught to think and feel
was now obsolete, and that the success which had eluded him
for so long would remain forever beyond his reach until he
learned to make the kind of fine discriminations that came
so naturally to men of Steve’s generation. How could Steve
be certain about when to ignore Diane’s instructions? Where
did this audacity come from? Murray longed for a time when
the boss’s word was indisputably right, and when that word
could be obeyed without the need for speculation.

They had gone some distance along Malden Road without
speaking, and Murray was beginning to feel responsible for
the silence. It seemed to have issued like a gas out of the
glove compartment, lingering between them despite the
replacement of the Vehicle Record Sheets.

“So what did Diane say about the late deliveries?” he
finally asked. “Was she mad?”

“Not at me. It was Janie’s fault. Of course I’m the
one who has to pay for it, working late.”

“They couldn’t just wait ‘til tomorrow?”

“Probably. If Diane wasn’t there I would’ve left them,
but she just gives you that look and you don’t have a
choice. She’ll never ask you to work late. She just
expects it.”

“Yeah, she seems that way. Reminds me of my boss back
at the garage. You know what he says to me a couple months back? I'm just about to go on my lunch and he says, 'Hey Murray, how about takin' the truck down the street and grabbin' me a Big Mac?' Can you believe that? I swear to God, Steve, I just about up and quit right there."

"Did you end up getting it for him?"

"Well hell, what was I gonna do? You can't go spoutin' off when you don't have anything else lined up. But that's when I started lookin'. He knew it, too. He was sorry to see me go. Three years and I knew that job better than any of the other guys. But hell, I'm not gonna take that. Are we gonna hit Reaume first?"

"Yeah."

Steve put his foot on the brake in anticipation of the next side-street. "Remember to watch this corner," he said, and made a wide right turn off the main road, skirting a pothole that lay in wait along Reaume's dirt shoulder. "Try to cut that one and you'll end up driving on three wheels."

Murray searched in his side-view mirror but the hole was hidden by the slope of the road. "The patch crew should fix that. You can't even see it coming."

"Yeah, sure they'll fix it--as soon as the mayor busts his axle on it."

Reaume was one of the old roads of LaSalle, distinguished by the deep ditches along both sides and the
height to which years of summer tar and chip had elevated it above the adjacent lots. Like Bouffard and Laurier Drive to the south, Reaume provided uninterrupted passage from Highway 18 all the way to Malden Road, and had thus become one of the main thoroughfares of the burgeoning town. LaSalle had doubled in population in the past decade and most of these new people were housed in the small, neat subdivisions that sprouted from the eight kilometre arteries between Malden and the highway. Turning off Reaume or Bouffard or Laurier into one of these new developments, any visitor was surprised to find such large, expensive houses tucked away behind the older homes that lined the main streets of the town. As a lifelong resident of LaSalle, Murray felt compelled to protest this recent growth.

"See those houses back there?" he pointed through his open window. "When I was in grade school I had a buddy lived around here and we used to go dirt-biking back in there when it was all bush. Look at it now. The great thing about this area used to be all the open space. Now it's gone. It's no good for the kids, that's for sure."

Steve did not reply. He had heard this lament for the glorious Old LaSalle far too often from the elderly customers on his route, and it had become for him in its various strains a kind of mythic umbrella over the town, similar in its insulting falsity to the phony Pledge under
which he worked. Who could believe in such an idyllic past? It seemed every citizen over forty had some grand coming-of-age yarn to spin about spear-fishing in the stream that ran through Ramblewood Park or trudging through trails that were now sidewalks in the Kenwood subdivision. Steve had lived in LaSalle for only six years and his home was in one of the small housing developments built by the trolls and ogres of the fairy-tales he had heard. It was all hypocrisy, thought Steve, for the same people who disparaged the contractors were curiously complacent when asked to sell their own uncleared lots at twice market value. In Steve’s mind the thing that really bothered these people about the growth was being left out of it. Anything of real significance that happened in LaSalle happened in tight, modern housing developments like Steve’s, and to reach these places one had to cut through the crust of older houses inhabited by older people who could only watch what was new and important from out of their back windows.

The Benders lived in one of these older houses separated from the road by an immense well-kept lawn. Steve pulled the truck nose-first into the long gravel driveway that led to the Benders’ house.

“There’s no charge. Just have them sign for it,” he said.

Murray mounted the steps of the porch carrying a bag of
prescriptions and a red ball-point pen. Only the front screen door of the house was closed and through it he could see an overweight man in a white undershirt asleep in an armchair, his head nodding on his chest and his grey whiskers lit by the flickering screen of a television. Murray pressed the button for the doorbell and heard nothing. When he rapped lightly on the door Mr. Bender stirred awake.

"Hold on. I'm coming," he grunted, pulling himself from his chair. "What is it?"

"Drug store delivery," Murray answered. "I've got three prescriptions here for you."

"Drug store? Hold on." Mr. Bender turned and shouted: "Kate! Kate! Did you order something from the drug store?" When no answer came he shouted again: "Kate!!" He turned to Murray. "How much is it?"

"There's no charge on them, sir. You just have to sign this sheet." Murray held out the white paper bag and pointed to a dotted line on the form Janie had printed. Mr. Bender stared at it and at last opened the door. "Here. Give it here," he said. As he scribbled his name on the receipt he said wearily, "I don't know what they are. God knows she probably doesn't need them."

Murray tore off the store's copy of the receipt when Mr. Bender had finished. "Thanks," he said.
Behind Mr. Bender a woman's voice asked, "Aren't you going to give him something, Andy?"

"Why? It's free delivery. Says so on the damn truck."
The truck was still idling when Murray returned.
"Any tips?" Steve asked.
"Nope. I forgot my pen too."

Steve shifted the truck into reverse and revved the engine, spinning the front wheels and spraying gravel up the driveway at the house. "Serves them right. Old people never tip." The wheels caught suddenly and the truck raced down the long driveway in reverse.

When they were back on the road, Murray said: "You can't be too hard on them. Things have to be pretty tough for older folks."

"No tougher than on anybody else. They get their prescriptions paid for if they're old enough." Steve checked his rear-view mirror and shook his head. "I can't figure out why the store even bothers. They don't make a cent off deliveries like that. Look at us--we're getting paid right now, and the truck's not running on free gas!"

"Maybe it's part of the Pledge."

"Yeah, right. Pledge my ass. Somebody's getting something out of it."

They passed through the intersection of Reaume and Matchette and continued west in the direction of the
highway. In the center of the dashboard the digital numbers flashed and read nine o'clock. Steve's foot lowered on the gas pedal until the needle was poised at 60 km/h. A sign at the roadside read 'Maximum 40.'

The breeze through the window threatened Murray's baseball cap, and he pulled the visor low over his forehead. "What do you think about the Pledge, Steve?" he asked. He had been meaning to try Steve on the subject all afternoon; but until now the hectic pace of the deliveries and his own small-talk had diverted him.

Steve looked sideways at him. "Didn't Diane tell you about it?"

"Hell yes. I felt like I was back in Sunday school, the way she talked. From what I can see, it just means the customer's always right, heh?"

"Pretty much. It's a lot of bullshit that amounts to the same thing. The worst part is they've got it posted right up in the store, so all the customers know about it. They're expecting you to kiss their ass, and if you don't it's like you're not doing your job. You saw today all the people that weren't home when we tried to deliver their prescriptions, and they're the first ones to get mad about the delay when you make a special trip back for them."

Steve glanced into the prescription basket. "That one we've got for Mrs. Best has been sitting under the counter for
five days now. You watch—when we give it to her she’ll probably be pissed as hell we haven’t dropped it off sooner, even though when I tried she wasn’t home.”

“Diane told me the store’s trying to bring back the old way of doing business: providing service.”

“Yeah, whatever. All that means is they want more work out of us for six-seventy an hour, like every minimum wage dump. Only here they put a friendly slogan on it. It must seem pretty good if you’re a fucking idiot.”

Murray considered briefly the implications of this.

“So you don’t think about it too much then.”

"Not when I don't have to. The nice thing about being a driver is you’re on your own all day. I try to be nice to the customer, but I also don't take any shit. I'm not getting paid enough for that. You pay the minimum, you get the minimum. That's my Pledge."

They rode to the end of Reaume and Steve turned the truck left onto Front Road, the main thoroughfare of LaSalle. Front Road was not really a street unto itself but rather the four-kilometre stretch of Highway 18 that ran through the town, lined with an old bowling alley, a tavern, a bank, a car dealership, several gas stations and variety stores, and the public pool. The Detroit River ran parallel to the street on the west side, and as Steve weaved the truck through evening traffic he kept alert for glimpses of
the sun-reddened water between the buildings and passing cars. Only rarely did it show through. Further south toward Amherstburg the highway drew close to the river and from there Steve imagined he might see the sun setting full and red over the water, unblemished by the dark grey scud of industrial smoke that drifted over LaSalle from Detroit.

He wondered what it would be like at the bar tonight. Mondays were relatively quiet, so he was not expecting to find the short brunette he had met on the week-end. Instead he was counting on a long night of drinking at his favourite table—a night made short by the laughter and punches of his buddies. With the gathering planned as a celebration of his new job, Steve was sure to be the center of attention. His friends were probably there already, scanning the few women who had turned up on the dance floor strategically visible from that corner table. Steve knew of nothing he liked better than slowly getting drunk in view of dancing, available girls. Indeed, he found this vision so inspiring that he even felt prompted to offer some rare encouragement to his partner.

"Don't let Diane fool you too much," he said. "She'll try and tell you the store's a community service as much as a business, but if you ever screw up and cost them a penny you'll find out how far that goes. She's O.K. to work for if you ignore most of what she says and just do your own
thing."

"It's going to take me a long time to get to know the house numbers like you do, Steve. Hell, you see the name on the bag and know right away where to go. I don't know if I'll ever know the route that well."

"You'll pick it up pretty fast."

They passed through the most populated section of LaSalle and found themselves in sight of the drab gray public arena on the edge of town. Their next stop was on a street just before the arena, and as Steve changed lanes he felt a breeze through Murray's window which came to him tainted by the smell of body odour. He regretted everything he had just said. How could people not realize when they were offending someone?

Beside him Murray sat oblivious, remembering with a smile the Saturday mornings of his childhood spent in the locker rooms of the LaSalle Arena. It seemed just last week he had been wriggling his sleepy body into his brother's hand-me-down hockey pads, trying with one arm to deflect the bombardment of empty beer-cans that transformed those cold, damp rooms into pre-dawn war zones. He remembered everything about those mornings: the smell of the sweaty skates and gloves, the fifth-grade laughter echoing between mouldy walls, the benches still wet with the spilled beer of the late-night adult leagues. Most of all he remembered his
fearful respect for the coaches who had threatened them week after week, volunteering so much in time and frustration to train the Bobby Orrs and Phil Espositos and Ken Drydens of the Bantam League. Even at five o'clock in the morning his parents had stayed to watch the games.

Murray found himself thinking of the Pledge. He could not get over the callousness it provoked in Steve. Though Murray sympathized in part with many of Steve's sentiments, he was surprised to find such cynicism in so young a man. Murray had always been too unsure of himself ever to grow really bitter at the world. For him, anger was an emotion directed at specific people—usually those who supported his darker views of himself. Thus he had spent the afternoon in silent resentment of his new boss and, periodically, of his partner. Only the hard, unavoidable practicality of Steve's opinions prevented him from being written off once and for all, forcing Murray to acknowledge his tyrannic status at the store and the validity of Steve's experienced—even if jaded—point of view.

Murray shook off his doubts with a glance at the next prescription bag. "How's Mr. Wilson?" he asked.

"Kind of a nasty old guy. Deaf, too."

Steve made a right turn and brought the truck onto Sunnyside Lane—a narrow, unpaved road that ran from Highway 18 down to an old white house on the riverfront. Lining
this road on both sides were a dozen motor homes nearly as permanent and old as the house at the end, occupying lots broken up long ago by the house’s aged owner. Steve himself had never met the Landlady, as her tenants called her, but he gathered from them that she was devout and fiercely vocal, never afraid to criticize any lifestyle that did not meet her moral standards, and yet—as the rust and peeled paint on the motor homes testified—never evicting anyone. This tolerance had fostered a long history of strife and gossip among the tenants, which lingered in the old lots with the same depressing effect as the broken toys in the sandboxes and the rusted hulks of cars along the road. Somebody’s neighbours were always playing their music too loud or smoking dope outside or stealing bicycles or breaking windows. Steve found it an unclean, unsettling little world, and liked to think of it whenever some Hater of Progress brought up the good old neighbourhoods of LaSalle.

Steve stopped the truck in front of one of the older, more dilapidated motor homes. "Speak loud or he'll get mad at you for whispering," he advised Murray. "He'll probably want to complain about the landlady for a while. Just listen for a minute and then say you have to go."

"O.K., be right back."

The evening had grown cooler since they had left the
store. Somewhere behind one of the nearby motor homes children were calling and shouting with a heightened fervour that signalled the end of the day. Murray approached Mr. Wilson's door and knocked loudly, but was answered only by a blast of television laughter from within. Startled, he waited for the noise to die down and tried again, but again his effort was drowned in the noise from the set. Finally, after several attempts, he heard a gruff voice shout: "All right! Come in!"

Murray stepped inside and found himself in a small living room, defined by a couch ten feet ahead of him and a kitchenette opening on his right. The television Murray had heard was placed on a short cabinet to the left of the door, and an elderly man with a heavily whiskered face lay watching it from the couch. His chin and the collar of his pale blue pajamas were stained with what appeared to be tomato juice. He did not make any attempt to rise on Murray's entrance.

"Hi," Murray said. "I've got a delivery here from the drug store, sir."

The man on the couch remained absorbed in his program. Murray waited a few seconds and said again, more loudly: "Drug store delivery, sir!"

Mr. Wilson looked at him. "O.K., put it on the counter. I told you before just to come in with that stuff."
I'm not gonna get up."

"Oh, all right. I didn't know."

"What?"

"I said I'm new on the job."

"Oh. Yeah. Never seen you before."

Laughter erupted suddenly from the television, causing Mr. Wilson to laugh explosively in turn. Murray noticed a half-finished bowl of tomato soup on the floor before the couch.

Mr. Wilson's mirth degenerated quickly into a low, wheezing cough. "You think the T.V.'s too loud?" he asked into his cupped hand.

Murray could not hear his voice over the prolonged hilarity from the set. "Pardon?" he asked.

"The T.V. Is it too loud?"

"Well, yeah, maybe a little." Murray took a step toward it. "You want me to turn it down?"

"What? Is it too loud?"

"Yes! Should I turn it down?" Murray reached for the volume button on the set to demonstrate what he meant.

"No, no. I've got it right here."

From between the cushions of the couch Mr. Wilson pulled out an enormous remote control device, the discus-like shape of which looked otherworldly in such sparse surroundings. Holding the controller outstretched before
him, a long green 'VOLUME' bar appeared on screen, which did not diminish in length until Mr. Wilson had pressed every other button on the controller. Finally he turned to Murray with a smile on his red-chinned face.

"Look at that--don't even have to get up anymore. How's it sound now?"

"Good. That's fine."

He set the controller down on the couch. "I can't always tell, you know. Can't hear it. The landlady shows up and tells me it's too loud and it sounds fine to me. That damn..." He tried to bury his opinion with a few shakes of his head, but it refused to be put off. "Damn her! Says everybody complains about my T.V. It's too loud. Turn it down or get out! Goddamn!" he spat venomously. Murray was thinking of a way to excuse himself when Mr. Wilson asked, "Do you know her?"

"Uh... no, I don't. This is my first night."

"What?"

"No!"

"Well she's one mean old lady. Comes around here all the time bothering me, picking on me..." His anger led Murray to believe there would be more in this vein, but instead of continuing, Mr. Wilson sat up slowly and grew quiet. He seemed to be mulling over some problematic piece of evidence. When he started again his tone was
surprisingly conversational.

"Sometimes she's nice, you know. Once she brought me some cupcakes her grandkids had baked for her, just to have someone to eat them with, you know? But then she started telling me how my place doesn't look nice and the T.V.'s always too loud. I can't hear it any other way!" He leaned forward in his renewed excitement and his right foot just missed the bowl of soup. "She doesn't walk around hassling the other tenants! Kids run around banging on the windows every night, getting in trouble. I can't tell you how many times the cops have to come down this street. You know she told me she'd kick me out of the place?"

"Really?"

"I'm not lying. Hey, now listen. What's your name?"

"Murray."

"Well listen, Murray... What happened to that other hot-shot?"

"You mean Steve?"

"What?"

"Steve! The other driver?"

"Whoever. Listen—you know a little something more than that other guy, I'll bet. You know I heard a funny thing once about guys like him, always so damn busy..." He thought for a moment but could not summon the anecdote. Soon the main point of his argument seemed to have slipped
out from under him, and his eyes retreated in alarm to the television.

Murray smiled and followed his lead. "What are you watching?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know."

On screen an attractive family was discussing something around three sides of a dinner table, eliciting frequent interruptions from a laugh-track. Murray did not recognize the program.

"I can't even hear it now. It's not my fault," said Mr. Wilson. "And the hearing aid never works anyway. She always has to yell about that. She just wants somebody to yell at, you know? I guess it might as well be me."

Despite the resignation in his voice, Mr. Wilson's face was almost cheerful.

Murray could think of nothing else to say and he remembered that Steve was waiting for him outside. "I guess I should be going. Got one last delivery."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Next time just come in after you knock. I can't always get up right away. Ah Christ--" Mr. Wilson brushed his chin with the back of his hand and felt the tomato soup that had dripped there and dried into a film. "You should have told me I looked like a damn little kid. Food all over my face." He rose awkwardly from the couch and stood with his lean length hunched over the soup
bowl.

"Do you want me to get that for you?"

"Yeah, O.K."

Murray picked up the bowl and followed Mr. Wilson slowly to the kitchenette. There the elderly man ran his hands through a stream of tap water and washed his chin slowly with his palms. "Hey, listen now..." he started, and did not complete his thought. After another moment he said, "Thanks."

"No problem. I guess I'll see you later, heh?"

"O.K. Just remember to knock. You never know—I could be naked!" Mr. Wilson laughed so that his frail torso bent even further over the small metal sink. He was soon coughing into his wet hands.

"See you later," Murray said. He closed the door behind him.

Steve had shut off the truck and looked dour and angry when Murray returned. The clock on the dash read 9:15 p.m.

"What took so long?" Steve asked.

"He's kind of a talkative old guy, heh?"

"No kidding. That's why I said to make up an excuse. Don't let him think you really want to talk or you'll be there longer next time."

"Well, I don't mind talking to him a bit."

"It's after nine o'clock," Steve said curtly.
"I didn't mean to keep you, buddy."

Murray's voice was not apologetic. The truck groaned loudly into reverse and left two stoneless patches of dirt on the road where the front wheels had been. Murray kept his eyes fixed straight ahead while Steve steered backward into a nearby driveway, narrowly missing an abandoned bicycle, and then sent the truck bouncing and swerving to the highway. By the time they reached Front Road, however, Murray's indignation had subsided. When he thought of Diane staring at her watch, pacing the short distance between the pharmacy and her office door, he could not blame Steve for being uptight about time. He could not, if he considered things in their proper light, really blame Steve for anything. Practicality was the root of everything he said; but practical or not, Murray decided that on his own run he would take whatever time was necessary to talk to amusing old men like Mr. Wilson. Yet no sooner had this resolution hardened, than his eyes undermined it by creeping to the clock. He would have to be careful of Diane.

On Front Road Murray felt compelled to re-open the topic. "Let me get this straight. If some old guy like that really wants to talk, you're just supposed to walk away? I don't know if I like that. Probably nobody visits half these people anymore." He had hoped to sound righteous, but his voice betrayed uncertainty.
Steve looked at him. "It's like I said, you just make up an excuse. It's not your fault nobody visits them. We're not getting paid to talk to them. Did he have soup all over his chin again?"

"Yeah, actually," Murray smiled. "How'd you guess."

"Dumb old bastard. Should try using a bib."

Murray laughed automatically and regretted it.

Front Road became Highway 18 again just past the arena, and the speed limit rose to 70 km/h. Steve turned on the headlights and accelerated to 85, remembering how much he had enjoyed this stretch of road earlier in the summer. He had always left his deliveries along the highway until last whenever possible, for he found something exciting about racing to finish a shift as the sun was setting on the river, and there was encouragement in knowing that, even if you never followed it, the highway could take you speeding away from everything into the darkening county, with nothing to guide you but your own headlights.

Tonight such enjoyment was impossible. Steve had already watched the sun set ignobly behind Mr. Wilson's motor home, and besides that he had his friends to think about. Thanks to Murray, it would be after nine-thirty before they got back to the store. The last delivery was to Mrs. Best in River Canard which was ten minutes away if Steve drove quickly. He depressed the gas pedal further and
the tires hummed on the smooth road. The headlights of the truck sent two bright cones into the dusk before them. Steve’s attention alternated between the clock on the dash and a point just beyond the reach of those headlights, where the bar and his friends and their pints of beer were waiting. He would not let Murray go inside this time.

Beside him Murray was exhausted. His failure to refute Steve’s callousness had left him in an embarrassed stupor, which made the cold clear boundaries of his partner’s world suddenly appealing. Murray felt himself fumbling over some sensitivity toward others that was, in comparison with Steve’s quick judgements, ineffective as a tool for living his life. He remembered the old mechanic at the garage and longed for something simple to hold onto—something as hard and real as Steve’s prejudice to sweep away the doubts and questions that clouded him like a fog.

Steve turned left off the highway onto Martin Lane. This road would take them back to Malden at a point not far from Canard Drive, where Mrs. Best lived. Martin Lane was dark and poorly paved, and Steve slowed the truck reluctantly.

"What's Mrs. Best like?" Murray asked.

"She’s old—really old. She shouldn’t be living on her own. Her house stinks like dog food all the time—you know the stuff out of the can? It sits on the front porch in the
sun all day and just stinks like you wouldn't believe. I don't know how she can stand it."

"Does she have any family?"

"Yeah, I guess she must. I've never seen them though. I think a nurse visits her every now and then. That must be a shitty job--being one of those V.O.N. nurses."

Murray smiled. "You don't like old people much, do you? Do they make you nervous or what?"

"No." Steve shook his head. "You do it for a while and you'll see what I mean. They're so slow and you're always in a hurry. They're just a pain in the ass."

Steve was about to elaborate further when a rabbit appeared in the glare of the truck's headlights. He swerved hard to avoid it and the tires skidded in the gravel along the shoulder, spraying stones into the ditch beside the road. When he regained control of the truck he searched for the rabbit in the rearview mirror.

"I think I hit him. Jesus! He came out of nowhere."

Murray turned to look through rear window. "Why would he have to run out then, heh?"

"No brains, that's why. They're rodents, just like rats. The only difference is the long ears."

They rode in silence the rest of the way to Malden. Steve turned right at the stop sign and soon they were approaching Canard Drive, a long twisting road that followed
the Canard River all the way to Town Line. Mrs. Best lived on the corner of Malden and Canard.

He pulled the truck into Mrs. Best’s driveway, which led through a thick forest of pine trees and uncut grass to her house. The drive itself was almost a hundred metres long, and once at the end of it, Malden Road and its non-stop traffic were lost behind the dense natural barrier that formed the front yard. Tonight Mrs. Best’s house was dark except for a dim lamp in the front window. Steve pulled the truck forward until its headlights contracted into a large circle on the garage door, then stopped abruptly. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Murray adjusting his baseball cap to make himself presentable, and he grabbed Mrs. Best’s prescription before Murray could react.

“I’ll get this one,” Steve said. Murray looked surprised but did not object.

Steve passed quickly before the truck’s headlights, casting a shadow on the door of the garage. Whatever remnants of sunset still lingered in the sky did not penetrate here through the trees, and he had to step carefully on the cobblestone walkway that led to the porch. High overhead a bat screeched at regular intervals in its awkward, veering flight.

“Hey, don’t you need the pouch?” Murray called to him from the truck.
"No, there's no charge. She doesn't tip either."

Steve could smell the sharp scent of rotten dog-food even before he reached the house. When he climbed the few wooden stairs to the front door a cloud of flies went up from the dog dish in the middle of the porch, and the stench was nauseating. Steve had to hold his breath as he knocked on the door. There was no answer.

Steve did not know much about Mrs. Best, as she was one of the few elderly people on his route who did not pester him with details of her personal life. He was certain only about what he had witnessed first-hand: that her house was a mess and her clothing often dirty and unmatched. Once she had stumbled to the door and nearly fallen trying to walk on two different shoes—one a flat-soled slipper and the other a white pump grown dingy with scuff-marks. Occasionally she left the front door unlocked to save herself the trouble of answering it. She was absent-minded and slow in her movements and thus one of the stops Steve dreaded.

She did not come to the door tonight even after he had knocked several times. Somewhere inside the house the dog barked disinterestedly but did not come running. Steve remembered that it was almost as old as Mrs. Best herself. She must be out again, he thought.

Steve had first tried a week ago to drop off whatever it was in Mrs. Best's prescription bag; but then, as now,
she had not been home to receive it. Arriving at the end of a sweltering six-hour shift, Steve had been so angry at her thoughtlessness that, rather than fill out the appropriate form for re-delivery, he had pitched the bag under the counter on returning to the store. There it had remained undiscovered until Thursday, when Steve found a note from Diane stapled to the bag, quoting the store's policy on Driver Initiative. This had been too much. Again he tossed the bag unopened beneath the counter, where it had lain forgotten behind the "PLEDGE" sign until Janie spotted it there tonight.

Had he heard something just now? Inside the house the dog's barking had ceased and Steve thought he heard movement in one of the back rooms, where Mrs. Best often received her deliveries. He listened to make sure it was not the dog but the sound stopped. Behind him the flies had settled again on the dish, consorting there in an inane, perpetual hum.

"Hello?" he called. "Anybody home?"

The dog began to bark again, drowning out any response. Steve twisted the doorknob, but to his relief it was locked. He did not want to go inside. Everything about the house had become strangely unsettling: the lone lamp in the window, the intermittent creaking of the floor within, the smell of decaying dog food so strong it sickened him even when he breathed through his mouth. He would gladly leave
Mrs. Best for Murray another day. He gave the doorknob one last wrench in parting and was surprised when it clicked and gave way in his grasp. He pulled his hand back instantly but it was too late: the door swung inward slowly to shadow. It had been stuck rather than locked.

The dog's barking was louder now that the door was open; but still it did not come running. Steve reached for the door to pull it shut, hoping that Murray had not been watching from the truck. He would be sure to ask Steve why he had not gone inside. Steve had been a fool to explain how many of the elderly customers left their doors open for deliveries. In fact, Steve had been a fool to come to work tonight in the first place. He could be in the bar at this moment, free of Murray and Mrs. Best and everyone.

He turned toward the truck and met Murray's expectant stare. Gritting his teeth, Steve called through the door: "Hello! Anyone home? Drug store delivery!" The dog barked louder at his voice.

In the truck Murray thought of his first interview with Diane. She had greeted him in her office, not rising to meet him, not even smiling as she told him to take a seat. He remembered her loud, unforgiving voice and the way she scrutinized him as she spoke, examining his response to every word. He remembered in particular her instructions about elderly customers.
"You won't have a lot of time for each of them," she had said. "But I want you to give them a little extra if you feel they need it. Some of these people don't talk to anyone but you all day." He had known she was studying him from behind the desk, scanning with disapproval his t-shirt and faded jeans, his baseball cap and big-knuckled fingers.

"You'll wear a uniform every day." This was spoken as a command.

"Most important of all, you must remember our Pledge. The customers are number one. You must show them courtesy at all times. If they want a refund for any reason, you must give them one courteously. There's no point being hostile about something you're going to do anyway—that just gives them a bad impression of the store. I always know when a customer has been treated rudely." Her unflinching stare had made Murray believe this.

"But don't think the Pledge is just about following rules," she continued. "You're expected to learn how to serve the customer your own way, to give them the extra time they deserve or the extra smile that might make all the difference. We want them to come back and they'll want to come back if they're treated well. You see?" She leaned back in her chair and attempted to smile, but the effect on Murray was not reassuring. He had felt her waiting, watching for any scepticism on his part, any show of doubt
in order to pounce. He had known even then that he did not want this job and could not work for this woman.

"That's the key to being successful here. Serve the customer to the best of your ability. That, in essence, is our Pledge. It's easy because it's common sense, but we demand that common sense from our employees." When Murray had said nothing in reply she pushed her chair back from her desk and stood up. "If you can keep that in mind you'll enjoy it here, Murray." Her hand when he had shaken it was not soft or sympathetic.

The screech of a low-flying bat startled Murray from his memories. Several minutes had passed since Steve had gone inside the house, and the night was now completely dark. Murray wondered what he and Mrs. Best could be talking about. He had every intention of pointing out just how long Steve had been.

Another minute passed and now the dashboard clock read 9:30. There were still no lights on in the house except for the lamp in the window. Looking at the porch, Murray noticed for the first time that the front door was not completely closed. Steve must have forgotten to latch it when he went inside. Murray pushed open the door of the truck and stepped out. He walked up the cobblestone path to the house. There seemed to be more than one bat now swooping overhead, and he paused for a moment to look for
them above the spear-like tops of the pine trees. He could not find them. Once on the porch, the smell of dog-food was worse than he had imagined—sickly-sweet and heavy, radiating outward from the dish like the flies that filled the air. Murray went to the front door and listened at it, but after hearing nothing, he pulled it shut to keep the insects from getting in. Only when he was half-way down the walkway to the truck did he hear a sound from inside the house. Footsteps came rushing suddenly down a hollow staircase, and the dog's barking started again at the noise. Murray looked back at the door to find Steve stumbling through it, tripping over the dish of dog-food on the porch and having to right himself against the wooden rail. There he doubled over and coughed into his fist, still holding the prescription bag in his other hand.

Murray ran back up the stairs to the porch. "What's wrong, Steve?" he asked when he got there.

Steve raised his hand to quiet him but did not answer. Looking up from his hunched position, his face was white with fear.

"What? What is it, buddy?" Murray asked him again.

Steve struggled with the words: "Nothing. She's not home."

"What are you talking about—?" Murray began; but then he suddenly knew. He took a step backward, away from Steve,
and felt his heel strike the overturned dish. "Holy shit," he stammered. "Holy shit, she's--"

Steve stood up straight before Murray could finish. "She's not home!" he said, lowering his hand from his face. "Come on, man, shut the door and let's go."

But Murray shook his head and edged sideways to the door. Flies buzzed madly in the light of the window lamp, while inside the dog's barking went on.

Murray reached the doorway and stepped backward into the house.

"What are you doing?" Steve asked. "Get back in the truck."

"No way. I know what you're trying to do--"

"Listen to me, Murray! Are you fucking stupid?!"

Murray was inside now and he turned around where he stood. The lamp in the window lit up a small living room, the crowded furniture of which was covered with dust. On the far wall two doors stood closed, and behind one the dog could be heard barking and scratching to get out. A stairway led up to a lightless hall on Murray's left.

"Murray!" Steve said; but Murray would not turn around.

Placing his foot on the first step, Murray's shadow stretched all the way upstairs into darkness. He made his way slowly upward, each step creaking in turn under his weight. Before he had reached the top, the dog stopped
barking and the house was silent.

He paused for a moment at the top of the stairs. There was no light in the hallway at all, and only the faintest shimmering of a mirror at the far end made evident the length of the corridor. Of the four doors opening off the hall, only the farthest on the right side was open. Murray began walking slowly toward it.

The floor continued to creak beneath him, and now the musty air of the house became scented with something else--something sweet like the forgotten dog-food downstairs, but with an undertone that made Murray stop where he was. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he wondered if he should not simply leave as Steve had suggested--simply close and lock the door behind him, climb in the truck and drive away from all of this. He took another step forward, unsure if he would continue or not. But he had come this far; he was half-way down the hall. A moment later he had reached the end.

She lay just inside the open doorway, curled up, one hand outstretched toward the leg of her bed. The blinds on her windows remained unpulled, and moonlight alone made her body visible. Her housecoat had ridden up to the knee of one leg. Her flesh was pallid and wrinkled and blue. Murray took another step forward. Her eyes were open.

On the nightstand beside the bed, a black and white
photograph of a man and woman caught the cold light filtering in through the window. They were both in their twenties, side by side in a park, and looked stiff and uncomfortable before the camera. The picture was turned so as to be seen from a rocking chair just inside the door. Murray stared at the picture until he heard the sound of the truck’s engine starting in the driveway.

In an instant he was down the hallway and outside, leaping the porch steps and charging down the cobblestone path toward the truck. Steve turned on the lights in time to see Murray running out before them, yanking open the driver door and grabbing him roughly by the arm. Steve struggled but could not get free.

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve cried.

Murray pulled him from the driver’s seat and nearly lost hold of him, latching onto his shirt as Steve tried to make a run for the garage. Finally Murray caught him with both arms and held him steady in the blinding glare of the headlights.

"What the fuck’s your problem? Let me go of me!"

But Murray would not let go of him--was holding him now by the arm with one thick hand while the other, fallen to his side, had clenched into a fist nearly as large as Steve’s whole head. Steve saw the fist even before Murray raised it--saw in Murray’s face the signs of it forming, of
pieces coming together at last, and understood that he could not escape. He looked into the glaring lights of the truck and saw nothing but their light, nothing of the dark driveway and the road beyond that could carry him away from Murray and the old house and the woman he had found within. He let himself be held.

"Go ahead," he said to Murray. "Hit me. That's not going to change it. She's dead. Didn't you see her?"

Murray held his fist upraised but his eyes had slipped to the right, to the garage whose weathered door displayed their shadows, melded by the headlights into a single amorphous figure. Murray lowered his fist. His throat moved to speak but the effort failed, drowned by the screeching of the bats above. Inside the house, as if to ward off further speech, the dog resumed its lonely, barking vigil.
ROAD'S END
Road's End

The warehouse was abandoned. Why it had been left or what its purpose might have been were favourite topics of speculation for the four of them, stoned, drunk, in the middle of the night. Its walls were rotted out and there were holes through which the approach of any police might be seen. Fifty yards from the collapsed front door the Detroit River ran in silence, carrying the dark industrial message of Zug Island to the lakes. When they were on acid Zug Island was a perverted amusement park. Its looming metal shapes were the stuff of nightmares. Its black smoke rubbed out the sky. Together they studied it from the warehouse roof, wondering aloud what their world had become. It was exhilarating in its bleakness. At the warehouse they were always on the brink of new horror. But they were together.

Rob was going to be a writer—all his teachers said so. He was going away to university where he would write about the friends he loved and had to leave behind. He would change their names eventually. He would transform
everything. When he was high enough, like now, he saw life as an endless scrolling text, and he knew he could preserve it.

He had taken the hit of acid forty minutes ago and it was moving into full swing. Dave's parents were gone for the week-end. The integrity of their house never buckled in their absence, even as marijuana was broken up into zip-lock bags on the coffee table. Rob was anxious to leave. Dave was haggling with his new dealer, whose name Rob could not remember.

"Look, man, you know I'm good for the cash," Dave said. "Just spot me a half for the party. I get paid Monday."

"I spotted you a nickel last week. Where's my money for that one?"

"Ask Tom, man. I'm good for it."

"To put it nicely, guy, I don't give a fuck what Tom says. He got raided and he's finished. Now have you got my money or not?"

"Obviously not, or I wouldn't be asking you to spot me."

"Then I can't help you out." He twisted a tie around a half-nickel bag.

"Are you serious? Not even a fucking half?"

The dealer got up and went to the door. "I want the cash by Monday, too."
Dave followed him. “Yeah, whatever.”

“No man, not ‘whatever.’ Monday.”

“Yeah, fuck you.”

“Yeah?” The dealer grabbed Dave by the collar and pushed him against the door. “You want to say that again? How much you got on you?”

“Fuck you!”

The dealer jammed Dave’s head against the door. It made a dull thud. “How much.”

“Twenty.”

“I’ll take fifteen for that mouth of yours.” He reached into Dave’s front pants pocket and pulled out a crumpled twenty. A ten dollar bill came out with it.

“You trying to grab my dick?” Dave said.

The dealer punched him hard in the stomach. Dave went down. “This looks like thirty to me,” the dealer said, grabbing both bills off the floor where they had fallen. He spoke across the room to Rob: “You should tell your friend here to watch his mouth. Who the fuck does he think he is?” He left the door open.

Outside it was dark, August. Rob waited for the dealer to return and let them know it had all been in fun. After all, he was a friend of their old dealer, Tom, who’d been shut down by the cops two weeks ago. No one got hurt over nickel bags. Especially when Rob was leaving Monday.
Dave looked funny stumbling to the door, closing it, holding his gut.  

“What the fuck? Why didn’t you help me out?” he said.

Rob shrugged. How could he explain his distance? It had been like a movie for him. He was leaving for real Monday morning.

Rob and Dave discovered the warehouse together. Taking the back roads home after a long night of acid, its silhouette spoke to them against the early morning river. It stood alone across a muddy, fenced-off field; but though the sun was threatening to rise every minute, they raced the light through the spring mud and won. In the grainy half-darkness it was majestic--boarded, dilapidated, forgotten and perfect. Nothing for miles was as old or as safe.

Through the windshield the road moved like a video game image. The telephone poles streamed out of sight beyond its frame, but their uniform motion suggested no depth. Rob looked across at the speedometer. One hundred kilometres an hour. Their destination was unreachable--no county road could touch it. It was a vanishing point giving the illusion of perspective.

“I think I’m peaking,” Rob said. “How long’ve we been driving?”

Dave drove on but didn’t answer. His hands were clenched like claws on the wheel. “That fucker. I can’t
believe that. Now we've got no weed for the party."

Rob was getting nervous. They were barely moving at all. The road was not cooperating; it wouldn't roll under them fast enough. He fixed his eyes on a streetlight in the distance and it wouldn't move, wouldn't come closer. He remembered vacations with his family—the long back-seat rides where time stopped altogether. Are we there yet, Dad? How much longer till we're there? How could you be a father? How was it possible to be a father?

He wondered if Sherrie knew. Linda had promised to keep quiet. He couldn't understand how the road could stop moving.

The warehouse had an old concrete cellar. Linda discovered it on their second visit. She and Sherrie went to a private school and lived in huge houses and wore expensive clothes. They had been reluctant to visit the warehouse at night, but Dave was the driver and they needed a way home. They were too fancy for Rob or Dave; but the warehouse changed all that. Its jagged boards and webbed corners captured them, soiled their fashionable sweaters and jeans, brought them abruptly down to earth. Linda found the trap-door beneath an empty barrel. Six feet underground, in the cramped, musty darkness, the four of them drank Jack Daniels and smoked weed. At ground level their parents lay awake and worried. The bottle went round and round the
circle and once, pausing to light her cigarette, Linda looked for Rob in the smoky black. In the flame of the lighter he saw her eyes.

Dave pulled the car into Sherrie's driveway. Panic seized Rob. What if she knew? What if Linda had told her? He was leaving Monday no matter what happened.

Stepping out of the car, Sherrie's house was impossibly large. It had never seemed so large before. It leaned over the driveway, challenging the neighbourhood, daring anyone to set foot on its sculpted lawn. Rob fixed his eyes on the porch light and followed Dave toward it. His peripheral vision swam with odd angles, looming objects, threatening movement. They arrived at the porch.

"I hope her old man's not home," Dave said. He knocked on the door and it opened instantly.

"Meet me down the street in half an hour," Sherrie whispered. She was dressed and ready to go.

Her father's voice thundered from deep in the house. "I told you you're not going out tonight, Sherrie!"

"I know, Dad."

"Then what are you doing with the door open?" His shape appeared in the dark behind his daughter.

Dave and Rob turned away, but not in time. Her father came to the door and yelled after them: "She's not coming out tonight! Not for the whole week-end! Have you got
that? Do you understand me?"

"Dad, stop it! The whole neighbourhood can hear you."

"I don’t give a damn! I don’t want them coming back tomorrow!"

The door slammed shut.

"You must have to practise to be that much of an asshole," Dave said.

Rob’s fear had not left him. "Hey what do you say we forget the party? Let’s take off and head to the warehouse."

"What about Sherrie?"

"She won’t be coming out."

"Yeah she will. Besides, she’d kill me if I took off on her."

Rob thought of their new dealer and Sherrie’s father and shivered. Rob was going away to university where he would write about the friends he loved. How was it possible to be a father?

They went to the warehouse only at night. Daylight was too charged with the present; cracks in the walls let in school and work and parents. At night nothing could creep in between them. The future, however grim, was only an idea. They laughed in its face from the warehouse roof, debated it on the remains of old crates, modified it solemnly in the dark of the cellar. Dave would start
apprenticing as a mechanic when he finished school. Sherrie
would go to university for engineering. Linda would move to
the States and become a fashion designer. Rob would be a
writer. He would write down everything. He would make sure
that nothing was lost.

Twenty minutes later Sherrie knocked on the rear
window. Dave had parked the car at the opposite end of her
street. Rob turned around and unlocked the back door.

"He didn’t hear you?" Dave asked when she had climbed
inside.

"No chance. I snuck out through the back. The
doorbell is the only thing he hears."

Dave handed her a small square of tinfoil. "Here’s
yours."

"Don’t I even get a kiss?"

He leaned over the seat and pecked her on the cheek.

"Now eat up. We’ve got a head start."

"Are you serious? I thought you were going to wait."

"Well, we didn’t. I didn’t even know if you’d get
out."

"I always get out, don’t I? When did you drop?"

"Maybe an hour ago."

"Shit, that sucks! You’re always so selfish." She
unwrapped the tinfoil and found a small square of paper.

"Is it good?"
"Ask Rob. He's wrecked."

Rob nodded, but the heaviest part had come to an end. He was entering what he called a "normal phase"—four or five minutes of calm between peaks. He waited to hear what Sherrie would say.

Dave started the car and Sherrie swallowed her hit. "So where's Linda, anyway?" she asked from the back seat.

"Isn't she coming out tonight?"

"Later," Rob said. "She'll meet us at the party."

"We're going to the warehouse first," Dave said.

"What for? There's nothing there but the cellar." Rob shrugged. "For old time's sake, I guess."

"Great. And I won't even have a buzz."

Rob couldn't tell if she knew or not; she seemed different somehow, but then she also wasn't stoned. He wouldn't know for sure until her acid kicked in.

"I can't believe you guys dropped without me."

"Think of it this way. Now you'll have more for the party," Dave said.

"Yeah, if we ever get there."

Rob's normal phase came to a sudden end. It was as if, staring down a long road, he had taken one step and found himself without anywhere to go.

Who knew how many histories the warehouse had acquired? They found strange footprints every now and then, beer
bottles and cigarette butts they knew they had not left. The history they gave the place was perhaps but one of many: its walls of rotted wood were the frame of countless stories, only a fraction of which they called their own. Watching Zug Island, Sherrie’s foot broke through the roof. Dave fell once on the cellar stairs. Rob and Linda sat alone in a corner. The past they gave the warehouse made the future possible.

They were on the dead-end road that led down to the river.

"Do you even have any pot for when we get there?"

Sherrie asked.

Dave’s hands curled tighter around the steering wheel.

"No."

"Are you serious? Why not?"

"I had no cash." Dave looked at Rob. "That friend of Tom’s is an asshole. We’ll have to find somebody else."

"Oh yeah, like that’s going to be easy. This city is dry."

"Well we’ve got no choice, O.K.? Tom got raided last week and this other guy wouldn’t spot me."

"Great. So I snuck out for nothing."

"No one begged you to come out. You could have stayed home."

"I would have if I knew Linda wasn’t coming."
Linda. Rob tried to block them all out. How had it come to this? How had it all gone wrong?

They were nearing the river now and Zug Island loomed across the water. Through the humid air came the sound of a ship signalling down river. Rob wanted so much for things to be as they had been before, simple and pure. Permanent. A joint would have made everything so much better. He saw the dealer’s fist jabbing into Dave’s gut, Dave going down, the front door left open.

"So Rob, what are you and Linda going to do when you leave for school?" Sherrie asked. Her words were toneless, suggesting nothing. "Are you going to stay together or what?"

"I don’t know."

He didn’t know why he felt like a spectator. Somehow his own life had grown distant beyond reach.

One night they arrived to find the warehouse gone. Its remains lay burned and scattered on the ground, its floor torn up, its cellar exposed like an open grave. Looking down into it, they realized in the moonlight just how small it was. They piled blackened boards where the front door had been and sat and speculated as to why. A safety hazard, they reasoned. After that they went there only for the cellar and the water lapping the shore fifty yards away.

Dave parked the car where the road ended. He made no
motion to get out.

"Isn't anyone else coming?" Rob asked.

Sherrie shook her head. "What for? I'm not even stoned."

"I'll follow you up in a minute," Dave said.

The empty stretch of field separating the river from the road was dark. Rob stumbled once, nearly falling; the long grass parted to receive him. He could smell the river. Zug Island winked at him across the water and belched its pollution unseen into the night.

He made his way to the old site of the warehouse. When he was nearly there he heard a soft cough from somewhere ahead of him and stopped. He waited, suddenly afraid. Far behind him Dave's car sat dark at the roadside. Maybe Dave would not be following after all.

He searched for the heap of boards they had made in sadness from the remains of the place they had loved. Passing by the cellar and looking down, he saw the orange coal of a cigarette in the darkness. Linda's voice said "Rob" in a whisper.

He descended the stairs, watching as the road slipped from view above him. She was sitting on a pile of boards in the corner, only a shadow behind the cigarette coal. He went to her. She did not speak or stand. In the darkness she reached for his hand and held it against her, holding
his palm against her soft belly. Her skin was warm. Rising up through the warmth of her flesh Rob thought he could feel the beating of a tiny, undeveloped heart.
VITA AUCTORIS

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