Under Emalien's Roof. (Original writing).

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UNDER EMALIEN'S ROOF

by

Laurie Abel

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Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master's Degree at the
University of Windsor

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Abstract

The first time I saw Emahlen Gruhn, I mistook her for a cow. She was working in her rose garden in a black wool skirt and black rubber boots. She was bent over from the waist, and from where I was sitting, I couldn't see anything but her ample rear end.


Mrs. Gruhn was seventy-nine years old and she lived alone except for her dog and a few cats. My brother and I used to wait in the car while my father dropped in to ask Mrs. Gruhn if she needed anything in town. Matthew would slide down into the back seat, and in imitation of Mrs. Gruhn, he'd crunch up his face and cackle like a witch. He'd say, "Here kitty, kitty into the pot." But I didn't believe a word of it and I wasn't afraid of her. My father said her house had fourteen rooms and it was full of junk and that's what I really wanted to see. Fourteen rooms filled with junk.

I didn't know that one day I would own Emahlen Gruhn's fourteen room house, and that one day I would fill it with my own junk. I bought the house twelve years after Mrs. Gruhn died. I was thirty-two years old, recently divorced, and alone except for my dog, Fred. I was not looking for love. I was not looking for Larry Fitzpatrick, but he found me, nonetheless. Larry Fitzpatrick is an inventor and a good cook. He made me a lot of dinners because the way to a woman's heart, don't you know, is through her stomach.
To my mother and father
The characters in this novel are purely imaginary. Their names and experiences have no relation to those of actual people except by coincidence.
I love the time and in between the calm inside me in the space where I can breathe I believe there is a distance I have wandered to touch upon the years of reaching out and reaching in holding out holding in.

"Elsewhere" by Sarah McLachlan
Chapter 1

Preserving

Emalien Gruhn is dead. She died in her kitchen. She was eighty-nine years old at the time. I know she’s dead, but I also know that she’s in my kitchen, watching me pack cherries into jars. There are so many cherries. I can’t possibly preserve them all. What did Emalien and Austin Gruhn do with all the fruit from their orchard? My orchard, now. Although it doesn’t feel like my orchard, yet. I’ve only had the farm for two months. They had it for over forty years. My mother thinks I’m crazy to come back here. Didn’t she send me away to school so that I could go anywhere, do anything? But here I am, back on Currie Road, working as a sign painter, and living in the old Gruhn house. My house, now.

And preserving cherries, no less. It’s a thrill to possess shelves well-stocked with home-canned fruit. That’s what it says in Joy of Cooking. It also says that the pleasure of serving canned fruit is comparable only to the pleasure of a clear conscience or a very becoming hat.

What do you think of that, Emalien?

I talk to her from time to time, which I suppose is a little weird. It’s okay to have an invisible friend when you’re three or four years old, but I don’t know too many people who will admit to it when they’re thirty-two. It’s supposed to be a sign of an active imagination, in children. Another theory is that children see spirits that adults don’t see, and invisible friends aren’t really invisible at all. I like that theory. I’d like to
think that Emalien might show herself to me one day. Not as a filmy, white ghost. That's for sure. She'd be more likely to stomp into the kitchen in her rubber boots with a fistful of rutabagas in her hand.

I cover the cherries with syrup, screw on the lids, and wipe the jars with a damp cloth. I put them in their boiling water bath, leaving two inches of space between each jar. I go by the book. If Emalien was doing this, she wouldn't need a cook book to tell her what to do. She would just know about canning and pickling. She was a farmer's wife.

But it's all new to me, so I check the book again. For cherries, it's fifteen minutes in the boiling bath. Fifteen minutes or botulism. That's the big scare with canning. Clostridium botulinum is so deadly that one ounce of the germ has the power to kill 100 million people. It says this in Joy of Cooking right after the part about having a clear conscience. I'm thinking of giving some of my preserves away as Christmas gifts, so I boil the jars for exactly sixteen minutes, just to be on the safe side. I wouldn't want anyone's Christmas to end in respiratory paralysis, especially my ex-husband's.

What will Henry say when I give him a jar of sour cherries for Christmas? He'll say that I've really bought this back-to-the-land bullshit. Bought it with his money. My money. Well, the cash settlement he gave me when I told him he could keep the house. Henry and I are miles apart. Which strictly speaking, is true, since he's in Hamilton and I'm in Forbes Settlement, and there's about a hundred miles between us.

Forbes Settlement is twenty-seven miles north of the Melford beer store. Melford being the nearest town, population 2000. To get from Melford to my farmhouse, you go straight up Highway 6. Make a left on Currie Road. Go past the checkerboard sign, past White's farm, past Sullivan's, keep going, keep going. You have to keep going almost to the end of the road. My laneway is on the right. There's a red mailbox with my name on it, Rosemary Hatch. You can't miss it. Of course people do miss it, and they end up at
Larry Fitzpatrick's house. That's the end of the road, and there's nothing to do then, but turn around and come back.

I should know. I grew up in that house at the end of the road. My father built it when I was ten. He only sold it a few years ago, when neither my brother Matthew nor I wanted it. He sold it after the heart attack. Nearly had another one, when seven years later. I told him that I wanted a house on Currie Road, after all. I told him I was thinking of buying the old Gruhn house.

"You could have bought our house," he said.

"I didn't want a house on Currie Road seven years ago," I told him.

"And now, you're sure this is what you want?" he asked.

"I'm sure."

"It won't be easy, living alone in that house," he said.

"I've got Fred," I said.

"There's the winters to think about," he said, ignoring my remark about the dog.

"I know, dad."

"It's not like Hamilton."

"I know, dad."

"Well, I guess you know it all when you're thirty."

"Thirty-two. Which is two years older than you, when you moved up north."

"Yeah, and what the hell did I know?" he said.

I tried to change the subject. "Gerard Baines did a great job, restoring the old farmhouse," I said.

"At least let me look at the place before you buy it," he said.

"I already bought it," I told him.

"I'm handing the phone over to your mother now," he said.
That was two months and forty-eight quarts of cherries ago. The jars are cooling now, and I am tired of canning. I am waiting to feel the pleasure that is comparable to the pleasure of a clear conscience or a very becoming hat. I am wondering if I should have left the cherries to the birds. I have more cherries than I know what to do with.

What did you do with all your cherries, apples, pears, grapes, Emallen?

It was just the two of them. Austin and Emallen. No children. Which seems kind of strange, considering that they lived on a farm and children might have come in handy. No children to help Emallen feed the chickens. She did have chickens. I know that because of a letter that she got from her sister.

Preston Ont Dec. 14th 1937

Dear Emallen,

Well it seems a long, long time since we’ve seen or heard from you. How are you getting along? I hope good. How are the chickens and turkeys this year? How many cows, pigs and horses have you? And how were your crops and your flowers. Did your peonies bloom? You are so far away that we can’t see you, although I don’t get to see the nearer ones.

This past year Mother has not been so well and has not been able to go visiting. The Dr. says if she were a young person she would get better faster. She’s in bed a great deal. Andrew and Albert are fine, and I am pretty well and am still able to do all my own work and do for Mother besides. Hope this finds you all well and wishing you a Merry Christmas.

Anna Wettlaufier

So Emallen had turkeys and chickens, a sister in Preston and an ailing mother.

I hope you don’t mind me reading your letters, Emallen.

My father gave them to me. He came for a visit that first day when I was still unpacking.

"It sure is different," he said, surveying the kitchen. It was the first time he’d been in the room, since Emallen Gruhn died.

The kitchen isn’t completely finished. There’s still cherry red linoleum stuck over pine flooring, but the white plaster walls are new, and the windows have all been replaced and reinforced, and the floor doesn’t slant any more, thanks to Gerard Baines’ efforts. One inch at a time, he told me. That’s how he raised the house. He spent ten
years restoring it. Said that after the first three months, his wife ran out the back door
and into the fields screaming. It was the plaster falling on her head and the rats in the
basement that got to her. She eventually left the house and Gerard for good, but he told
me he went right on fixing the stairs, the roof, the ceilings, and the floors. Didn’t stay to
enjoy the fruits of his labour, though. He moved to Victoria. Said he missed the ocean.

"Every window in this place was broken," said my father.

"I know," I said. "Gerard showed me the Before pictures."

"Mrs. Gruhn’s nephew was going to burn it to the ground," said my father, "but
he found a sucker to buy it."

"You think that Gerard Baines paid him too much money for this place?" I asked.

"Well, he didn’t pay as much as you," my father said.

"More coffee, dad?" I asked.

My father and I are a lot alike. We’re both stubborn, and we both think we know
everything, but we get along all right. We spent a lot of time together when I was grow-
ing up because it was me, not Matthew, who took to sign painting. I was going out on
jobs with my father when I was nine, and striping cars when I was fourteen, although
my father didn’t always tell people it was my work.

My father and I collect old bottles. That afternoon, my father gave me an old
purple bottle for a house-warming gift. It was one that Emalien had given him many
years ago.

"Probably 1910," he said, handing it over to me.

It was lovely -- full of bubbles and imperfections. Said Paterson’s Lozenges on the
side.

"How much is it worth?" I asked.

"Oh, thirty bucks, maybe," he said. "Not that you’d want to sell it."

"Of course not, dad. I was only asking."
He also gave me an old Christmas card box, collapsed at the corners. It was full of newspaper clippings and letters and documents that used to belong to Emalien. She’d given them to him by mistake. About a year before she died, she gave him a box of old bottles for his collection. The letters were buried underneath some old newspapers in the box.

"I almost threw the letters out," said my father.

"And you didn’t give them back?" I asked.

"I meant to," he said. "But I forgot about them."

We looked through the box together. There were cards, photographs, newspaper clippings (mostly obituaries), a mortgage foreclosure, even a certificate stating that Emalien Gruhn passed the Education Department Entrance Exam. Dated 1909.

"Austin Gruhn. This is her husband’s obituary." I said, holding up a scrap of yellowed newspaper. "What am I going to do with this?"

"Well, you can always bury it in her flower garden," he said.

"No, I think I’ll keep it," I said. "These things belong here." In Emalien’s house. My house, now.

I invited my father to stay the night, but he said he had to get back to London.

"Just a quick visit," he said. To make sure I was getting settled in.

I suppose the box of old bottles were payment for something that he did for Emalien. Maybe he delivered a bag of groceries that day, or ploughed her laneway. Or maybe she was just getting rid of things. Cleaning house. That thought makes me smile. Emalien, clean house? Not the Emalien I knew. She was a collector, not a cleaner. Kept every margarine tub she’d ever owned. But I didn’t know her as Emalien then. She was Mrs. Gruhn. She was an old woman, who lived half a mile down the road. An old woman who gave away saucers without tea cups.

She couldn’t come to my tenth birthday party, but she sent me a saucer.
"Where's the cup?" I asked.

"There probably isn't one," said my mother.

"Is it an old saucer?" I said.

"It's an antique," she said.

"Is it worth a lot of money?" I asked.

"I'm sure it's worth something," my mother said.

"Does she have a lot of antiques?" I asked.

"She's got a lot of junk --", my father started to say.

"Antiques," said my mother, cutting him off. "Your father says she saves things."

I made Mrs. Gruhn a thank-you card. I drew a picture of her house, her flowers and the two big spruce trees that grew beside the house, and I wrote a big THANK YOU FOR THE SAUCER inside.

"We'll give it to her on Saturday when we drop by to pick up her grocery list," said my mother.

"I hope that I get to see her this time," I said.

"She might be in her garden," said my brother, Matthew. "That's where she was when dad and I went over last week."

When I asked him what she looked like, he said she was old, and wore men's clothes. I wanted to see for myself.

On Saturday, my father stopped into Mrs. Gruhn's to ask her if she needed anything in Melford. My mother, Matthew and I waited in the car while my father knocked on the door.

"Mr. Sullivan's cows are out again," I said, pointing to a black cow in Mrs. Gruhn's garden.
"That's not a cow," said Matthew. "That's Mrs. Gruhn." I took another look. She was working in her garden in a black wool skirt and black rubber boots. She was bent over from the waist, and from where I was sitting, I couldn’t see anything but her ample rear end. But Matthew was right. It was Mrs. Gruhn’s backside that I saw moving about the roses and not Mr. Sullivan’s cow.

My mother motioned to my father to go around the side of the house. But by this time, Mrs. Gruhn had either seen the car or heard my stifled snorts of laughter because she was already on her way over.

"She's wearing men’s boots," whispered Matthew.

"Shhh," said my mother.

"And a man’s cap." I said.

My father handed Mrs. Gruhn the thank-you card. She put it in her pocket.

"Will she come over here?" I asked.

She didn’t come over, but her dog did. He came over to the car, snifflng toward the open window.

"It’s an old dog," said Matthew. "You can tell by the white hairs around his nose."

"Maybe, he’s always had those white hairs," I said. "Maybe he’s had them since he was a puppy."

It was my job to challenge everything that Matthew said. Just because he was three years older than I was, didn’t mean that he knew everything.

"In dog years, he’s probably as old as she is," said Matthew.

"How old?" I said.

"Seventy, maybe eighty."

"Mrs. Gruhn is seventy-nine," I told him. "And Mr. Gruhn was eighty-four when he died. Those are probably his old boots that she’s wearing."

"That’s enough, Rosemary," said my mother.
"And that's his old cap," whispered Matthew.

A few minutes later my father came back to the car with Mrs. Gruhn's grocery list. "She just wants a couple of grapefruits and some milk," he said.

"I'll take the list, dad," I offered.

As we pulled out of the laneway, I watched her for as long as I could. I watched her in her rubber man-boots and her engineer cap, and her long, black skirt.

"Will she read the card?" I asked.

"She's probably reading it right now," said my mother.

But I knew that she'd wait until she got inside because she wouldn't want to get the card muddy.

My mother shopped on Saturdays because she said the produce was fresher and not all picked over. I took my time picking Mrs. Gruhn's grapefruit. She didn't like the white ones. GRAPEFRUIT -- PINK, she'd specify on her grocery list. And I'd find her the biggest pink grapefruits in Melford's only grocery store.

She saved the thank-you card that I made her. It was in the box of letters that my father gave me. It was inside an envelope on which she'd written, Cards received in 1972. There were only two cards that year: a Christmas card from my family, and the thank-you card that I made her. But there are other envelopes and other cards from earlier years, like this pretty card from 1921. It has no signature, but I figure it's from Austin. He would have been courting her around this time. The verse reads,

To the One I Love:

O may thy life be fair and sweet
As these sweet flowers I send to-day
O may they blossom round thy feet;
With ne'er a thorn along the way,
And whispers close within thine ear,
This tender message straight from me,
That through each moment of the year
My heart is full of love to thee.
She would have been twenty-eight when she received this card. At twenty-eight, did she believe in roses without thorns or hearts full of love?

"What do you think, Fred?"

Fred puts his hairy paw on my leg. He wants another dog biscuit. I give him one to ease my conscience because tonight I skipped out on the evening walk. I was too tired after canning. Or probably just too lazy.

"Tomorrow, we'll go for a walk," I tell him.

He cocks his head. He knows the word, walk. I read somewhere that dogs have a vocabulary of fifty words or is it five hundred? I can't imagine Fred knowing five hundred words, but anything's possible.

"Biscuit?" He knows that word, for sure. "That's the last one you're getting tonight," I tell him.

I don't want him to gain weight because the vet says sixty-five pounds is just about right for his breed. Although strictly speaking he's a cross-breed. Part husky, part Alaskan malamute.

"Bed hog," I tell him.

We go through this every night. I shove him to the bottom of the bed. He never stays there. I wake up in the morning with his nose in my armpit.

I go to bed thinking about a young Emallen. Twenty-eight years old. No wrinkles. But she doesn't stay with me. The old Emallen keeps insisting that I put on my rubber boots when I work in the garden. And gloves, too. She tells me that if I don't mind working among the thorns, I can make roses that will be the envy of Melford's Annual Fall Fair. There's still time. But I'm not entering any flower arrangements in the fall fair, I tell her. Put them in mason jars, or old pottery, she says. The judges like that. Don't go for anything fancy. Just your basic yellow roses. The ones by the side of the house. I
tell her that. tomorrow, I have other things to do. Tomorrow, the yellow roses are ripe for picking. No. No more picking cherries or roses. No more canning. I tell her.
Chapter 2

First Meeting

It's been nine months without sex. I sip my tea and stare at the milk calendar with its recipe for cranberry muffins. Maybe I should be crossing these days off a calendar, or recording them. Happy faces for good days. X's for bad days. It worked for Emalene Gruhn. Only she didn't record her days of celibacy. She recorded the weather. Cold. Very cold. Windy and cold.

When I discovered the calendars tacked up in the wood shed, I thought I had a real find on my hands. In the dim light, I saw that every square of every month was covered with Mrs. Gruhn's handwriting. I thought the calendars would tell me a lot about her, but when I brought them into the sunlight, I found only pages of Cold, Colder, Coldest -- nothing but the weather recorded in each square. The calendars were from 1972-74. She could have recorded anything on them: Christmas dinner with her new neighbours, her first snow mobile ride, the day she got indoor plumbing. Anything but the weather. Cold, Colder, Coldest says just about as much as happy faces and X's.

Of course there isn't much room to write on a calendar, so maybe she kept a record somewhere else. And maybe she recorded the first day that I came to visit her. It was the afternoon that Ralph Sullivan and my brother, Matthew, went off on their dirt bikes and I couldn't go with them because I was too young, and would only get in the way. I told them I didn't want to go. I had other things to do. I stomped around the field beside our house ripping up daisies by their roots. These were wild daisies nourished by the septic tank with stems too tough to break.
I had a lot of energy and determination that hot afternoon as I made my fat bouquet of sewage daisies. So what if Ralph Sullivan was taking Matthew to a secret lake that nobody knew about but him. So what if Matthew was going to have an adventure without me. I'd have an adventure too. I'd go to Mrs. Gruhn's and give her these daisies. I'd go without Matthew or anybody. I'd go alone.

It was quiet at Mrs. Gruhn's house. She came to the door with her hair down. I'd never seen it down before. It was about the same length as mine, and stringy too, like mine. Only her strings were grey and mine were brown. She wiped her hands on the skirt of her apron. Her hands were stained red. I poked the bouquet toward her chest. "These are for you," I said. She didn't take them. She peered through her glasses at me. I thought she was trying to figure out who I was, so I told her.

"I'm Rosemary Hatch," I said.

"I know," she said. "Bring them inside." Then she turned around and I followed her through a hallway and into a sunny room with windows. She called it her front room. That was where she lived. It was kitchen, living room, and bedroom combined. I looked for something red and bloody on her kitchen counter to explain her stained hands. I thought maybe she was skinning a squirrel or a rabbit for supper. She was skinning beets. They were piled high in a bushel basket on the floor. There were jars of beets on the counter and a pot of boiling beets on the stove.

"Do you like beets?" she asked me, as she pulled down a green-painted vase for the flowers.

"I don't know," I said. These didn't look like any beets that I'd seen before. The kind that I knew were diced and came out of a can.

"Get a fork," she said motioning to a drawer behind me. It was an old drawer, and stiff. She didn't help me open it, just went about cutting the roots off the daisies and putting the flowers one at a time in the vase. She did it the right way, not shoving the
whole bundle in a jar and expecting it to look good, like some people did, but one at a
time with the tallest and biggest daisies in the centre and the smaller ones nodding
over the sides. I got the drawer open and picked out a thick, heavy fork. There were lots
of forks to choose from all jumbled in the drawer, not neatly arranged in a plastic con-
tainer like at home.

She took the fork from me, stabbed a piece of beet from one of the jars, and held
it out for me to take. She didn't care that it dripped red onto the floor. It wasn't the kind
of floor you had to care about. I took the beet from her and put the whole thing in my
mouth. It was bigger than it looked on the fork. I had a hard time getting it chewed
down, and it was a good thing that Mrs. Gruhn was cutting daisies and not noticing or
I might have choked on it and spit it up. And then she wouldn't have wanted me to
come back in her kitchen again. I told her I liked the beet, but I didn't know if I liked it
or not. I just knew that it was the right thing to say. I hung on to the fork so she
wouldn't give me another piece to eat.

But she seemed to have forgotten that I was there. She was humming over the
daisies. I sat down in a wooden rocker beside the oil stove, and began to rock. Mrs.
Gruhn had a creaky kind of hum that disappeared in the high notes. I knew the song
that she was humming. My grade four teacher, Mrs. Marten, said I had a good voice. I
started to sing the words, softly at first:

    Daisy, daisy, give me your answer do.
    I'm half crazy over the love of you
    It won't be a stylish marriage.
    I can't afford a carriage ...

    I guess I got carried away. My mother was always saying that I got carried away
when I sang because I wasn't soft. My father used to say, "Let her belt it, Cara. It'll do
her good." He liked to belt it out too.

    So, big crescendo --

    But you'll look sweet upon the seat
Of a bicycle built for twoooooo.

I was rocking ferociously when I hit the last note, quite carried away by the
music. Mrs. Gruhn turned around and looked me straight in the eye, and said,
"Asparagus."

She hadn't forgotten that I was there at all.

I stopped rocking, and followed her to the door and out into the garden. I didn't
know why she needed asparagus. Maybe for her dinner, I thought. The asparagus was
shoulder high with feathery branches and scales. Mrs. Gruhn snapped a few branches
off and we went back in the house. She pushed the greenery into the centre of the
daisies and poured a glass of water into the vase. She asked me to put the bouquet on
the table beside her bed. It looked beautiful on the dusty, red-brown table, next to the
old photograph.

"Is this your son?" I asked Mrs. Gruhn, pointing to a picture of a boy dressed in a
tight, Sunday suit. He was about my age. She had her back to me and she was wiping
down a jar of beets with a dish towel. She didn't answer my question. I knew that she
was hard of hearing and didn't hear everything I said that day.

At the end of my visit, she handed me a bottle of beets and said, "You pick out my
grapefruits."

I nodded.

"Thank-you," she said.

Fred's paw on my leg reminds me of my promise to take him for a walk this morn-
ing. I close the milk calendar and rouse myself from the breakfast table. I tell Fred to
get his leash, which hangs on a nail just beside the door. He comes back with it in his
mouth, his body wriggling with pleasure. I let him pull me out the door and down the
laneway without making him heel which pleases him tremendously. He pulls me all the
way to the end of the road, and right up to Larry Fitzpatrick, who is putting out his recycling box at the end of the laneway.

This is the first time I've come face to face with Larry. I've passed him a few times on the road, but I've never spoken to him. He has long, blond hair. He has a lot of soup cans in his recycling box. When I get to know him better, I'll ask him to set them aside for me. I'm always looking for soup cans to mix my paints in. My father told me that Fitzpatrick was an inventor and that he hated people, and that he bought the house on Currie Road to get away from people. But Larry seems friendly enough to me. He gives me the standard Melford greeting, "How are you now?"

I tell him I'm fine. Then Fred lifts his leg and pees on Larry's recycling box. I tell Larry that I'm sorry, and he shrugs his shoulders and says, "That's dogs for you." He has a dog too.

Driving to Owen Sound, I think about Larry Fitzpatrick. He must be forty-something. He must be one of those confirmed bachelors. I wonder how long it's been since he's had sex. When I get to Owen Sound Collision, Hank Carter meets me at the door. It's the first time I've seen him in many years. He's called me in this morning to do a striping job for him.

"How's your dad?" he asks. My father used to do a lot of work for Hank, lettering and striping cars. That was before the heart attack and the move to London.

"He's good," I answer.

Hank pounds his chest, "And the heart?" he asks.

"Still working," I tell him.

The car is a green Plymouth Sundance. They've replaced the rear fenders and repainted the trunk, so I have to take the striping around the back. There are two stripes. One grey. One red. Hank follows me as I walk around the car. I get the feeling
that he isn't exactly comfortable with a woman in his shop, but he's willing to give me a chance as a favour to my father.

"You've grown up some," he says to me.

I don't tell him that, to me, he seems to have shrunken over the years. The only thing that's still big about him, at least from what I can tell, is his voice.

"Nice paint," I say, turning my attention to the glossy rear end of the car. I crouch down on my knees to get a closer look, hoping that Hank will get the point and drift away.

He does, reluctantly. "I'll be over there," he says, "if you need me."

It's the preparation that takes time: the colour match and the taping. Looking in my box of paints, I guess fire-engine red. I dab a bit of paint on the existing stripe to make the match. It'll take about fifteen minutes for the test spots to dry and then I'll know what I'm working with. In the meantime, I tape. Starting from the driver's door, I wind the strand around the trunk and over to the passenger door, just underneath the moulding. It's all a matter of taping and painting between the lines. I don't do it free-hand. I don't know anyone who does.

I wonder if Larry hates women or just people in general? When I work, my mind wanders. It checks in with my hands once in a while to make sure that everything's going smoothly, but mostly it's free to roam. I keep getting hung up on Larry's hair. I wonder how long it took him to grow it? My hair is straight like Larry's. Maybe I should grow it one length and stick it back into a pony tail too. Which reminds me that I haven't put my hair up in hot rollers since I moved to the farmhouse. I'm starting to let some things go. But I'm not burrowing in the dirt, yet, like the woman in Surfacing.

That's Julie's worry. Julie's my best friend. She's also a potter, a freelance writer, and a waitress and she still has time to worry about me living alone on a dead end road
in the middle of nowhere. I told her that I had no intention of burying myself in the vegetable garden. As far as I knew, there was no vegetable garden.

The first week I was here, I sent her a post-card with a picture of Melford’s IGA on the front. On the back I wrote,

Doing fine. That’s a lie. I miss you. Fred has burs. When are you coming to visit? I have a full bottle of Scotch.

Julie came as soon as she could. She came with a polar bear head wrapped in newspaper. She’s been making heads in her pottery studio for about four months now: rhinos, elephants, and bears. My polar bear has a small stress crack in the back, so we made sure that when we put it on the wall, it was securely fastened.

She also brought me her latest published article which was about office furniture.

"Don’t hold your breath waiting for the exciting part," she said, as she tossed the magazine in my lap. "There’s only so much you can say about carpet tile and ergonomic chairs."

Julie’s just working her way into the writing field so she takes whatever writing job that she can get.

"And finally," she said, digging deep into her duffel bag, "The latest issue of Fireweed, lest you forget."

I told her that my feminism had never been more in the foreground.

She looked sceptical.

But it’s the truth. All my theories are being tested. I still don’t know, for example, what I should do about firewood. A feminist would cut her own wood, wouldn’t she? There’s one acre of property around my house (the rest of the land was severed off), but there’s no dead trees on it. Gerard must have cleaned them out long ago. So the question is, do I buy wood, split and delivered for $45 a cord, or do I pick it up and split it myself for $30 a cord, or should I ask Larry if I can go into his bush and cut down a few trees? If I cut my own, then I’ll have to buy a chain saw, which isn’t a bad idea, anyway.
But then there's the problem of getting the trees out of the bush once I've cut them down. Can't very well drive in there with my mini-van. And then there's also the complication of Larry. If I take a few trees from his fifty-acre bush, I'll owe him a favour, unless I pay him for the trees, and if I do that, I might as well just buy the wood in the first place. But I can't do that because if I was a true feminist, I'd cut my own wood. Besides only tourists buy firewood. People who live here, cut their own.

I paint with smooth brush strokes from left to right, laying down the grey line first. As I work, I hum. Julie tells me that I sound like a big bumblebee when I paint. I am taking the line around the trunk when I see a cover-all body walk toward the car. Surely, he's not going to work on the car while I'm painting it. The cover-all body reaches for something on the roof of the car. I stop him in mid-reach.

"Watch the paint," I warn. He's dangerously close to the grey stripe that I've just painted and which is still five hours from being dry enough to lean against. Although they're sure to take the heat gun to it after I leave, which means that it'll be dry in about three hours and they'll be able to get the car out of the shop sooner. Time is money.

"Oh," says Mr. Coverall, peering at his dark blue clothes for paint. "That was close," he says.

He waits until I've finished the red stripe, before he introduces himself to me as Jeff Carter. The owner's son. I tell him that I have to wipe my test spots off the car before they dry on there for good, but it's a pleasure meeting him. He hangs around waiting for the unveiling of the stripes.

I peel the tape off carefully, collecting it in a rag as I go. The striping looks good. No one will be able to tell where the factory lines end, and mine begin. The owner's son tells me that I did a pretty good job. He tells me that he knew my father, and it looks
like I'm following in his footsteps. I tell him that he seems to be following in his father's footsteps too.

I load my paints into the van and I write up a bill for $60 plus tax. That's less than I would have charged in Hamilton, but it may be on the high side for Owen Sound. Doesn't matter. I'm worth at least $40 an hour. I drop the bill into the office on the way out. The woman behind the counter takes it, nods to me, and continues her phone conversation. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. It'll be ready Wednesday," she says to the person on the other end of line.

With the striping job out of the way, I have the rest of the day to myself. When I get home, I kick my boots off by the door and I leave them right there because no one's going to fall over them, but myself. I put some water on the stove to boil for spaghetti, and open a book that I'm reading about the Bruce Peninsula. It's an old one that someone gave me years ago. I keep meaning to go into the Melford Public Library to get a better one, but in the meantime this will do. I'm reading this book because I want to know what life was like for Eammon when she was thirty-two and living in this house.

I don't find much about women in the book, but I do find the origins of my purple bottle -- the one that says Paterson's Lozenges on the side. Paterson's was a drug store in Melford. The book says that the store closed in 1968 after almost 100 years of service and three generations of Patersons. I think about all those Paterson hands dipping into the big bottle for lozenges. Hands dead and gone. I keep spaghetti in the bottle now. I dip my hand in and pull out a generous clump of pasta. Enough for me and a few strands for Fred. I twirl the noodles around the pot, watching them soften and slide to the bottom. I do it this way because my mother always did it this way. Maybe her mother too.

I read while I eat, trying not to splatter the pages of the book with spaghetti sauce. I learn that mixed farming was common around Melford in the 1920's and I am
reminded of Anna Wettlaufer’s letter to Emallen: How are the chickens and turkeys this year? How many cows, pigs and horses have you? Today, you’d be hard-pressed to find a Melford farmer with a turkey. Most of them are beef farmers. Not one or two cows, but two or three or four hundred. Mostly family operations.

I learn that farmhouses on the Bruce Peninsula were usually surrounded by large fruit orchards, and that the market for fruit was good up until the 1950’s. This explains why Emallen and Austin had so many cherry, apple and pear trees on their property. I wonder what they did with all the fruit when they couldn’t sell it anymore. Emallen must have fed it to the pigs or canned it. Probably both.

In 1936, there were 25 entries for home canning in the Melford Fall Fair. There were 76 flower arrangements and 43 baking entries. All those pies and peonies. Emallen must have won a lot of ribbons over the years. She was still going strong with flower arrangements when she was eighty. That was the year she combined yellow roses and fat yellow pears in a basket and won first prize.

I was eleven that fall, and I had an entry in the fair too. It was a tissue paper picture of the Little Mermaid, sitting on a rock. I made her in art class. I didn’t give her legs that shot pain through her body with every step she took. I gave her a strong fish tail of turquoise and green tissue, so she could escape the sea witch and the sailors. I hoped that she would win me a blue ribbon. She didn’t. She got honourable mention. The warty, orange pumpkin on the shelf below her got honourable mention too. I wasn’t too pleased. I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering among the baked goods, wondering what good was it. If you couldn’t even taste them? At least with the flowers, you could smell them.

I didn’t realize I had my nose in Mrs. Gruhn’s roses until a voice came up behind me and said, “Better watch out. There might be a bee in there.”
It was Mrs. Gruhn with rouge on her cheeks. "Those are mine," she said pointing to the arrangement.

Sure enough, the tag, said "GRUHN"

"You got first prize," I said, pointing to the ribbon.

She picked a pear out of the arrangement and gave it to me.

"Here," she said. "No sense wasting it."

It's Melford's 126th Annual Fall Fair this year. It's been twenty-one years since the mermaid picture, so I think it's about time I got back on the horse, so to speak. I've decided to enter a sketch in the fair. Something unique. Something that Melford won't forget for a while.
Chapter 3

Fortune Telling

I tell the librarian that I'm looking for information on Forbes Settlement. She says, "You're a Hatch, aren't you?"

I tell her that I'm Rosemary. She says, "Ah, yes, Rosemary" as if she knows something that I don't.

She knows that I bought the Gruhn place. She knows my mother. She knows the book that I need. _Green Meadows and Golden Sands_, she says, leading me back into the stacks. She puts her finger immediately on a fat white book and pulls it from the shelf. "This has a section on Forbes Settlement," she says.

The librarian's name is Eileen Hay. Eileen says it's lovely the way the Gruhn house has been restored. She and her husband took a drive out there, five, no six years ago when Gerard Baines (was it?) was working on the house.

"What a mess," she says. "But I'm sure it looks a lot better now."

I tell her it's quite liveable now that the bats and the rats have moved out. She smiles and says she knows all about the bats. Her friends used to own the big Craft Barn on Highway 6, and when Gerard Baines got the bats out of his house, they moved into the Craft Barn.

"It was a nightmare for them," she says. "All those knickknacks covered in bat droppings."

"I can imagine," I say.
She tells me that they did all kinds of things to get rid of the bats. Tried to smoke them out. Installed electronic devices. Then they sold the place, but it wasn't because of the bats. It was the recession. Not enough tourists buying moccasins.

I still have bats in my house, but only in the north attic, and only two hundred of them which is just about the right number to keep the mosquitoes under control. It's nothing like it was. Gerard Baines told me about the first time he went into the attic. All he saw were wall-to-wall eyes looking back at him.

"Beady, red eyes," he told me. "And mounds of bat shit. Two feet deep in spots."

He'd hired a young kid to clean the attic for him, but he didn't have the heart to send him up there after what he saw, so he went up himself and he shovelled the mess into garbage bags and handed down the bags to the kid below. Bag after bag of bat excrement. It was in the walls of the house too. It was what made the house smell so bad when Mrs. Gruhn owned it. I didn't know that as a kid. But I know it now. I know it because on a hot afternoon when I go upstairs in that far bedroom there's a little bit of that smell to remind me of those days. I use that bedroom for storage.

The librarian tells me that if I'm late bringing back the library books, I have to pay in nonperishable goods. She points to a box on the floor that says Salvation Army on the side. There are a few soup cans and boxes of pasta inside.

I leave the library with my books and a "Friends of the Library" flyer. It's raining, which is just what the weatherman said it was going to do. I pull my rain hood over my head and dash for the nearest store. I still have a few minutes until my appointment with the fortune teller. The bell jangles behind me and the man behind the counter says, "It's a wet one."

I agree with him. I pause at the cassette rack. I see a tape that I'd like to buy, but I can't figure out how to get it out of the rack. It's behind bars. I ask the owner of the store how to get the tape out and he comes over with a key.
"Have to lock them up," he says. "Things go missing if you don't."

"Times are changing," I tell him, pointing to the tape I want, Sarah McLachlan's *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy*.

"That they are," he says.

I pay for my chocolate bar and my new tape and head up the hill to my 5:15 p.m. appointment. It used to be a funeral parlour, but the large, white house by the main gates as you're heading into Melford is now a teahouse. There's no other customer in the place. A woman, probably the owner of the restaurant, leads me to a small table with dead roses in the centre. I mean, dried roses. She tells me that the fortune teller will be here in a few minutes and she asks if I would like a cup of tea. There is nothing that I would like better.

This is grandmother's house, I think, as I settle into my surroundings. A grapevine wreath over the fireplace, a framed picture of *The Blue Boy*, and lace tablecloths (under wipeable clear plastic). This Victorian decor doesn't fool me. I've read what life was like for women during this period. Tight corsets and a string of pearls around the neck and never say, boo. Nonetheless, I feel myself slipping into the comfortable folds of the illusion. It's hard to fight fairy lights and bunches of snap dragons and Mozart playing softly on the stereo.

If I had a pen, I would write Julie a letter while I wait, but I have no pen. I sip my tea, waiting for the fortune teller to arrive. She is advertised on the menu. Fortune teller -- six dollars with any main entre. I imagine a kerchief, hoop earrings, one gold tooth, but when she arrives she is wearing a rain slicker like mine, except hers has a red plaid lining. She shakes my hand. Her name is Yvonne and she has brown eyes and long brown hair clipped neatly in a barret. No hoop earrings. She takes a deck of cards from her pocket and shuffles them. They are everyday playing cards, not Tarot cards. Blue diamonds on the back. She shuffles and cuts the cards up and down and over, and
then she asks me to do the same. I don't talk to her. I don't want to give her any clues as to who I am and what I am all about. I want to know my future.

Yvonne takes two cards out of the deck and places them face up on the table. "These are the cards of the heart," she tells me. She shuffles the remainder of the deck and pulls cards out one by one until she has about twenty of them overlapping in an intricate pattern on the table. She is looking for love. I should tell her that I'm not interested in love, but I let her go ahead.

She says that she sees two men in my future. She says the two men will offer me something and that I must choose between the offers. One of the men makes a second offer, and that is the one I accept.

I have no idea what she's talking about.

After she has read the cards once and then twice, she asks me if I have any specific questions for her. She has spent half an hour with me already. I can't believe that six dollars is buying me so much good fortune. I ask her if Fred will live to an old age. I don't tell her that Fred is a dog. She shuffles the cards and pulls out a ten of hearts. She tells me that this is an excellent card. My dog, she says, should live a long and healthy life. It must have been the way I said, "Fred," that gave it away.

She asks me if I have another question. I ask her if she sees any prizes or money in my future. I'm thinking about Melford's Annual Fall Fair, but I don't tell her that. She says that she does see some money in my future and that it is connected to a man. She sees men everywhere in my cards. She must be mistaken. I give her six dollars and thank her for her time.

It has stopped raining and the air has that just-washed smell. Is there any truth in fortune telling? I wonder as I drive home. My grandmother was a fortune teller, only her medium was tea leaves not cards. She used to do it for fun until one day she found death in the bottom of Aunt Hazel's cup. What could she tell Aunt Hazel? She couldn't
very well tell her that Uncle James would die of a heart attack, fall down the stairs, and meet her glassy-eyed when she came in the door. Which is what she saw in the tea cup, and exactly what happened. After that, my grandmother said she wouldn't read any more tea leaves. She didn't want to have anything to do with it ever again.

I couldn't understand why. I was twelve and I wasn't afraid to see death in a tea cup. I asked my grandmother to show me how to read tea leaves. She thought I was a cheeky child, and not worthy of the knowledge, which by that time she felt was too dangerous anyway. I was persistent. I would peer into my tea cup, pretend I saw letters, and ask, "Does the letter M stand for man or mother?" And then my grandmother would throw me a withering look and say that I didn't even turn the cup upside down and around three times, so it didn't matter what I saw.

So I didn't learn all the magic, but I learned enough to tell Mrs. Gruhn's fortune one day when she was in bed with a cold, and I thought she could use some cheering up. I was supposed to be cleaning her kitchen at the time. My father sent me over because Mrs. Gruhn was sick and things were getting out of hand in her kitchen. He called her on the C.B. radio (she didn't have a telephone and neither did we) to let her know I was coming over to wash her dishes.

"See if you can throw a few things out, Rosemary," he said as I went out the door. "Margarine tubs, newspapers and milk cartons," he called after me.

I didn't knock because I didn't want Mrs. Gruhn to get out of bed, so I just opened the door and called in a small voice "Mrs. Gruhn, it's Rosemary. Mrs. Gruhn, I'm here." and I kept this up until I entered the front room. She was in bed under a crocheted heap of blankets.

She said, "Hello."

I said, "Hello."
I wasn't used to seeing her sick. I turned my back to her and picked up the nearest pot. Something crusted in the bottom. I filled it with water. There were pots and pie plates on the floor. I picked those up too, wondering if they were cat dishes and did she wash cat dishes with people dishes? Maybe she didn't have rules like that. I did the best I could with soap and water and an old dish towel, and Mrs. Gruhn's eyes staring at me. Only when I finally got the nerve to look over my shoulder, she wasn't staring at me at all. She was reading.

I went over to her and asked her for a broom. She told me to look behind the door, and then she asked me to put the kettle on for tea. She needed something to warm her bones, she said. I filled an old silver kettle with water and put it on the large burner. I swept the floor and put clean dishes in cupboards crammed with jellies and mixing bowls and jars of red sauce. Mrs. Gruhn's cupboards were not organized. I couldn't find tea bags anywhere.

"Right in front of your nose," said Mrs. Gruhn, reaching up past me to pull out a jar full of dark leaves. For an old, slow woman, she sure had a habit of sneaking up on people. She reached into the cupboard again and took out a small silver ball and chain. She put tea leaves in the ball and slipped the ball into the tea pot.

"Wrap the tea pot in a towel," she said on her way back to bed, "and bring it over."

As I poured the tea, bits of black leaves floated and swirled to the bottom of the cups. It was then that I saw the potential to tell Mrs. Gruhn's future in real tea leaves, not just the few specks I could squeeze out of an old tea bag.

"I can read tea cups," I told her.

"Can you?" she said.

"I need a saucer though," I said.

"You know where they are," she said.
Mrs. Gruhn handed me her cup. There was just a little bit of the tea with lots of leaves floating in it. I turned the cup upside down, and then around in three complete circles. I was careful not to grind the cup against the saucer too much because it looked like an old saucer, and it might be a valuable antique. You never knew in Mrs. Gruhn's house what you were dealing with. I flipped the cup over and looked into its depths.

There was a chain of leaves across the bottom of the cup. That meant a voyage.

"You are going on a voyage," I began. "But there is no suitcase in your voyage, which could mean that you're just going into Melford."

I thought that was pretty believable. I looked at Mrs. Gruhn and since she wasn't saying anything, I took that as a sign that I should continue.

"There's a shape like a hook in here." I showed it to her so she would see that I wasn't making it up.

"This could be a fish hook so it might be a warning not to eat fish," I told her.

"You could choke on a bone."

She nodded.

"I see a letter A," I said. "Someone you love has that initial in their name. I think it's a man," I said, making this part up just like I made up the other part up about the fish bone and the voyage.

"Tell me more about this man," she said.

She wanted more? By this time, my grandmother would have taken the cup away, and told me to find something to do with myself.

"He's going to contact you soon," I said. "He wants to tell you something."

"Then I'll wait for Andrew to tell me the news himself," said Mrs. Gruhn, closing her eyes.
I didn't know who Andrew was, but I agreed that would be best. After I'd cleared away the tea cups, Mrs. Gruhn told me to go over to her dresser and get the cookie tin. I thought she was going to give me a shortbread, but the tin was full of coins. She scooped out a handful and put them in my palm.

"This is for the cleaning and the fortune telling," she said.

I thanked her, slipped the coins in my pocket and left. They were old coins with kings on them. I showed them to Matthew, who showed them to my father, who promptly took them and put them in a safety deposit box. When I complained the next day about the disappearance of my coins, my mother took me into Melford and bought me Kidnapped by Robert Louis Stevenson. It was a hard-cover book with pictures and notes along the sides of the pages. In the excitement of learning Scottish phrases, like giering in the tow (which means snarling while being hanged) I promptly forgot about the coins.

I haven't given them a thought until now. I must find out what became of them. When I get home from my fortune telling experience, the light on my answering machine is blinking three times. The first message is from my father:

Rosemary, let me know how you made out with Hank Carter. Your mother says hello.

The second one is from Julie:

Two heads exploded in the kiln today, and my disposable diaper article was rejected by Hamilton Business Magazine. Guess it'll end up in the landfill site with all the diapers. Just called to complain. I miss you.

The third one's from Larry Fitzpatrick. He wants to know if I'm still looking for some firewood. He knows somebody who has some maple if I want it. Larry doesn't cut his own wood. He gets it from a friend. Barters for it. So I was wrong about that. Not everyone in Melford cuts his or her own wood.

After supper, I take Fred for a walk to the end of the road and up Larry's laneway. Larry tells me that the wood is only $22 a cord, but I have to pick it up at the bush. He
says my van will make it through Sam Walker’s field, no problem. Larry offers me some home-made beer, and I tell him, "Just a small glass," because I don’t want it to be another late night sitting on Larry’s porch. We’ve already done this about three times in the last week. Larry says I should enjoy these warm September evenings because they’re not going to last. I know he’s right.

I ask Larry how old he is. He tells me he’s forty-two, going to be forty-three in another month. He tells me that he’s broken almost every bone in his body. Cracked his skull in a motorcycle accident, broke his hand on his sister’s head, and tore the cartilage in his knee. I tell him I have no stories about broken bones, but once I sprained my finger playing volleyball. He doesn’t look impressed. He asks me if I want more beer. He pours the amber liquid slowly into my glass so that I don’t get any sediment. He prides himself on his technique.

I ask Larry how his fan is going. He says he doesn’t want to talk about it. Then he talks about it. He’s redesigning the propeller. Actually, he’s going back to the original design which the manufacturer asked him to change. The fan is an invention which is going to take Larry into a higher tax bracket. He hopes. I’ve stuck my finger in Larry’s fan and it’s as safe as he says it is. Doesn’t break any bones. Doesn’t even break the skin.

He asks me about my day and I tell him about the latest sign I’m doing which happens to be one for Burns Plumbing in Melford:

"Unclogging toilets since 1926 -- Burns Plumbing"

Brian Burns wants me to draw him a groundhog coming out of a toilet waving a plunger. Melford is famous for its groundhog and its groundhog festival on February 2, so everyone wants to incorporate the little beast in their business signs.

Larry shakes his head and rolls another cigarette. "No accounting for taste," he says.
There's a pause in the conversation so I figure it's a good time to ask Larry something that's been on my mind all evening. I ask him if he's ever done any nude modelling. He says that he hasn't. I ask him if he would do some nude modelling for me. I tell him about the sketch I've got in mind. He tells me that in his forty-two years, women have asked him to do lots of things, but no one's ever asked him to lie naked with a pumpkin under his arm.

I think he's pleased.

Larry smokes filtered cigarettes. That is, he smokes his cigarette through a plastic cigar filter. I thought it was because he didn't like getting tobacco in his mouth, but he says it's for health reasons. He has to replace his filters regularly because they melt. Larry tells me that he doesn't think he can lie in one position for very long. I hadn't thought about that. I hadn't thought about Larry's inability to sit still for more than two seconds.

I tell him that he can take as many breaks as he likes and that I'll put him on a patchwork quilt so he won't get splinters in his butt. I warn him that if the sketch turns out as good as I hope it will, I'm going to enter it in Melford's Fall Fair.

"Whatever," he says.

Larry likes the idea of mooning Melford.

It's after midnight when Fred and I leave Larry's porch for the walk home. My head is buzzing with home-made beer because I keep forgetting how potent it is. It probably gave me the courage to ask Larry to pose, but now I'm wondering what I've done, which is always the way. He's coming over on Sunday and that means there's still time to get out of it. I should buy some beer in case Larry feels shy and needs something to fortify himself. I've still got some Scotch in the cupboard.

About halfway home, with the darkness closing all around me, I start to doubt my judgement. It's all very well to ask a man to pose naked for you in the daylight when it
seems under the guise of art to be a reasonable request, but it's another thing to think about it after midnight on a dark, country road. For all I know, Larry could be a rapist hiding out in the backwoods of Melford, and now I've invited him to get naked in my studio.

No, he's not a rapist. He's a man who likes his solitude. And when he wants to let the world in, he talks to people on his computer. Hooks up with a local board and talks physics with a teacher in Toronto or argues about religion with someone in Owen Sound. Larry doesn't hate people. He just likes them in small doses. Who doesn't?

I can just imagine what my ex-husband, Henry, would say if he knew what I was doing. He'd most likely tell me to use my head and remind me of the nice old man behind the art gallery.

That was the first year Henry and I were married. It was a hot afternoon and I was sitting on the steps of the Hamilton Art Gallery waiting for Henry to come out of the exhibition. I'd seen enough of pig guts and cow intestines for one afternoon. There were other people sitting on the steps too. There was an old man licking an ice cream cone. When he was finished his ice cream, he struck up a conversation with me, and told me about the sculptures behind the gallery. Had I ever seen them? No. I hadn't. Would I like to see them? What the hell. So I followed him behind the bushes. And of course there were no sculptures, just a man's hands sticky with ice cream.

So now I'm hearing Henry's voice again asking me, "What were you thinking?"
But this time he's talking about Larry.

"Do you think this guy is going to come into your house, take off his clothes, and then go away when you're finished with him?"

Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know.

I must be going crazy like Julie said I would. I'm arguing with Henry and he's not even here.
Maybe I'm the one leading Larry behind the bushes. Maybe I should just stick to my farmhouse and not drink any more of Larry's home-made beer. I definitely shouldn't think about Larry's hair, wet from the shower, and how he shook it out of its pony tail in the warm evening air.
Jimmy Leedale was born in a pumpkin patch. Not really, but that's what the kids used to say at Melford Public School. Jimmy's father was Ed Leedale who owned Leedale's Vegetable Farm on Highway 6. Jimmy's father raised competitive vegetables, as well as the usual table variety. His Atlantic Giant pumpkins, weighing over 500 pounds, earned him the title of Pumpkin King of the Bruce Peninsula. It was all right to have a pumpkin king for a father in grade one and two. And even in grade three it was bearable because Jimmy's father donated his prize pumpkin to the school and the art class carved it into a 600 pound jack o' lantern and it made the front page of The Melford News. But by grade four, Jimmy didn't want to have anything to do with pumpkins. And by grade seven, no one dared to call him by his old nickname, Pumpkin Face, because Jimmy was good with his fists.

I saw Ed Leedale yesterday and I asked him about his son, and he said that Jimmy's doing fine. Just bought a big house in Newmarket. Him and his wife have a baby girl. Him and his wife both work for IBM. So it wasn't true what we used to chant at him from the safety of the school bus: "Pumpkin Eater -- had a wife and couldn't keep her."

Ed Leedale is still a member of the World Pumpkin Confederation, and this year he thinks he might have the Big One growing in his pumpkin patch. Not just a local fall fair winner, mind you, but the largest pumpkin in the world. The prize is a new GMC truck. There's still a couple weeks to go until the World Pumpkinfoest Confeder
Weigh-Off in Port Elgin, but Ed said that if she keeps putting on weight like she’s been doing, (10-15 pounds a night) she should tip the scales at 800 pounds, minimum. Of course, if she’s splits in the pumpkin patch, she won’t be good for anything but pig slop, so Ed’s got two other pumpkins on the go. Not as big as her, but they’ll do in a pinch.

I wanted to take a peek at Ed’s Atlantic Giants, but he wouldn’t show them to me. He never shows them to anyone until after the competition is over. In fact, he keeps them hidden on his 100 acre farm. Vandals. Competitors. Spies. You can never be too careful. I told Ed about my project for the Melford Fall Fair. I told him that I needed a good-sized pumpkin for the sketch I was doing. A fat, round one. Not one of those skinny, oblong one’s. I told him that I wanted it fresh off the vine. I didn’t want one that had been sitting on the flat bed for a week in the hot sun. He told me that none of his vegetables sit in the hot sun, although a little sun doesn’t hurt a pumpkin, he added. We went into the patch together and Ed pointed out a few specimens.

Perfect, except for a flat spot. Too skinny. Not big enough. Too big. And then I found the one. I knew it was the one even before I bent down to examine it.

"Kind of jumps out at you, doesn’t it?" said Ed, cutting the pumpkin from the vine.

You can tell a lot about a person from the way they pick out a pumpkin, Ed says. There’s people who venture into the patch and people who don’t. Ed says I’m the kind of person who doesn’t mind getting my hands dirty.

"And my shirt," I said, looking down at the brown smear left by the perfect pumpkin.

I loaded it into my trunk, wrapped a protective blanket around it, and paid the Pumpkin King seven dollars.
It's a big pumpkin for seven dollars and strong too. Larry's been leaning on it, off and on, for two hours now. At first he said it was cold under his armpit, but I think that was only to break the ice which got broken very soon. Just as soon as Larry shed his boxer shorts. Larry has a small pot belly from drinking beer, but other than that there's no fat on him. He's not my favourite type, to draw anyway. I like fat women the most, but I figure there's enough sketches and sculptures and paintings of nude, fat women already.

Larry wears my bathrobe during his breaks. He looks remarkably comfortable in it. Colourful too. Red poppies on a black background does wonders for his pale complexion, I tell him. He crosses one leg delicately over the other, making sure the robe doesn't slip open in the process. When he's lying on the quilt, and I'm at the easel, he doesn't mind what I see, but when he's sitting next to me with a cigarette dangling out of his lips, he keeps it all under cover. I'm relieved. Not that I'm a prude or anything. I just want to keep my professional distance.

Larry tells me that he likes the sketch, but he accuses me of making his body too pretty. He asks me why I haven't drawn his varicose veins. I tell him that I'm getting to them. He asks me why I picked him to be in the sketch. Was it because he was convenient or cheap or because I wanted to see him naked?

Maybe he just jumped out at me, like the pumpkin. I tell him, as he sheds his robe and takes his position on the quilt again.

I have all kinds of reasons for wanting a man's body in my sketch, but I don't know why I picked Larry. Convenience, I suppose. And yet there's something about Larry's body that says everything that I want to say in this drawing. It's not a beautiful body and that's important. It's not beauty that I'm getting at. I suppose I want to turn something upside down. Something that has to do with Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater
had a wife and couldn't keep her. Something that has to do with symbols of fertility and Pumpkin Kings. Peter. Peter must have put his wife in a hollowed out Atlantic Giant.

Of course, it could all be a joke. Just a funny picture of a naked man with a pumpkin under his arm pit.

I could spend more time on the sketch, but I sense that Larry's had just about all that he can take, so I tell him that it's over and he can put his clothes on if he likes. He tells me that I sound like his doctor. Very professional. If I was a doctor I'd leave the room, but instead I watch him pull on his jeans and do up his zipper.

After Larry leaves, I examine the sketch. I look at it from different angles. I hold it at arm's length. I think it's not bad, but I wish Julie was here to see it. Not that I want her criticism. I just want her to look at it and share it with me. It's times like this when I miss her the most. So instead of missing her and standing here like a fool, I put the sketch back on the easel and go into the kitchen. I pick up the phone, telling myself that I'll only talk to her for a few minutes because my phone bill is already too high. The clock says 5:26 p.m. I give myself fifteen minutes of Julie. A quick fix.

Julie is being sued for libel. She tells me this as soon as she realizes it's me on the phone. She says that she was just about to call me and that her writing career is over and she feels awful. So awful. And then the tears come. I hear them in her voice. She made an awful mistake. But how was she to know that Phil didn't know what he was talking about? He was her source and she trusted him.

I sit down, put my feet up, and even though I know I'll have to pay for it later, I tell Julie to give it to me slowly. Start at the beginning.

She wrote an article about flea markets and antique sales. Do I remember it? Yes, I remember. I thought it was good. It made me want to go to a flea market, which is what Julie and I did about two weeks after the story was printed in The Burlington Weekly. We went to Creek's Flea Market, paid our quarter entry fee, and entered the big
barn, the one with all the good stuff that Julie had written about in her article, and that's where we saw a young couple buying a table that had been sawn right down the middle.

"All it needs is a little glue," said the vendor, holding the two pieces together, "and it'll be as good as new."

"The gall of that guy," I said, walking away in disbelief.

"You got to hand it to him, though" said Julie.

Julie's article was funny and interesting, and probably boosted attendance at local flea markets and antique sales. And that's what I tell her, but she moans and says, "The stuff on the flea markets was okay, but it's what I wrote about Brady's Antique Sale. I said there was a pre-sale, and that's where the good deals are, and that's where the vendors pick up a lot of their stuff."

"Which is true, isn't it?" I ask.

"The guy from Brady's said there was no pre-sale and there never has been, but I'm sure Phil said there was a pre-sale."

Phil is nowhere to be found for verification. Julie's editor is livid. Didn't she check her facts? Didn't she verify her sources? Brady's Antiques is threatening to sue the paper and sue Julie. Does she have a lawyer? her editor asked. She'd better get a lawyer.

I tell Julie that mistakes happen, but maybe it wasn't a mistake and there really was a pre-sale, except nobody was supposed to know about it. And then Julie writes her fluff piece, and along with the prattle on salt and pepper shakers, she just happens to mention the fact that often there's a pre-sale before a big antique sale. So maybe all the deals get snatched up by the vendors before the public has a chance to get to them. And maybe the young couple who buys a table is paying more than they should for it. (Especially if it's a table that's been sawn in two.)
Julie says dramatically, "I'll never work in this town again."

"Maybe you need to get out of this town for a while," I tell her. "Until things cool down."

"Why are we talking like gangsters?" she asks.

I convince her to come to Melford. I promise her a retreat. Paradise. I tell her I have lots of firewood for her stack, and the laneway needs a fresh load of gravel, and if she'd like to help me rake it, that would be fine too.

"Sounds fun," she says.

For fun, I promise to take her to Melford's 126th Annual Fall Fair.

I tell her about my sketch, and she wants to know all about Larry's body. Have we had sex yet?

I tell her I'm after a blue ribbon, not sex.

"I'm sure you'll get it," she says.

It's hard to hang up the phone. Julie and I finally do it after saying goodbye three times. I take down the calendar and write Julie's visit on it in green magic marker.

Three weeks is not so long, I tell myself.

My ex-husband thought Julie was another man. He thought I was having an affair. One day he came storming into the house, demanding to know whom I was seeing. I never listened to this music before, he said, throwing a tape at my feet. I never wore tight leggings. I never went to movies on Sunday night. So who was he?

"She," I said. "Julie, you know, the one I told you about?"

I met Julie at Dundas Art School. I told her I liked her bowls. She said they were shit, but thanks anyway. She said that my sketches were uninhibited. And one thing led to another.

One day, after I got off the phone with Julie, Henry asked me what was so funny?

I said, "I don't remember laughing."
He said that I laughed the whole time I was on the phone, and when I wasn’t
laughing I was squealing. He said it sounded like I was having an orgasm right there on
the couch.

That made me laugh.

The next day Henry said, "You’re not turning into a lesbian on me, are you?"
I asked him, "What's your definition of lesbian?"
"Two women screwing," he said.
"I don't think I fit your definition," I said.

Henry again. I'd like to keep him out of my head, but he creeps in.

I get out my Emalien box. I'm looking for something. Something that tells me how
she got through the loneliness of living out here by herself. Because I'm not doing so
well with the loneliness and I want to. I want to find whatever it was that got her
through the days without seeing anyone. Without needing anyone. I want to be as
strong as the old woman in this photograph who sold her furniture to buy oil so she
could stay one more winter.

My father said that every time Andrew Wettlaufer came to visit his Aunt Emalien,
he took another piece of furniture with him. The settee that used to be in the parlour.
The oil lamp, the really nice one that was hand-painted and used to hang over the oak
table.

The oak table.

He'd visit Mrs. Gruhn once or twice a year and when he left, there was always a
space where something had been. Something that you'd gotten used to seeing around
the place, like the big maple syrup kettle that was on the porch for the longest time and
then one day, wasn't. She would have had a lot of spaces and gaps where things had
been, except that she filled them with junk almost immediately. Bushel baskets where
the kettle used to sit, plastic juice containers where the hall seat used to stand, and a
growing stack of kleenex boxes that had been there forever, so who knows what used to
be along that wall.

Andrew always gave her money, though. For her things. The cheques came one or
two or three months after the furniture disappeared. They came in slim envelopes with
no letters attached. I know this because I used to pick up Mrs. Gruhn’s mail on my way
home from school and once in a while there’d be an envelope with a Kitchener address,
which was where the nephew lived. And I’d hold the envelope up to the sunlight, and
see that there was no letter in it, just a cheque for Emaileen Gruhn from Andrew Wet-
tlaufer. The largest cheque I remember was for one hundred dollars, which seemed like
a lot of money at the time.

What she did with the money was anyone’s guess. She probably paid her taxes
with it, or bought her winter’s supply of oil. So it was a good thing that Andrew sold the
antiques for her because it meant that Emaileen could live in the house one more
winter. Andrew made his visits in the summer when the roses were in bloom. I don’t
know that for sure, but I’m looking at a photograph of Emaileen and Andrew and there’s
red roses behind them. Emaileen looks happy in this photo. Jaunty in her black bonnet,
and her long, red skirt.

Wonder what went missing that day.

Casey Midge told our grade seven class that it was not a good idea to donate or-
gans. Casey Midge was Melford’s one and only funeral director. He was a tall man with
white teeth which were false, but we didn’t know that at the time. Casey Midge came
into our classroom on Career Day, smiling and talking with a soft voice and sitting
down, but first giving his pant leg a little jer. We were all ready for the funeral director
to tell us about dead bodies and washing people’s hair and doing their make-up, but he
talked about the importance of preplanning which didn’t mean diddley squat to us.
He also advised the class against organ donation because it made such a mess of the corpses, and it was hard on the family members to see their loved ones all chopped up.

"Not even eyes?" asked Colin Baker. His father was a doctor at the Melford Hospital.

"How are you going to see in heaven without your eyes?" Joked Mr. Midge.

My father said that it was Casey Midge who stole Mrs. Gruhn's organ. The funeral director must have given her the same spiel that he gave our grade seven class. All about paying ahead and saving loved ones the trouble, and buying a sturdy coffin because you wouldn't want an old pine box that rots in the ground as soon as you put it there. What Mr. Midge didn't tell us, and what he must have told Mrs. Gruhn, was that he liked antiques and that he would be happy to take her pump organ in payment for the funeral expenses. Mrs. Gruhn and Casey Midge went to the same church. Perhaps they made the deal there.

Mrs. Gruhn belonged to the Lutheran Church in Melford. She didn't go often because she didn't have any way of getting there. My father took her into town for groceries and doctor's appointments, but she was on her own when it came to Sunday service. My family didn't believe in church. Except on Christmas Eve, and that's when we all went: Mrs. Gruhn, Matthew, my mother and father, and me. We didn't do it for Mrs. Gruhn, although that would have been the Christian thing to do. We attended the Lutheran Candlelight Service because my father liked to sing carols. He liked to belt them out. He said Christmas wasn't Christmas without the music. But my mother said it was a nuisance going out on Christmas Eve when there was still so much work to be done at home.

If this was church, I couldn't figure out why we didn't go more often. Everything had a shine to it. Heads, boots, the gold corsage that trembled on Mrs. Gruhn's coat.
Everyone was talking. Turkeys, snow, did you get all your shopping done? And the best part. The singing. The whole congregation stood up in a rush and lifted voices that creaked or boomed or soared to the rafters. Mrs. Gruhn gave her all, and I went off-key just standing beside her. Matthew elbowed me to let me know I was singing flat, so I tried to listen to him instead of her. And then the minister asked us all to join hands and I put mine into Mrs. Gruhn’s knuckly one, but soft because she didn’t wear any rings. And we sang, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to end the evening. Only I wished it wasn’t over so soon. To which my mother said, "People have to get home."

I was surprised one Christmas Eve when my mother got out of the car at Mrs. Gruhn’s farmhouse, telling Matthew and I to do the same. Surprised when she took Mrs. Gruhn’s arm and helped her up the porch steps and into the kitchen. My mother never went into Mrs. Gruhn’s kitchen. She didn’t like the way the house smelled. But on this Christmas Eve, she braved the smell to take part in the surprise.

My father told us all to wait in the kitchen. He’d be right back. So we did as we were told and not even Matthew knew why we were standing in Mrs. Gruhn’s kitchen when there was still so much work to be done at home. I thought my father was getting the usual crate of tangerines out of the trunk. That’s what we gave Mrs. Gruhn last Christmas and the Christmas before that. Mrs. Gruhn must have been expecting tangerines too because she didn’t look too excited until my father walked in the door with a bushy pine tree, hollering "Merry Christmas," and then she smiled one of her rare smiles so I knew she was really happy about the tree. Except she didn’t want it to go in the front room. Too close to the stove. She told my father to put it in the parlour.

Matthew and I looked at each other. We didn’t know there was a parlour. We followed Mrs. Gruhn through a door, and through another door and into a room that was dark with red curtains on the window. It was full of furniture stacked high with newspapers. It didn’t look like anyone had sat in this parlour for years. There wasn’t
much space in the room for a tree except over by the window, so that's where my father put it. Then, he went back outside to get the second half of Mrs. Gruhn's surprise.

While he was gone, Mrs. Gruhn and my mother cleared a path to an old cedar chest that Mrs. Gruhn was sure held some Christmas ornaments.

Out of the cedar chest came packages of lead tinsel, heavy glass balls and homemade paper chains. We were in the middle of unpacking them when we heard my father's voice from the kitchen. He was coming in. Mrs. Gruhn should close her eyes. Keep them closed. Keep them closed.

He put the surprise at her feet.

She looked at the surprise. Then she looked at my father and said, "There's a toilet in my parlour."

"Not just a toilet," said my father, "but the beginnings of a bathroom."

He and Spencer White would get the room ready over the winter. Do the plumbing and the drywall, put some tiles on the floor, and then in the spring they'd bring in Al Fenwick to dig the septic system, and for sure by June, my father promised. Mrs. Gruhn wouldn't have to use the outhouse any more.

"The outhouse is not so bad in June," said Mrs. Gruhn.

She had a lot of questions about the new bathroom. She was not as excited about the idea as my father was. Wouldn't it cost a lot for a septic system? Where would the new bathroom go? She didn't have an empty room in the house. She didn't know where she would put a toilet, a wash basin and a bathtub.

"This room would make a good bathroom," said my mother.

Mrs. Gruhn looked horrified. "This is my parlour," she said.

My father was convinced that the bathroom was a good idea. That it would make Mrs. Gruhn's life easier, especially in the winter. She seemed to agree with him on this point, but she completely ignored my mother's comment about how nice it would be to
take a bath once in a while. Eventually, Mrs. Gruhn thanked my father for the toilet, and it was put under the Christmas tree for the time being.

The tree had to be tied to a bookcase on one side and a table on the other before Mrs. Gruhn would hang an ornament on it. She didn't want the tree to fall and the ornaments to smash. The balls were over a hundred years old, she pointed out. They came from Germany. They used to belong to her grandmother.

She hung cardboard bells with the same care that she hung fragile glass balls. We did the same.

We didn't know there was an organ in the room until after the tree was dressed in its paper and gold finery and Mrs. Gruhn said that she would play the organ if someone would pump it for her. The organ was over by the door, under a heavy, brown blanket. Mrs. Gruhn sat on a stool. Matthew and I knelt at her feet. We pumped while she played. We didn't know that Mrs. Gruhn could play the organ. It was a night of surprises. She sang in German, "O Tannenbaum," and we sang in English, "How lovely are your branches" until our arms ached and we couldn't pump any more.

It was probably the last time she played the organ because in the spring, it was gone. It must have left a gap, but not for long, because the new toilet took its place. It was decided, after all, that the parlour was the best place for the new bathroom. My bathroom now.

Before I go to bed, I take my guitar out of its case, tune it with my electronic tuner, and play my C and D chords. That's all I know. Henry gave me the guitar for my twenty-fifth birthday. I took a few lessons, but I never learned to play it. I wouldn't want to sell it, though. There'd be a gap in my life, if I did that.
Chapter 5

It's been five months since Larry had sex. The last woman was Irene. He met her at a party. He woke up in the morning with her legs wrapped around him. That relationship was a purely physical one, says Larry. It lasted three months. Most of Larry's relationships last three months, he says. After that something happens.

"What happens?" I ask him.

He shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know," he says.

I'm not surprised that Larry and I are talking about sex on Larry's porch late at night. It's part of a larger topic. My favourite topic. How to live alone. How to go without sex and stimulating conversation. Although I have to admit that since I met Larry, I haven't had to go without conversation. Larry will talk about anything after dark, especially after four glasses of beer. He tells me that in the winter he can go three or four weeks without seeing a soul. Doesn't bother him at all. He's got Jake. He slaps the dog's ribs and a cloud of dust rises out of Jake's fur.

"I won't go without seeing anyone for three or four weeks," I tell him.

If it comes to that, I'll drive to Hamilton and stay with Julie rather than go crazy in my farmhouse. Larry tells me that it takes some getting used to, but he doesn't go crazy when he's by himself.

"You've been living alone for how long?" he asks.

"Almost four months," I tell him.
He laughs. He’s been living alone now for ten years so four months doesn’t seem like a big deal to him.

"Living alone, by choice?" I ask him.

"I don’t know if it’s by choice," he says. "but with my three-month track record, I don’t expect that anything’s going to change."

Larry says that he can go for long periods of time without sex, although he doesn’t have to. For some reason, women like him, he says. Married women, especially. He says that when you get to be forty-three, most of the women you meet are married. It’s rare to find a woman who is thirty-two and unattached.

He means me.


"I am not a wheel in search of a bike," I tell Larry.

"No," he says. "I can see that."

Larry and I sit for a few minutes in silence, staring at the night sky. The moon is almost full.

Larry says, "One small step for man. One giant leap for mankind. He screwed up his line, didn’t you know that?"

"No," I answer.

"It was supposed to be ‘One small step for a man’ not ‘One small step for man,'" says Larry.

Neil Armstrong must have been nervous about being the first man on the moon. I guess I’d be nervous too if 500 million people were watching me.

Larry and I do that, "Where were you when the Eagle landed?" routine. Larry remembers that night like it was yesterday. He was with his grandfather. Just the two
of them sitting on the rocks at Tobermory. Listening to the sound of the waves. Larry was stoned on acid.

"And you were with your grandfather?" I ask him.

"Uh-huh," he says.

Larry would have been seventeen or eighteen.

"Eighteen," he says.

And I would have been six or seven?

"Seven," I say.

And I wasn't under the stars that night. More likely, in bed with my stuffed rabbit, I tell him.

"Uh-huh," says Larry.

I tell Larry that I have to go, but I'll see him tomorrow afternoon if he still wants to go to the fair with Julie and me.

"See ya then," he says.

I know that he'll stay up for a couple of hours longer, even though it's almost one o'clock in the morning. Larry's a night owl. Larry and I are both night owls.

Larry's naked butt is right next to a drawing of a sad-eyed golden retriever. The judges have given my sketch a second prize, and the golden retriever, honourable mention. They've awarded first prize to a still life -- a slice of bread, a piece of cheddar cheese and a blue and white coffee mug. Everyone says the cheese in the painting looks like real cheese. One woman says, "I have a coffee mug just like that." Everyone agrees that the first prize painting is just like a photograph.

They like my sketch too. I feign interest in a hand-carved duck on a nearby table so I can listen to their comments. They think the pumpkin looks just like a real pumpkin. They wonder if it's one of Ed's pumpkins. Shame about Ed's pumpkin. He
really thought he was going to win this year. But with that kind of weight gain (Ed said
she was putting on twenty pounds a night in the end) no wonder the thing exploded.

"Who do you think the girl in the sketch is?" one woman asks.

She thinks Larry is a girl. She's not the only one. It's the pony tail, I guess. And
the slim hips. She thinks pony tails and slim hips belong to girls. Look closer, I want to
tell her. Look at the varicose veins. You don't see many young girls with varicose veins.
And what about that mangled left leg? If that isn't the leg of a man who road his motor-
cycle into a guard rail, I don't know what is. But the woman doesn't look that closely.
She sees a young girl leaning on a pumpkin. Her husband says the buttocks should be
bigger. I should have swelled them out a bit like the sides of the pumpkin.

Julie comes up behind me, and says, "I thought we'd find you here." She and
Larry have sausage-in-a-bun and sauerkraut, and a hotdog for me because Julie knows
I can't stomach tiny bits of sausage gristle. I don't tell her that I haven't eaten any hot-
dogs since the report came out. If you eat twelve hotdogs a year, you'll get cancer. Or
was it twelve hotdogs a month? Julie looks very beautiful today. She is paler than
usual because she didn't have time to get her eyelashes tinted before she came up. She
usually gets them tinted black so she doesn't look like a ghost with her long white curls
and her white eyebrows. I don't think she looks like a ghost, but then, what do I know?

I'm losing touch with how people are supposed to look and what's fashionable. I
wear my jeans every day. I walk in the house with my work boots on. Julie says I look
rustic. This morning she asked me if I still shave my legs. "Sometimes," I said, "when I
know I'm having company." She asked me whether I'd had any company lately. She
meant Larry. I chucked a pillow at her head.

She has decided that Larry must be good in bed because he's an inventor. She
says that anyone who's interested in alternate energy sources, must be interested in al-
ternate sources of pleasure. Julie has lots of wild theories. She thinks, for example,
that male hotdog vendors who sell twelve inch hot dogs are overcompensating for being poorly endowed.

Julie asks me how my hotdog is. I tell her it's a bit overcooked.

She tells me she bought it from a Woman Aglow.

"A what?" I ask.

"From the Women Aglow Booth," she says, pointing to the back of the arena.

We walk by the booth on our way out. The women are aglow with Jesus and pro-life. There's a banner over the booth that says in big purple letters: "JESUS IS LORD OF MELFORD." And underneath the banner, there's a smaller sign that reads, "Hotdogs -- $1.00." There are four women working behind the booth. Three of them are pregnant. They hand out pro-life pamphlets with every hotdog.

"They're looking for new members," says Julie. "I've got the pamphlet. If you want to take a look."

She knows that I'm not interested, but she wants to see if Larry has anything to say on the subject.

"At least they offer a choice of relishes," he says.

We sit in Blue Water Park eating our carcinogenic food and enjoying the view of the bay. Julie's happy because she's not being sued for libel any more. I'm happy because Julie is staying with me for three days, and because I have enough sign work to keep me busy for the rest of October. Bill Stead wants me to do a couple of signs for his hotel and they're good for a couple hundred bucks a piece.

I don't know if Larry is happy. With Larry it's hard to tell. He looks at everything through dark glasses. Some days he wears two pairs: sunglasses over his tinted eyeglasses. Larry's eyes are sensitive because when he was a kid, he had snow blindness. He said it was a stupid thing, really. He was out snow shoeing. Didn't know enough to
come in out of the sun. Went blind for three days. Learned his lesson. Moonshine, sunshine. It doesn't matter, the glasses don't come off.

"Ever?" I asked him.

"Except in bed," he said.

Larry wants to be buried with his sunglasses on. Figures he might need them where he's going. Har. Har. Larry doesn't laugh easily. He says "har, har" instead of laughing. He says laughter is an extreme emotion, like crying, and that he isn't very good at either one.

Julie and I laugh a lot. We laugh at Larry's fear of bees. Julie tells him he looks like a marionette the way he's lifting his legs and arms and looking behind him for the bee. He tells us that he's allergic and if he gets stung by a bee, he will die in less than thirty seconds. Why do we laugh? Because he's so dead serious he makes us laugh.

After the bee incident, we agree that we've seen enough. Enough quilts and horses and cows for one day. We find Larry's pick-up truck sandwiched between a horse trailer and a van. We squeeze inside. Larry, then Julie, then me. On the way home, Julie tells us about her attempts with raku finishes. She tells us that she almost lit the art school on fire the other day. The newspapers were blazing, she had smoke in her eyes, and a hot rhino head in her hands. It was all she could do to go through with it.

I close my eyes. I listen to the sound of Julie's voice. Soft as rain water. I think there's no other voice like it. Julie was my haven when things started to go wrong with Henry. When I needed a place to go and someone to talk to, I went to Julie's apartment. I had my own chair. It was wicker and made anguished creaks every time I moved. We used to read to each other from fat anthologies or slim literary magazines. Julie would sit cross-legged on the futon, usually with a blanket wrapped around her legs because she always felt the cold, even with the base board heaters cranked on High. And we would read until our voices grew husky with the effort.
We say good-bye to Larry. Was he disappointed that I turned down his offer to make dinner? Julie says that he was. Julie says that Larry is handsome.

"Go for it," I tell her.

She laughs.

She says that she's not sorry that it's only going to be the two of us tonight, like old times at the apartment.

"How is the apartment?" I ask her.

She says that it's cramped and stuffy, and these days it smells like cinnamon, which is a big improvement over garlic powder. Julie's apartment is on top of a spice store.

"And my wicker chair, is it empty?" I ask her.

"Quite empty," she says.

We talk around our love for each other. We don't know any other way. Sometimes Julie squeezes my arm when she talks to me and sometimes when we're watching movies together, I run my fingers through her hair. I'm not very good at it. Sometimes my fingers get tangled. Julie doesn't say anything. She doesn't tell me that it feels good when I touch her hair. She doesn't tell me to stop, either.

After dinner we hug coffee mugs and catch up on each other's lives. Julie is fed up with waitressing and freelance writing. She isn't making much money at either job. I tell her that she should move up north and live with me. She could do her pottery. She'd be the only potter making animal heads in the area. Julie changes the subject. She wants to know what I've been doing and what I've been reading.

I show her some of the information that I've been collecting on Forbes Settlement, including a book with a picture of Neil Forbes' stone house, built in 1861.

"That's the house on the corner," I tell Julie.
Neil Forbes was the first man to settle the area. Daniel Sullivan was the second. Sullivan's house is also in the book. There's a Before and After picture, showing a log house and then a house covered in aluminum siding with a new roof and a new addition on the back. There is no picture of the Gruhn house in the history book. It's a black sheep, so to speak. It used to belong to the Sullivans, but in the early 1900's it was sold to a family from Ottawa -- the McKays. And then from the McKays it went to other outsiders: the Gruhns from Kitchener, and then to Gerard Baines from Toronto. So it's changed hands too many times for the history books. It does have a history though.

There's stories about the McKay brothers. Some kind of dispute over a whisky still. One brother shot the other through the heart. It happened right in the laneway.

"Is that true?" asks Julie.

"So I'm told," I tell her.

When the Gruhns moved in, things settled down. They didn't make moonshine in the back forty. They made maple syrup. Sold it at the local market. All very legal. I get out my Emallen box and show Julie an old photograph of Austin and Emallen standing in front of a maple syrup kettle. Emallen would be in her sixties and Austin would already be eighty-something. They are not smiling for the camera. Their mouths are straight lines across their faces. Julie says it looks like they don't have any teeth. She may be right. Mrs. Gruhn had false teeth, but she didn't always wear them.

Julie thinks I should locate Andrew Wettlaufer and give him his aunt's photographs and letters. She doesn't agree with me that the letters belong to the farmhouse. She says that even though Mrs. Gruhn didn't have children, there are probably nephews and nieces who want to know about their Great Aunt Emallen. What do I think? I think I want to keep the letters. I think that Emallen's antique furniture is spread all over southern Ontario because nobody cared enough to keep it in the family.
If I give Andrew these cards and letters, he'll just dump them in the nearest garbage container. That's what I think.

Julie says, "But you don't know that for sure."

I tell her that it couldn't have been a very close family. In the ten years I knew Mrs. Gruhn, she had no visitors.

"What about this?" says Julie, putting a colour photograph in front of me.

There's no date on the back of the photograph, but it must be from the early 1970's because Mrs. Gruhn looks exactly as I remember her. There are two other people in the photograph. The woman standing beside Mrs. Gruhn looks like she might be a sister and the girl with the jar of roses in her hands, that would be a niece maybe.

So she did have visitors. People who came in the spring and the summer no doubt, but not in the winter when it was thirty degrees below, and you had to kick the snow drifts from the porch just so you could get the door open. And nobody gave her a toilet, like we did. I tell Julie stubbornly.

She liked the toilet. And the bathtub too. She kept snake plants in the bathtub. Tall, spiky plants that didn't require much sunlight. She started all her vegetable seeds in there too. Put them in plastic containers and kept them in the bath tub until they were strong enough to go outside. But as far as I know, she never took a bath in her tub. Maybe she was afraid that if she got in there, she'd never get out. There were no handrails that I remember.

Julie says that it's funny how the letters fell into my father's hands. Funny that Mrs. Gruhn would give them to him by mistake. A post card from 1912? She kept it safe for sixty years, so why would she suddenly forget where she put it? And this letter from Cousin Esther, 1955. You don't just misplace a letter that you've kept for twenty years.

"Yes, it's odd," I say.
But I don't really think it's odd. I think that the letters were meant for me. Emallen is somewhere in these letters. I just have to find her. And then maybe she'll tell me things. One woman to another.

Julie kisses me goodnight. Tells me not to stay up too late. I tell her to sleep tight and don't let the bed bugs bite.

"And if they do, hit 'em with your shoe until they're black and blue," she answers.

It's funny how that old bed bug thing has hung on through the years. I wonder why it didn't evolve. It would make more sense to say, "Don't let the fleas bite," or "Don't let the mosquitoes bite." Bed bug. Sounds so innocuous. Snug, bug, rug. The name completely belies the blood-sucking nature of the beast. Not that I'd want Julie to think that there are any blood-sucking insects in her mattress. I'm pretty sure that there aren't. I aired it out before she came.

Julie will be asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow. It's the air. It does something to city people. Knocks them out. I think it's got more oxygen in it then they're used to. I was like that four months ago. Could barely stay awake for the eleven o'clock news. But that was before I got used to the air, and before I started spending long evenings on Larry's porch. I wonder if he's sitting on his porch tonight. Staring at the moon. Howling at the moon. Larry the werewolf. Now, there's a thought. He does have a lot of hair for a man in his forties. Long nails too. For picking the guitar, he says.

I'm wondering if Larry and I are going to have sex some day. It seems likely, given the time we're spending together and the proximity of our houses. Which means that I should probably get a prescription for birth control pills. Which means I have to endure a pap test, and a doctor peering up my vagina and telling me to relax. But I should do it, if I'm going to do it, because it'll take a month of swallowing pills before we can have unprotected sex. Although it can't be unprotected sex any more because of AIDS. But I'm sure Larry has a condom or two in the house. Probably a couple different kinds of
condoms. Probably has them in a couple different rooms in the house, so that they're handy.
I wait my turn at the fish counter. The customer in front of me wants rainbow trout, but she didn't order it ahead of time so she has to settle for splake. She must be a tourist or she would have known to order her trout three days in advance. She tells Mrs. Cole, of COLE'S FISH, that she wants two thick pieces of splake with no fat on them. I wonder how she can tell what is fish and what is fat since the meat looks all the same melon-colour to me. But she knows. She tells Mrs. Cole that the slab of fish on the scale has too much fat on it.

Mrs. Cole picks up the offensive, fatty fish by the tail end, takes it back to the tub, and slaps it on the pile. She asks the customer to point to the fish that she wants.

The woman taps the glass with her fingernail. "That one," she says.

Mrs. Cole slides the fish out of the pile and puts it on the scale.

The woman says, "That one isn't as thick as the other piece."

Mrs. Cole takes the two fish and puts them side by side. She points out that they are the same thickness.

The woman says, "They'll have to do."

Mrs. Cole wraps them, first in wax paper and then in newspaper. She tapes the package, hands it to the woman and says, "That will be $6.80." The woman hands her a ten dollar bill. The woman asks her whether splake tastes as good as rainbow trout. Mrs. Cole hands her the change and says, "I couldn't tell you. I never eat splake."
I ordered my rainbow trout on Monday. Mrs. Cole remembers the order. She pulls out a tub from the cooler in the back. It is stocked with rainbow trout. Mrs. Cole lays three fish on the counter. She doesn't hurry even though there is a man and a woman behind me and a couple more customers behind them. She takes a small silver tool and digs it into the soft, salmon-coloured flesh. She digs and pulls, digs and pulls, until she's worked down the length of the fish and pulled out all the bones. She repeats this procedure on each fish. I tell her that she's got a neat device for pulling bones, and she tells me that it's a strawberry huller.

"No hell on strawberries," she says, "but good on fish bones."

She runs her fingers down the flesh just to make sure she's got every bone out. She knows the fish is for Julie. She knows that Julie is my friend from Hamilton. I gave her the whole story when I put the order in on Monday. How Julie and her family used to camp at Sauble Beach when Julie was a kid, and how they always had a big fish fry and they always had COLE'S FISH because it was the best fish around. I suppose she is taking extra care because she knows all this. The couple behind me leaves. They are in too much of a hurry.

Mrs. Cole asks me if I'm going right home or running errands. I tell her that I have a few groceries to pick up. She puts a chunk of ice in with my fish before wrapping it in newspaper two times. Anxious for the person behind me, who might be in a hurry, I give her exact change and thank her for the fish. As I leave the store, I hear the next customer say, "How are you now, Ida?" He doesn't sound like he's in a hurry. His visit to COLE'S FISH may be even longer than mine.

When I arrive home with lemon and pepper corns and tin foil and everything else on the grocery list that Julie wrote out for me last night and which I promptly forgot on the kitchen table this morning, I discover my father's car in the laneway. It's not unusual for him to show up on a Sunday. Usually around 10 a.m. I check my watch. It is
10:35 a.m. And if I know my father, he's right in the middle of preparing the kind of
breakfast that he can't have at home. Bacon, homefries, eggs, and liver. Everything that
is not on his low cholesterol diet. And onions. I smell them frying as soon as I walk
through the door. My father takes my grocery bags and asks me how I want my eggs.

I don't like liver. I never have. I pass it to Julie. She surprises me by taking some.
She's a more dutiful daughter than I. She smoothes her liver in ketchup. An old trick.
She asks my father about his heart. That's the right question to ask. He loves to talk
about his heart. He thinks that he can outsmart it even though it failed him massively.
He thinks that he can eat liver and scrambled eggs once in a blue moon and it won't kill
him. He thinks that he can go on borrowing cigarettes from other people because it isn't
really smoking if he doesn't buy them himself.

I've heard it all before. Julie hasn't. She looks concerned in all the right places.
What is my face saying? Probably that I don't care, which is not true. My father begins
the story of his heart attack just as I'm finishing my last piece of toast. I take my plate
to the kitchen sink. I fill the kitchen sink with hot water. I turn the radio on low. Julie
leans forward to catch my father's every word.

He was shingling the roof of his newly acquired outhouse when the heart failed
him. Certainly it was the finest outhouse on the Bruce Peninsula, my father says. And
probably the only one with a stained-glass window. Real lead. Crimson glass. My father
bought the outhouse at an auction. All it needed was a few new shingles, which was the
last thing on his list of things-to-do before people started arriving for the family
reunion. That's why he bought the outhouse in the first place. He didn't want all those
kids trooping in and out of the house, getting the carpets dirty and using his bathroom
just when he needed it the most.

He was up there shingling and that's when the pains started. The heart failed him
three times, and it should have been game over, but he outsmarted it because he had a
few things that he still wanted to do in this lifetime. He asks Julie if she wants to drive
to Mexico with him. He tells her that he’s having a hard time convincing my mother to
go with him. Julie laughs and shakes her head. She doesn’t think he’s serious.

"Rosemary won’t go with me," he says. "She’s too busy riding around the penin-
insula on the back of a motorcycle."

He pauses for effect.

How does my father know that I’ve been out on Larry’s bike?

"Ralph Sullivan," he says.

My neighbour, Ralph Sullivan, is always cutting something, hay or trees or grass,
and always with one eye on the road so he can see who goes up and down and with
whom. He must have seen Larry and me on the bike last Tuesday, which was the day I
finally agreed to go with Larry after he’d been asking me for weeks and telling me that if
we didn’t go soon, it would be too cold. I was just finishing the sign for The Herb House,
when Larry called and invited me to go to Goderich with him. He promised to take me
to a gas station on the outskirts of town.

"A gas station," I repeated.

He told me that he would explain when he picked me up "in say, fifteen minutes?"

It turned out that it was a combination gas station and restaurant and that Larry
knew the cook. Well, he didn’t actually know the cook, but he’d been talking to him for
the last six months on his computer, and he was curious to meet this guy who called
himself Galley and who knew more about physics than anyone else on the board except
Larry, of course.

"He has a motorcycle too," said Larry, handing me a helmet. As I was tightening
the strap under my chin, Larry gave me a few instructions about being a passenger on
a motorcycle. He told me to relax and let him do all the leaning.
I told him that I'd been on the back of a bike before and he wouldn't even notice that I was there.

He smiled and said that he would notice.

The gas station restaurant was called The Church. Galley took a break from his burgers to shake our hands and smile shyly as he held out his package of Colts cigars. Did we smoke? Larry pulled out his package of tobacco and rolling papers. He and Galley talked about motorcycles and getting together some day for a ride. Galley explained why the gas station was called The Church. Used to be an old church. We didn't stay long because Galley was the only cook in the kitchen and when he was on his break the dishwasher had to do all the cooking, and he wasn't much of a cook.

As we were putting on our helmets to leave, I told Larry that a gas station was an interesting place to take a woman on a first date.

"A first date?" he said smiling. "I thought we'd gone beyond that."

My father tells Julie that motorcycles are dangerous. She looks at me and smiles. In about an hour she's going out for a ride on Larry's bike. They made the arrangements yesterday. Did I mind? No, as long as Julie was back in time to make supper because I didn't know the first thing about cooking rainbow trout. Julie doesn't tell my father that she and Larry have a date. She wants to hear what he has to say about motorcycles.

He has plenty to say. He says that motorcycles are a good way to get yourself killed and that Larry Fitzpatrick drives like a maniac or at least that's what he's heard. I tell him that the reports are greatly exaggerated. I'm surprised to hear him speak so critically about motorcycles since he rode one, himself, for over twenty years. Rode with me between his legs when I was five years old, barely old enough to hang on tight.

When I tell him this, he says that he only took me up and down the street.

"It was very safe," he says.
"What about the Hog's Back?" I ask him, jogging his memory.

"I took you there?" asks my father. He can't remember taking me through the sand dunes of the Hog's Back. His memory isn't as good as it was before the heart attack. He is always telling me this, and maybe he is right.

"Uh-huh. I was seven," I say. "And I still have the scar where I burned my leg on the exhaust pipe."

My father shakes his head. He doesn't remember the burn.

"I never told you about it. I was afraid you wouldn't take me out again," I tell him.

"You were a tough one," he says.

"Still am," I remind him.

But he's not convinced. He worries about me more now than he ever did. He worries because I'm thirty-two and have no man to protect me. He doesn't say it, but I know that's what he's thinking. He's thinking that he has to step in now that Henry's gone. Like tag team wrestling. Even with his weak heart, his three sets of eyeglasses round his neck ("None of which work worth a damn," he says) and his lungs filled with fluid, my father still thinks that he can protect me better than I can protect myself. Of course it's not about physical strength, is it? It's about what he knows. And he knows motorcycles, since he rode one himself for years and years, and he knows men.

Dinner is safe. Motorcycles are not. My father wants me to go out to dinner with Ruthie Patterson's son. He's been dropping Derek Patterson's name into our telephone conversations on a regular basis. Derek Patterson is an accountant. Lives in Toronto, but comes up occasionally to visit his mother.

"You remember Ruthie Patterson? She's got a little restaurant at Mar now. Ruth's Cafe. You should drop in some time and say hello."

Dinner has the reputation of being a safe ride. Truth is, now that I've felt Larry between my thighs, I'm not too interested in dinner.
Will my father stay for dinner? Julie asks. "Barbecued trout," she offers tempting-
ly.

My father won't stay for dinner. He's leaving at three o'clock, he tells her. I could
have told her that. My father always leaves at three o'clock.

Julie thanks him for breakfast, and says it was just what she needed before her
big motorcycle trip up the peninsula.

"With Larry," I add.

My father just shakes his head. "Not you too," he says to Julie, picking up his
newspaper. He takes the paper and his coffee out to the back porch. He'll read and
sleep a little before he drives back to London. That's his routine.

Julie says, "Can I borrow your boots, Rosey?"

I give her my boots and a hooded jacket and on her way out the door, she tells me
not to eat anything all day so I'm really, really hungry for dinner.

"I'll see you when you get back," I tell her.

No doubt Ralph Sullivan will be on the side of the road looking out of the corner
of his eye as Julie and Larry drive by. He's probably wondering about Larry's sudden
popularity with women.

I wonder if Ralph Sullivan is taking ginseng tablets along with the rest of the men
on the peninsula. Amanda Young, owner of The Herb House on Highway 6, told me that
ginseng tablets are one of her big sellers at the flea market. The women who buy it for
their husbands hope that it will, as Amanda puts it, "enhance sexual prowess." The
sign that I painted for Amanda's ginseng display said: "Makes an Older Woman
Younger and a Younger Woman Hunger." Ralph's been married for about ten years so I
figure he's prime ginseng material. Amanda says it's good for loosening stiff joints too.

After I wipe the kitchen counter and the breakfast table, I join my father on the
porch. He is hiding from the deer flies under a straw hat. I ask him if he is awake. He
comes out of his hat blinking. He's awake. I hand him a fresh cup of coffee. He takes his coffee with a drop of rye, for flavouring. He sniffs it to make sure that I haven't forgotten to put the alcohol in. It's a sweeter smell, he says, than the damn cows. I should tell Sullivan to keep the cows out of my backyard. My father is exaggerating. The cows are in the field behind my yard. I tell him that I like the cows. He says that they'll fill my house with flies, but whatever I like.

Speaking of sweet smells, I say. Then I ask him if he remembers putting in Mrs. Gruhn's toilet.

He says he remembers. Then he laughs. "I don't think she used it once," he says.

"She didn't use it?" I ask. I thought the toilet was a god-send.

My father says, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

He wanted to bring her into the twentieth century, he tells me. He thought that it wasn't right an old woman having to pee in a bucket in the winter. Even though it all got recycled, he says, and she did grow the biggest red poppies in both counties. She had a famous artist come and paint her poppies once. Did I know that? asks my father.

She didn't use the toilet in the winter because the pipes in the bathroom froze. The oil stove heated the front room, but not the parlour, so come January the pipes froze solid. My father said that he went over several times with a blow torch to thaw them, but eventually he capped the pipes off and Mrs. Gruhn went back to her buckets. In the springtime she did what she'd always done. She used the outhouse under the pear trees.

Ralph's parents, Stan and Flo Sullivan, warned my mother and father against helping Mrs. Gruhn too much. They'd been her neighbours for forty years. Did she really need a new mailbox? a toilet? a snowmobile? telephone lines? they asked.

Mrs. Gruhn's mailbox had bullet holes in it and every time it rained, her Melford News got soggy. She hated that. I know. I used to deliver her newspaper once a week,
only I didn’t take it to her on Thursday which was the day it arrived in the mailbox. I took it to her Friday after I’d read the Horoscopes and my father had checked to see if there was anything good in the Classified Section. The new mailbox was a big improvement over the old one. It even had a red flag so you could tell when there was mail in the box. It was worth the forty bucks that Mrs. Gruhn paid for it.

The new snowmobile cost a little more than the new mailbox, but my father put in half the money. The snowmobile was not a recreational machine. It was for emergency purposes only. It was stored in my father’s woodshed and only came out when the snow had been drifting for days, and Mrs. Gruhn’s laneway was blocked and the only way to deliver her milk and bread and grapefruit was by snowmobile. My father hated the machine. Said he couldn’t figure out why people thought that snowmobiles were fun when they were noisy and hard on the back. So it wasn’t true what the neighbours were saying, that he bought it for his own purposes. Although he did take it back into the bush to get a load or two of firewood, but that was once in a blue moon.

The year the telephone lines went in, Flo Sullivan asked my mother if it was really necessary for an eighty-six year old woman to have a phone after so many years of living without one? She’d heard the cost of bringing in the lines was $2000. Was that so?

It was precisely because Mrs. Gruhn was eighty-six, said my mother, that she needed a phone. Any day now she was due to break a hip, especially with so much junk in her house. Not to mention cats. My mother wanted the phone lines regardless of how much they cost (and where Flo got that outrageous figure was beyond her) because Matthew was going off to university to study geology and my mother insisted that it was time we had a phone. How else would she be able to talk to Matthew? That Mrs. Gruhn needed the phone was obvious.
My father and I sit together on the porch in comfortable silence for about five minutes. Then he asks me if I've bought a weed whacker yet. He doesn't understand how I can live out here without one. I tell him I like the way the grass grows tall around the cherry trees and the apple trees. He points to a patch of grass in the left hand corner of the yard. "What's that?" he says.

I tell him that's where the sneezewort grows, and just down from that, the poppies, and over there, the garlic.

"You wouldn't want to mow the garlic patch," I tell him. I did that when I first moved in and my boots still reek of garlic juice.

"The grapes should be ready in a few weeks," says my father.

"After the first frost," I tell him. "Maybe in time for Thanksgiving."

I've broached the topic. Now I have to carry through. I invite him and my mother up for Thanksgiving dinner in two weeks time. He's pleased. Of course they'll come, he says. He hates London. He doesn't say this, but he doesn't have to. I know he's thinking that he should never have sold the house on Currie Road. That's probably why he doesn't like Larry Fitzpatrick. Because he rides a motorcycle, lives in his house, has all the things he once had. Even has the outhouse that nearly killed him. Doesn't have his daughter though. I suppose that would be the final straw.
My father has just driven out the laneway. He should be rounding Sullivan's corner right now. I close my eyes and savour the emptiness of the house. I must be getting used to being alone. Maybe that's not a good thing. Maybe I'll get set in my ways and I'll never be able to live with people again.

I pour a cup of coffee and gather up the photographs from last night. No sense rushing into things. It'll be a few hours before Larry and Julie get back from their ride which is plenty of time to do all the things that I have to do this afternoon. I should make a pie for dessert. Impress Julie all to hell with my home-grown apples and a pie crust that's almost as good as the real thing. Just add water and stir. But even then, I'm looking at a good hour for the apple picking and the peeling, and the rolling of the dough, and is it worth it?

What I really want to do is spend the next two hours with Emalien. Larry and Julie won't mind if there's no pie for dessert. They know that I'm obsessed with the ghost in the house. I'd like to make sense of the letters and the photographs all jumbled in this box. I've read them. I've looked at the photographs. But not in any kind of order.

I think that if I were to start at the beginning, maybe with this wedding photograph, I might be able to put the pieces together. Figure out who Emalien Gruhn was. Not that I'll ever really know her, but I'd like to know something about this woman who gave me beets and old coins and saucers with no cups. And the wedding photo
seems the most likely place to start since that was the beginning of Emallen’s life on Currie Road.

Maybe someone told Emallen to stand on the side of a hill so she would look taller in the photograph, but she still only comes up to Austin’s shoulder. She looks a little precarious standing there in her white shoes with heels digging into the grass. The year is 1923 and she is twenty-nine years old in this black and white photograph. It was taken in the back yard because I can see the old barn in the background. Nothing like a barn backdrop for a wedding photo.

The bride wore white satin and held a bouquet of shaggy daisies across her stomach. She was not a slip of a girl. She married a man who was not a slip of a man. The bride wore rose buds in her hair. The groom wore a stiff, white collar buttoned to his chin. The groom didn’t know what to do with his hands so he clasped them in front of his groin and hung on (to his hands) for dear life. He might have taken his bride’s hand which was only a few inches from his own, but perhaps that didn’t occur to him.

*Forgive me, Emallen, but I'm putting Austin’s obituary next to the wedding photo. It can't bring you any bad luck now.*

Austin Rupert Gruhn 84, Passes
At the Melford Memorial Hospital on Friday, October 19, 1964. Austin Rupert Gruhn was in his 84th year.

Austin Gruhn was born March 2, 1880 at his home near Breslaw. Before his marriage to Emallen Holm on September 14, 1922, he spent a number of years as a farm hand near High River, Alberta. In 1920 he purchased a farm at R.R. 2, Melford.

He was predeceased by four brothers and five sisters. Surviving are his wife, the former Emallen Holm and a number of nephews and nieces in and around Kitchener.

The body was resting at the Midge Funeral Home until eleven o’clock Monday, thence to St. Peter’s Lutheran Church for a short service.

Pall bearers were nephews of the deceased. After the burial, relatives and friends met at the home of Andrew Wettlaufer, 16 Kelly St. Kitchener for refreshment.
Austin was forty-two when he married the fresh-faced Emallen. He was Emallen's old man. Just an expression. But did Emallen know what she was getting into, marrying a man who was thirteen years her senior? Did she marry her father? That's one theory. A woman marries an older man who reminds her of her father so that she has a chance to work out everything that she didn't have a chance to work out the first time around.

Maybe that's why I'm attracted to Larry. He's forty-three, which is not so far from my father's fifty-seven years. He lives in my father's house or what used to be my father's house. He drives a motorcycle. My father drove a motorcycle. It's just coincidence. They are nothing alike.

Emallen had no children. Was that because Austin was already forty-two and he didn't want children? But they didn't think like that back then, especially on a farm. On a farm they wanted children. So why didn't Emallen get pregnant? Or maybe she did. There is a picture here of Emallen holding a baby on her hip. She looks no older than she does in the wedding photo. Only slimmer and happier. The baby, according to the back of the post card, is Andrew. I always thought that Andrew was Emallen's nephew, but who knows. Maybe he was her son.

There is a Christmas note from Emallen's mother, sent in 1930, which keeps me guessing along these lines.

Merry Xmas everyone.
   May I come in and have dinner with you. I would love to sit between Andrew and Austin. Wouldn't that be nice. I hope Santa was real good to Andrew. I hope you are all real well as this leaves us.

   Mother

And yet, there is nothing else in the pile of letters and documents to support the idea that Andrew was Emallen's son. Andrew is nowhere to be found in the letters or photographs until 1937. Then he lives, not with Emallen and Austin on Currie Road,
but with Emallen's sister, Anna Wettlaufer, who is living in Preston. Anna mentions
Andrew briefly in her Christmas note in 1937 and then again in 1940.

Anna Wettlaufer packed a year's worth of news into her Christmas notes. The
news was not always cheerful, but the Christmas cards that she sent her sister
Emallen were:

A good old Christmas wish once more,
So often sent and read before,
Joy and Happiness with you abound,
To make you glad the whole year round.

And the letter inside:

Dec. 17 1940

Dear Emallen and Austin,

With Christmas coming, one thinks of all ones friends and family so I am also
thinking of you. Well how are you getting along? There are so many boys away to war.
Albert is not gone yet. His joints slip and he has to wear two elastic knee caps to help
keep them in so he may not have to go. We are praying that Andrew will not go, but so
many of his friends have signed up.

Albert's sister, Margaret, sure went fast toward the end and it was a blessing all
round she could go. Alberta Swartz went so sudden too, but she had to suffer. But she
told me last time I was there that Christ suffered more on the cross for us all then what
she has to suffer.

I find it hard to walk these days. My ankles are so bad, but I cannot complain. I
can still do all my own work. Hope you find the time to write me a long letter and let
me know how you are getting along.

Love from Anna

Andrew was son or nephew? The letters won't tell me. I let it go for the time being.

I read to find out about what life was like for women during the forties and fifties. A let-
ter from Cousin Esther, dated 1955, gives me some idea:

New Dundee Nov 10/55

Dear Cousin Emallen and Austin,

Thanks for your letter. I know mine is late, but the time slips by. I did a big wash-
ing this week, but no drying weather. One has to fuss so much with it in the house.

A niece of Austin out West she had Cancer. She got her one breast taken away six
years ago, then the cancer came back. She was buried this week. One thing her
stomach was good so she could eat anything and her heart was good so that made her
linger along. She was 64 yrs. So everyone has their troubles one way or the other.

A few weeks ago we had a nice week so I boiled a big batch of soap. I have to do it
outside. Had good luck. Hannah had so much grease on hand. Got it from her sons and
she did not want to throw it away. A bumper crop of fruit this year so it made more work to can but it tastes good when you can fetch it from the cellar in winter time. So I hope you both stay well and happy.

Lovingly your cousin Esther, Harold and Ruth Anne

Preserving fruit, making soap, and worrying about all the family members. I bet Emalien did all of that too. But what I'd really like to know is whether she slept in the bedroom that I sleep in now. I know she didn't when she was eighty, but when she was thirty-two, she probably did. It is the biggest room upstairs and it has two windows which draw in the breeze on hot summer nights. So did she sleep with her bedroom windows open? And did she and Austin listen to the mother coyote teaching her young ones to howl? Or maybe they kept the windows tightly shut against howling coyotes so they could get their sleep. I put Emalien's letters and photographs back in the box.

It's six o'clock. Julie and Larry are still not back from their ride so I decide to make an apple pie, after all. While I crimp the edges of my pie crust in the tradition of my grandmother and my mother, I think about what Julie said. About sending the letters to Andrew Wettlaufer. Maybe it's not such a bad idea. He'd be in his late sixties or early seventies now. I don't even know if he's alive, but he'd probably be in Kitchener if he was. It wouldn't be that hard to find him. And Emalien's not really in the letters. Not like I thought. This house tells me more about her than the photographs or Anna's Christmas notes. And maybe if I found Andrew, I could ask him point blank: Are you Emalien's son or her nephew? That would be the only way to find out for sure.

It's 7:25 p.m. and I am trying to figure out what it feels like to walk without the support of the baby toe. It feels strange. The baby toe is definitely necessary. So the chiropodists were wrong. About one hundred years ago they predicted the disappearance of the little toe by the year 2000. They said human beings would have no need for the toe and it would go the way of the tall bone. Another prediction out the window.
I am trying to keep my mind off the time. It is 7:42 p.m. And off my stomach, which is grumbling with emptiness. I am really, really hungry. I am thinking of making a cheese sandwich when I hear the rumble of Larry's motorcycle. Then Julie comes running in full of apologies, but they had such a good time. Such a great time. And they forgot the time. Am I really, really hungry? she asks.

Larry comes walking in with his helmet in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other. He is smiling as he hands me the bottle of wine. He must have had a good time with Julie. Maybe a better time than the motorcycle ride that we took together. Julie assures me that dinner will be fifteen minutes, tops. She is already ripping sheets of aluminum foil, and she hasn't taken her coat off.

Julie is as good as her word (almost). We are eating rainbow trout and green beans and corn bread and avocado salad within the hour and I am hearing all about the Grotto and how they've put up a concrete wall between the trail and the steep drop to Georgian Bay, and posted signs that say: CAUTION: STEEP DROP.

"As if that isn't the most obvious thing in the world," says Julie, tearing off a chunk of corn bread.

It was just a matter of time before someone built a wall to keep tourists a safe distance from the scenery. Matthew and I used to hike that part of the Bruce Trail when we were younger and the highlight was always the moment when we made it to the top and got as close to the edge as possible. What would be the sense of hiking all that way if you didn't look over the edge and feel in the pit of your stomach how really far down it was to the water below? Besides, that was the only way to get a good look at the cave. But now the view is blocked by a wall, says Larry. A wall that is pointed so no one will get any ideas about walking along the top of it because that would be too dangerous.

The trout is delicious. Julie is a wonderful cook.

"What did you do all afternoon?" she asks me.
I tell her that I’ve decided to return Emalien’s letters and photographs to Andrew, after all. That I took a good look at them this afternoon and that I think I’ve learned all I can learn from them. I tell Julie my suspicions that Andrew was Emalien’s son and not a nephew.

"Then he would want his mother and father’s wedding picture, for sure," says Julie.

"Maybe," I reply.

I tell Larry and Julie about Aunt Esther making soap out of pig’s grease in 1955.

"Weren’t they sending rockets to the moon by then?" says Julie.

"Old and new existing side by side," says Larry.

Larry would say that. He’s the only person I know who runs his house with a computer, but still washes his clothes in a ringer washer.

"Conserves water," says Larry. "It’s hard on zippers, though." Larry says he’s forever sewing new zippers into his jeans.

Julie leans forward. She is an attentive listener and something more. She is looking at Larry’s hands. She likes hands, I remind myself. She’s said that before. Maybe that comes with being a potter.

I ask Julie to pass me the wine. She empties the last of it into my glass, checks behind to see if the braided rug is still there, and then tosses the bottle over her shoulder. This is something that we’ve always done. We laugh as Larry shakes his head.

He thinks we’ve had too much wine.
Chapter 8

Tourists

The sign sticks out of the landscape like a sore thumb because of its size and the oddity of its message: CAMEL RIDES -- $5. The large black letters are crudely drawn and are obviously the work of a camel operator and not a professional sign painter. I pull off Highway 6 and onto the side road where the camel trailer is parked. Julie and I are on our way up the peninsula to visit a pottery studio, but I take this detour because Julie wants to ask the camel operator some questions. She wants to know what he does with his camel in the winter months. She wants to know if the camel smells bad. Not that she has any intention of getting close to it or riding it.

There are two brown lumps in a grassy field and a sign over the entrance that says, Welcome to Camelot. I am not sure about camel rides. I am not sure about using animals for entertainment purposes. Julie knows how I feel about this, and half-jokingly she makes me promise that I will not set the two camels free while she is talking to the camel owner.

He is hunched behind the wheel of his pick-up truck, reading The Sun. Julie asks him if he is the man with the camel rides.

He looks at her, puts his newspaper aside, and says, "Uh-huh."

He's not quite as talkative as I thought a camel operator would be, but Julie doesn't appear to notice. She smiles and asks him where his camels are from.

He says they're from Kansas.
"Camels don't usually come from Kansas, do they?" says Julie, trying to get the camel operator to open up.

"No," he says.

"So, how did you get into this business?" asks Julie.

He puts his hand on the steering wheel, pulls himself out of his slump position, and introduces himself as Murray Sinclair. Murray doesn't mind telling us his story. He was working for Stelco Steel and he had to take an early retirement, but he didn't want to sit around and watch the grass grow so he went to a farm in Kansas and purchased what he thought was a racing camel. But Prancer turned out to be just a riding camel. Prancer's the big one in the field, says Murray. The little one, he says, pointing to the smaller of the two brown lumps, is Stuart, Prancer's son. Stuart's not a racing camel either, says Murray. And he's not big enough to ride yet. He's just in the field to keep Prancer company.

Murray asks us if we'd like to see his photographs. He pulls out a thick pile and begins thumbing through them.

"This is Amy," says Murray, showing us a brown-eyed, camel with long eyelashes.

"She's eleven months pregnant right now."

Murray is hoping for a baby girl. He wants to make a racing camel out of her. Only the females, he explains, are good for racing.

"What about the winter time?" asks Julie. "Isn't it hard on the camels?"

Murray flips through the pile of pictures and pulls out winter and summer shots for comparison. He wants us to notice the coats. How thick and woolly they are in the winter, and here's a shot of the camels moulting. See how the camel hair is coming off in big chunks. And here's Prancer in the summer. Notice the sleek neck. Looks almost like the neck of a serpentine because he's shed his winter coat.
Murray has five camels altogether and when Amy has her baby, it will be six. Have we entered the name-the-baby-camel contest? he asks. They'll be making the draw on Thanksgiving up at Tobermory. The winner gets $50 and a free camel ride.

"How much does it cost to ride the camel?" asks Julie.

She's going to ride the camel. It does seem like the only thing to do after we've taken up so much of Murray's time. And it doesn't seem like a hardship to the camel. It's not a hot day, and he's only lying around in the grass, anyway. I think it's probably the best thing for her to do at this point.

"You can both go on for five dollars," says Murray, taking a red blanket from the front seat of his pick-up truck.

"I'll buy the camel ride," says Julie, turning to me, "instead of that beer I owe you."

"I'd rather have the beer," I tell her.

Murray goes into the field and grabs the end of the camel's rope. He leads Prancer to the gate and ties him there. He motions for us to join him in the paddock. The camel looks a lot bigger when it's standing and kicking its feet around. Murray says that Prancer is just trying to get the flies, and if you notice, he doesn't have hard feet like a horse. His pads are spongy like the pads on a dog's foot.

Spongy or not, a kick is a kick. Besides, I can see his toe nails and they don't look particularly soft.

Murray swings the basket up on the camel.

Julie says, "He doesn't smell bad at all."

Just then, Prancer decides to empty his bowels, in preparation for the ride, I suppose.

Murray tightens the basket straps oblivious to the camel dung dropping around him. He pulls a step ladder up to Prancer and asks Julie to mount the camel quickly because it's this part that the animal likes the least. But Prancer gives us no trouble. He
stands patiently as Julie takes the front of the hump and I take the rear. Murray says he will be right back to lead us around the field, but he has to shut the gate first.

The camel figures he’s done this enough times that he doesn’t need Murray. He begins to lope across the field. I ask Julie where she is taking us, and she laughs. She says, she hasn’t any idea where we’re going.

Murray runs after us, assuring us that this never happens. Usually Prancer needs a lot of coaxing before he’ll move. Murray jogs beside us until he catches the camel’s rope, and then the camel stops dead in his tracks. Murray has to stick the grain bucket under Prancer’s nose to get him going again. Round Camelot we go. Once. Twice. The camel moves in slow motion. I can’t help thinking that it was a much more exciting ride when the camel was in charge.

At the end of the ride, Murray hands us a souvenir postcard. We thank him. He thanks us. We have attracted other riders. Two small boys who want to brave the camel. Murray collects their money and helps them up the ladder.

Julie and I leave Camelot and continue our journey up the peninsula. We are going to a pottery studio that Julie has read about in a tourist brochure, Discover the Bruce Peninsula. Julie wants me to take the scenic route. She will navigate me through the back roads and up the coast. Pottery by Bernie is just past St. Mary’s Church, south on Silver Mine Road from Hope Bay. After twenty minutes of twists and turns along a gravel road, I ask Julie if we are still going in the right direction. She assures me that we are. I am not so sure. The gravel road has narrowed to the width of my minivan, and there is swamp on either side of the road. Julie shows me the map to reassure me. There is no swamp on the map. Only neatly drawn lines, an arrow and a round dot with Pottery by Bernie printed over it. Julie says that any time now we should see signs.

Any time now.
We drive along a shoreline filled with fog. We pass fields of grazing, white-faced Herefords who stare at us as we go by. Julie reads from the tourist brochure as I drive. She tells me that we will see "pottery born before our eyes" and "clay transformed into craft," and all of this in the humble surroundings of a log cabin in the woods. But not just any log cabin. The cabin has a history of honeymoons. Bernie’s grandmother. Bernie’s mother. Bernie. They all spent their wedding night there.

"If only walls could talk," says Julie.

"Does the article say anything about the honeymoons?" I ask.

"No," says Julie. "But it says that 'Bernie loves her work and finds it is a passion that has taken over her life,' and it also says that she sells a lot of parsley pots."

"What's a parsley pot?" I ask Julie.

"Damned if I know," she says.

I'm wondering how Bernie gets people to drive all this way for a parsley pot. when Julie spies our first arrow and a sign that says POTTERY.

"Aha," she says. "I knew we were going the right way."

The signs are small with black lettering. We see them out of the corners of our eyes, or we don’t see them at all. I have to turn around in a farmer’s laneway because I've missed a sign somewhere. About a mile down the road, I find the arrow and the turn that I should have taken. We drive for about fifteen minutes until finally we come to a sign that says POTTERY 1/4 MILE. There is a bright orange balloon tied to it so that visitors won't miss the final turn.

When I pull into the gravel laneway, the first thing I notice is that it’s not really a cabin in the woods. It’s a log cabin beside a lilac bush. On the other side of the bush is a stone farmhouse, and all around the house are cornfields. It is a log cabin on a farm, but nonetheless it is a beautiful spot for a pottery studio. Isolated. Not another house in sight. I park the van in front of a split rail fence with a sign that says POTTERY
PARKING. The door to the log cabin is open and Bernie is inside working at her wheel. She is making coffee mugs out of lumps of clay.

"No, not coffee mugs," she says. "Bird feeders."

Bernie makes two bird feeders before our eyes. Her left hand lifts the pot from a lump of clay and her right hand rubs it gently with a sponge to form grooves along the side. Working on the third feeder, she asks us where we're from. When Julie says that she's from Hamilton, Bernie tells her that she has a brother in Hamilton. A musician. Maybe Julie's heard of the band. "Kicking Mule?"

"No." says Julie.

Bernie slides a taut string under the pot, separating the clay from the wheel. She places the bird feeder on a tray with the others.

Did we have any trouble finding her? she asks.

"No," says Julie.

"A little," I say.

"It was an adventure," says Julie.

Bernie says she's heard that one before. She tells us that she gets a lot of visitors who come for the drive, especially in the fall when the leaves are turning. But after Thanksgiving she shuts the cabin down. In the winter months, she tells us, it is too cold in the cabin to make pottery. She tried it once and all the profits were eaten up by the heating bills. She's passionate about pottery, but not so passionate that she wants to work for nothing. So in the winter, she goes back to being a mother again. Bakes bread. Drives a school bus. That sort of thing.

"Where is your klin?" asks Julie.

I drift away to the other side of the cabin. Bernie's functional stoneware is smooth to the touch and uniform. There are one, two, three, four parsley pots. They are not all the same. Some are blue and some are beige. They come with a tiny packet of parsley
seeds and planting instructions. There's not a polar bear or rhino in the place, I note, thinking of Julie's hand-built pottery heads.

I hear Julie's voice from the other side of the room. "How big is your kiln?" she asks Bernie.

Julie is researching. She's been saving for three years and she finally has the money to buy a kiln of her own. All she needs now is a place to put it. Studio space isn't cheap in Hamilton.

I am looking at a garlic pot. I have a lot of garlic and it usually sits around in my cupboard shedding its skin all over the place and if I had this pot I wouldn't have that problem. I don't really need a garlic pot, but it is a pretty thing and we've come fifty miles. Can't very well go away empty handed. I wonder as Bernie wraps up my garlic pot, how many other people buy pots for the same reason. Even Julie can't resist a small candle holder with Bernie's signature scratched in the bottom.

Taking Bernie's advice, I head for Highway 6, which is a less scenic, but more direct route home. Julie takes my garlic pot out of its newspaper and holds it in her hands. She turns it over and traces Bernie's name with her finger. She is quiet. Why? Is it because I bought pottery from Bernie? I realise that since I've known Julie, I've never looked at another potter's work. All the money that I could spend on pottery went to Julie's chunky hand-built pieces. Bowls with grapes dripping over the sides. Heavy coffee mugs with imperfect glazes and handles big enough to slide all four fingers in. And now I've gone and bought a beige pot from Bernie. A fluff piece.

"It's not half as good as your work," I tell Julie.

She says, "I know."

"Not even a quarter or an eighth as good," I say.

She says, "I know."

"I don't even know why I bought the damn thing," I say.
"Well if you don’t like it, I’ll take it," says Julie, grinning.

She’s not angry about the pot. What then?

"Did you see the way she was whipping them off?" says Julie. "She must have made five bird feeders in ten minutes. Do you know how long it took for me to make that soap dish I gave you?"

She doesn’t wait for me to answer.

"An hour," she says. "One hour to make one stupid soap dish. You know how many bird feeders she can make in one hour?"

She waits for me to answer.

"Thirty," I say.

She frowns. Maybe she wasn’t waiting for me to answer, after all.

The truth is that Julie wouldn’t trade her bowls and heads for all the bird feeders and parsley pots on the Bruce Peninsula, but she wants to be successful like Bernie.

She tells me again how much she wants to have a studio of her own. She wants to get up in the morning, have a cup of coffee, and then spend the rest of the day in her studio making rhino and wart hog heads.

"Wart hog?" I ask.

"That’s my newest head," she says. "It’s the horns that make it."

But Julie can’t afford her own studio on a writer/waitress salary, and she’s afraid she’ll never be a potter. A real potter who sells work out of her studio like Bernie. Julie doesn’t see a way out.

I do.

Once again, I bring up the idea of Julie moving to Melford. I could give her studio space in my house, I tell her. And if people will drive all the way to Hope Bay, then they’ll come to Currie Road too, and she could sell right out of her studio. As for the kiln, it could be easily accommodated in one of the sheds. I’m sure Larry would help us
run the electricity. And she could live with me or get an apartment in town. Rent is cheap in Melford, I tell her. And even if she still has to waitress, at least she would have a studio to come home to.

In ten minutes I convince myself that this is the best move for Julie. Now all I have to do is convince Julie. She always said that she’d never live in the country again. Not after growing up in Onaping. That was enough small-town Ontario to last her a lifetime. But now, she’s listening to my proposal.

She says that she’d have to get a car if she lived in the country and that would cost a lot, but she supposes she could pick up something second-hand. But what about her writing? she asks. Although she wouldn’t have to tell Hamilton Business Magazine that she’s left the city. She could just drop in from time to time with proposals. She’d have to go back to the city every once in a while for an infusion of culture, anyway. She’d miss the Hamilton Film Theatre though. Melford doesn’t have an alternative movie theatre, does it? Julie asks.

Melford doesn’t have any kind of theatre. Not since the Roxy burned down in 1978, but I don’t tell Julie that. No sense in alarming her. "No foreign films," I say.

And she’d miss Hamilton’s festivals. They had a new one this year, she says. A busker festival. A man was shot out of a canon.

There’s always the Melford Groundhog Festival in February, I think to myself, but I don’t mention this to Julie. I figure that a celebration based on a rodent’s ability or inability to see his shadow might not measure up to Hamilton’s multicultural festivals. Although it’s just about as good as a man being shot out of a canon.

Julie has to go to the washroom. We are just coming up to Mar, so I tell her that we’ll stop at Ruth’s Cafe, grab a coffee and use the washroom. I pull off the highway.

The car behind me pulls off too. Julie and I let the occupants of the car, a woman and a young boy, go through the door first. The boy tells his mother that he is starving and he
wants two cheese burgers, a chocolate milk shake, and french fries with gravy. She says, "We'll see." and steers him to table.

There is a pink tea rose in a vase on our table. Julie sticks her nose in it, and she is just telling me that I must do the same thing because it smells heavenly, when a man with wide blue eyes walks into the centre of the restaurant and asks, "Which one of you came in last?"

The woman with the young boy immediately points an accusing finger toward our table. Julie and I look at each other, wondering what we have done wrong. I assume that I've parked in a delivery zone and that I must go out and move the van. I start digging in my pocket for the keys.

The man comes over to our table and asks Julie and I one more time, "Which one of you came in the door last?"

Julie says, "I guess that would be me because I held the door open."

The man takes her hand and starts pumping it up and down and congratulating her. She is the hundredth customer to walk through the door. She wins a free meal. The Special, he says, is a hot roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and corn. Would she like that? he asks. Julie looks startled. She only came in to use the washroom.

She says, "I'll just have a coffee."

He looks disappointed. "Is that all?" he says.

The woman at the other table, whose son is so hungry that he eats a bag of barbecue chips while he waits for his food to arrive, stares at Julie.

"Would you like a piece of pie with your coffee?" says a woman, who introduces herself as Ruth Patterson, the owner of the restaurant. The man who wants to give Julie the Special of the Day or won't she at least have some whitefish? is her son, Derek. Ruth explains that the promotion was Derek's idea and that every hundredth
person who walks through the door from May to Thanksgiving receives a free meal. She points to a bulletin board across the room, plastered with polaroids. Derek takes the customer’s picture for posterity.

And promotion, I think to myself.

Derek says to Julie, "How would it look if you’re just sitting there in the picture, drinking a coffee?"

Julie smiles. He is winning her over. She asks him what kind of pie does he have? He says he doesn’t know and turns to his mother. She ticks them off on her fingers: cherry, apple, blueberry and pumpkin.

Our order is on the house, says Derek. He includes me in his generous smile. Then he leaves to get the camera. Julie laughs and says that now she really has to go to the washroom, but she’ll wait until after the photo session is over.

Ruth brings a tray to our table. Pumpkin pie with whip cream, blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream, and two coffees. Derek has us pose with forks of pie raised and big smiles. He writes on the photo: Rosemary Hatch and Julie Matheson/home-made pie.

"And you’re from?" asks Derek, looking at Julie.

I’m pretty sure at this point he’s going above and beyond the call of duty.

"From Hamilton," replies Julie. "And Rose lives just outside of Melford."

Derek volunteers some information about himself. Tells Julie he’s from Toronto, but comes up from time to time to help his mother. He’s on vacation until Thanksgiving. Julie says that she has to go home tomorrow, but she can see why he’d spend his vacation up here in the fall. It really is lovely. Julie has forgotten about her dire need to go to the washroom. I ask Derek to point the way. He says the washrooms are back toward the kitchen and to the right.

When I return to the table, Derek has gone and Julie tells me to try the pumpkin pie. It is so good. Then she flees to the washroom.
The pumpkin pie is not as good as I expected. It has lumps.

I can make better pumpkin pie than this. I tell Julie when she returns from the washroom, and if she'd come up in two weeks time for Thanksgiving dinner, I'd make her a pumpkin pie that would put this one to shame. I am just kidding, I know that Julie can't come back for a visit so soon. She's probably working Thanksgiving dinner at the restaurant, anyway. Julie finishes her pie and does what Julie the potter always does. She turns the dish over to see whose work it is. She can't help herself. It's something that potters do, she's told me.

"I could come for Thanksgiving," she says, putting the plate down. "If it's not too much trouble."

"You can?" I ask, surprised.

"Might as well spend some time in the area if I'm going to be living here," she says nonchalantly.

She is waiting for my reaction. She wants to know if I am serious about everything I said. The studio. Setting up the kiln.

I'm serious about it all, I tell her.

But she says she won't live with me. She'll take an apartment in Melford. And she won't open the studio to the public until May because it will take her that long to get enough work ready, although she might have an Open House at Christmas, if that's okay. And when she does open the studio to the public, it will probably only be on weekends. And she won't bother me when I work. And I won't bother her when she works, unless we want to be bothered.

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I can't believe that Julie's talking about coming up in two weeks time to check out apartments. And what about work? I ask her. Would she waitess? Maybe she'd have to work in Owen Sound which would be a thirty minute commute from Forbes Settlement and not a particularly pleasurable drive in the
winter months. Maybe I've been too optimistic. Maybe I've made it sound easier than it's going to be.

Julie puts her hand on my arm and says, "We'll take it one step at a time."

Derek comes over with two mints on a tray. No bill. He smiles at Julie. Says he'll see her in two weeks time. Walks away.

"What?" I ask.

Julie blushes pink like the tea rose in the middle of the table. Derek is going to take her to the Bruce's Caves.

"A hermit used to live there," says Julie.

"Yes, I know," I say.

"He seems nice," Julie says.

"I think he's dead," I say.

Julie punches me in the arm and we leave Ruth's Cafe laughing. She's already wishing she'd said no to Derek, but he caught her at a weak moment and he was so friendly.

I tell her that according to my father, Derek Patterson is a good guy. An accountant too, I add. Not that Julie cares about that.
Chapter 9

Touching

Larry keeps his hair hidden under his jacket or his shirt, so most people don’t realise how long it is. But some women figure it out. They see it tucked down there and want to know exactly how long is it? Or they want to touch it, like the cook at the golf course. Larry was bending over to get some mashed potatoes at the buffet table, and she was slicing the hip of beef, and she saw the pony tail tucked under Larry’s golf shirt. So she asked him how long he’d been growing it and he told her that he’d been growing it all his life. She wanted to see it. He said that he’d show it to her some time. She followed him back to his table and made him show it to her right there. So Larry pulled out the tail and the tie that was holding it in place and shook out his waist-long hair for the cook to see. And she said that it was just like her niece’s hair and she wondered if Larry would mind if she touched it.

"What’s it like having strange women touch your hair?" I ask Larry, wanting to touch his hair myself.

"I’ve known Ida for a long time," says Larry, "so she’s not exactly a stranger."

Larry says it works the opposite way too. Some women want to touch it and some women want to cut it off. His mother was always threatening to take a pair of scissors to his hair.

It feels good to be with Larry again. Not on his porch because it’s too cold for that, but in his living room with a fire going in the stove. I miss Julie already which is why I’m with Larry. Because being alone after Julie left was okay in the daytime when I had
work to do and laundry and dishes to clean, but once I had things back to normal, I started sinking fast. I couldn't even rouse myself to make a cup of tea and then Larry called and asked me if I wanted to share the first fire of the season with him which sounded better than sitting around listening to Fred snore. He really is getting to be an old dog.

We're drinking Scotch because Larry says it's that time of the year. Beer in the summer. Scotch in the fall and winter and spring because you need something to warm your bones. He drinks his with water and I drink mine straight because I like the burning sensation. I close my eyes and feel it go all the way down, and then I feel something else. Larry's hands on my hair. Starting at the top of my head and sliding all the way down to my shoulders. Both hands. I open my eyes in disbelief and say the first thing that comes to my mind, which sounds stupid even as I say it.

"That's what I should be doing."

Larry says, "What?"

"Touching your hair," I say.

Larry pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around me and holds me against him. He doesn't say anything which is unusual for Larry because he always has something to say. Not that I really mind because I'm busy with the feeling of being held after ten months of not being held or touched or anything except the odd hug from Julie. I am very aware of Larry's hip bones and the way his hair smells like wood smoke. I run my fingers through Larry's hair. I find a tangle (what my grandmother used to call a rat's nest) in the back. Larry says that his hair gets tangled on the motorcycle, but as far as he knows there's no rats living in it. Course he hasn't combed it out in about five days, he adds, so you never know.

Somehow we end up in grandpa's chair. It used to be grandpa's chair when he was alive and now it's Larry's chair. It's in bad shape. All its naugahyde is torn and its
yellow sponge stuffing is spilling out, but it holds the two of us no problem. We don't talk about sex in grandpa's chair. Sex is something we talked about when we had distance between us. But now that I can feel every bone in Larry's body (he has to shift me over because his arm is falling asleep) we talk about Larry's sweater. Who made it for him, how long has he had it, and does it go through the ringer washer or does it have to be hand-washed.

And all the time, I'm touching Larry's face and neck, and thinking about how soft and warm and salty the skin is. I ask Larry if his grandfather spent a lot of time in this chair, and Larry tells me that he practically lived in it toward the end. Maybe he's watching us right now, I say. But Larry doesn't believe in ghosts. He says he's never seen one. I tell him that he's never seen one because he doesn't believe in ghosts.

He says, "Whatever you say, Rosemary" because he knows that I believe what I want to believe and it doesn't matter what anyone tells me.

I have no trouble believing in ghosts. I have a lot of trouble believing in men right now. Because of my ex-husband, Henry. Larry tells me it's not men. It's people. Some people it's best to stay away from. Other people it's okay to get close to. He puts himself in the latter category. He says that I should trust him. That he's an honest person.

I've heard that before.

He says that sometimes it takes a leap of faith.

He doesn't believe me when I tell him that I'm never leaping again.

He says that there's this thing called biology that interferes with all the best-made plans.

I tell him that's a load of crap.

He laughs. He thinks he's right.

I know he's wrong.
It's almost sunrise before I get out of grandpa's old chair and drive home. I feel like I'm nineteen years old. I remind myself that I am thirty-two with my own business and an appointment in less than five hours to see hotel proprietor, Bill Stead.

My hair smells like wood smoke.

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The waitress in the Stead Hotel tells me that Bill Stead is supposed to be in at eleven o'clock. I tell her that Bill Stead is supposed to meet me at ten o'clock. She looks wearily around the dining room and says that the last thing Bill told her when they closed the place last night was that he'd be in at eleven. Do I want to wait? she asks.

"I'll wait," I say.

I help myself to last week's Melford News, which is sitting by the cash register. I read:

Camel Stomps on Worker

A zoo keeper was injured when she was thrown from a camel's back and stomped on at the Miller Zoo, south of Shallow Lake.

The incident with a 3-year-old camel called Norma was "pretty scary," Alex Morrison said yesterday.

The 17-year-old Brantford student said she had been asked to give the camel a refresher course in people skills on Friday after the camel recently bolted, throwing two children off her back.

When the camel started bucking, Morrison said she hung on for dear life until the basket slipped off and she fell to the ground. Morrison said the camel then stomped on her a couple of times.

She was treated for a broken ankle.

I rip the article out and put it in my pocket. I'll send it to Julie. She should know all the dangers of camel riding in case she's tempted to go again. Maybe with Derek. Although Derek doesn't look the camel type. Too stiff.

It was worth the wait for Bill Stead. He came in at 10:28 a.m. looking pretty rough and pretty much like he'd forgotten that he'd made the appointment with me last week. But he was honest about it. Said that he'd had a late night. Hosted the Melford Steppers Annual Roast Beef Social and couldn't get the crowd out until an hour after closing.
"Pumpkin," says Bill to the waitress. "Is your coffee edible, this morning?"

She assures him that it was made fresh just an hour ago.

"I'll take a cup, then," he says.

Bill Stead used to be a Stepper himself a few years back, he tells me, but when he married his second wife, she had an inner ear problem and all that do-at-doing made her sick to her stomach. She's better with line dancing. Have I done any line dancing?

Bill asks.

"No," I say.

He tells me I should come in Tuesday nights for free lessons. He's been getting a good crowd with that Kimberly Ann Desjardine (used to be a Dunlop) teaching it.

Bill tells me that the Steppers don't like line dancing. Lost half their membership to Kimberly Ann's new club, The Melford Line Dancers. The Steppers almost cancelled the Annual Roast Beef Social when they heard that Bill was offering line dancing Tuesday nights at the Stead Hotel, but the reservation was made a year ago. Bill had a good talk with them last night which is why he didn't get the place closed until 2:30 a.m.

At 2:30 a.m. I was still sitting in grandpa's chair, which is why I'm having a hard time concentrating on what Bill is saying.

"It may not be as classy as square dancing," says Bill, "but my argument is that if people want to line dance, you got to give it to them. You got to change with the times."

Bill talks about line dancing like it's something new, which I guess it is for Melford. The waitress brings Bill a cup of black coffee. He thanks her.

Bill takes me out to the front of the hotel to show me what he wants in the way of signs. He wants all of them changed. Not just the hotel's, but the beauty shop, the dry cleaners and the real estate office. He rents the space out to all of them, and he's redoing all the store fronts. Wants the signs to have a black background and maybe some red letters. What do I think?
I think I won't have to worry about finding any work for a while. On the way out of the hotel, Bill hands me his sandwich board. It was kicked in a bar fight a couple nights ago and it needs some repair.

******

Fred hates having his tail brushed, but I do it anyway because I realize I haven't done it in months. There is a dead ear wig in Fred's tail. I pull it out while Fred squirms and pants. He wants me to stop. I don't stop. These mats have to come out, I tell him. They have to come out now, even though they've been in his tail for two months. Fred wants me to stop. He doesn't care that he has dead bugs in his tail. But I can't stop. I haven't stopped all day. I painted Bill Stead's sandwich board as soon as I got home. I stripped the beds and put the sheets in the wash so that my guests will have clean sheets when they come up for Thanksgiving. Now I'm cleaning the bathroom sink. I've only had three hours sleep. I am a crazy woman. It's finally happened. I'm crazy, but not crazy from loneliness. I'm crazy from coming too close to Larry.

It would have been better if we'd had sex. Something purely physical. Like that woman that Larry told me about. What was her name? Irene. The one that just jumped on him at a party. I should have had sex with Larry instead of sitting on him for five hours talking about everything under the sun. I think I bit his neck. I know I bit his neck. I can't blame it on the Scotch. If he gave me his neck this afternoon, I'd bite it again, and I'm cold sober, although the cleaning fumes may be going to my head and that's why I'm thinking about Larry's neck.

Larry is not following the rules. He's supposed to want sex. Not conversation and holding my hand for four hours. Five hours. He's forty-three and he hasn't had sex in six months. Why didn't he ask me to dive in his waterbed with him? I know he has a waterbed because he told me about it. Maybe that was a hint, but I don't think so. He was just telling me about the motorcycle accident and that he had a lot of neck pain until he bought the waterbed. He says a waterbed is good in the wintertime when the
temperature drops to forty below, and if The Old Farmer's Almanac is right, this winter's going to be even colder than last year's. I don't think that Larry's talk of waterbeds was a prelude to sex. I think he just wants me to stay warm this winter.

I am finished with the cleaning or it has finished me. I am not thinking of anything. I am rocking and humming. Humming what? "She'll be riding six white horses when she comes." Why am I humming that? I must be thinking of Julie's Thanksgiving visit. She said she would call me this week. She wants to know what she should bring. I'm going to tell her to bring buttermilk. I am sitting beside the phone, not because I am unthinking that it will ring, but because I am going to call the operator and ask her if she has a listing for an Andrew or an A. Wettlaufer. It is the last thing on my list of things to do before I sleep.

Emlen Gruhn had a son. Where is he now? At least I think Andrew was her son. I remember a photograph of a boy in a Sunday suit on her bedside table. She had other nieces and nephews, but she left the farm to Andrew. That says something, doesn't it?

The operator says there is no Andrew or A. Wettlaufer listed for Kitchener, but there is a Carl Wettlaufer and a B. Wettlaufer. I take down both numbers. I'll call them when I'm not so tired.

I make a grilled cheese sandwich and crawl into bed with it, even though it is just after nine o'clock. I will not think any more about Larry. He is not thinking about me. The phone rings. It is not Julie. It is Larry. He was just wondering how I made out with Bill Stead today. He was going to call me this morning and make sure that I got up for the appointment, but he slept through his alarm.

He tells me that he's filing the American patents for his fan and that it's costing him more money than he thought it would. He wants to know if I want to have dinner at his house on Saturday night. He wants me to meet the woman who knit his sweater, Wanda, and her husband, Phil, who are good friends of his. He wants to know if I have
any food allergies. To peanuts, for example? Larry's making a peanut sauce for the
chicken. And he says that he wouldn't want to kill me; he's just getting to know me.

I tell him that I have no allergies to peanuts.

Larry wishes me a good night. He says it would be an even better night if I was
eating my cheese sandwich in his bed, rather than mine. He hangs up on that note.

I put the receiver down. That's it then. It's going to lead to bed after all, maybe
not Saturday night since Wanda and Phil will be there, but some night soon. Of course.

It makes sense. We've known each other for a few months. That's a long time in Larry's
books. I'm relieved now that I know where he stands. All I have to figure out is where I
stand. I suppose I want to have sex with Larry. I'm sure it would be good. All that ex-
perience with women that he's had. Even two women at once.

I asked him one night whether he'd ever slept with two women. That was when I
didn't know him very well and I could still ask him anything. He didn't answer right
away which made me laugh because a pause is as good as a yes to that question. He
said he did sleep with two women, once, but it was only sleeping.

I said, "Sure."

Then there's Julie's theory to be tested. Which is that being an inventor, Larry
should have some innovative ideas about sex. That's a giant leap if I ever heard one. As
if fans and sex have anything to do with each other. And what would it be like to do
strange and wonderful things during sex, anyway? I haven't had sex since Henry. Al-
though according to Julie, I should be having sex now because I'm at my prime or did
she say peak? One or the other. Women peak in their thirties and men peak when
they're seventeen or eighteen. So what happens to a man's peak at forty-three? My
grilled cheese sandwich is cold. I feed it to Fred to make up for pulling his tail earlier in
the day.
I will split my work shop down the middle. One half for Julie. The other half for me. I plan it on paper so that when Julie comes up on Friday, I can show her how easy it will be. We'll put a partition down the middle, not a full wall because we don't need that kind of division, but something to create two working areas. And some kind of shelving in the picture window so that when visitors pull into the parking lot, they'll see Julie's pottery right away. I wonder if she will want her business mail delivered to the studio, in which case I could paint Julie's name on the mailbox next to mine.

I check the clock again. Noon. Now I can call Julie. I always wait until noon on Saturday because she works late at the restaurant on Friday nights. I want to tell her about my plans for the work shop.

Julie tells me she just got in the door. She's been at the Farmer's Market in Jackson Square, and she bought a new pair of running shoes for the hike.

"What hike?" I ask.

"To Bruce's Caves," she says.

"Oh, that hike," I say.

She's been talking to Derek. She's talked to him every night since she's been home.

"Every night?" I ask.

Except last night because she was working. She called him today because she forgot to ask him what day they were going to the caves. They're going Saturday. Did I
know, Julie asks. that the hermit of Bruce’s Caves wore clothes made out of grey flannelette blankets? Derek told her that.

I read that in a tourist brochure too, I tell her.

Derek’s heard that there’s a turkey vulture nesting just north of Melford. He’s going to take her to see it. Julie’s never seen a turkey vulture before. Or a fen. Did I know there’s a fen in Oliphant and a boardwalk that goes through it? If there’s time on Saturday, Derek’s going to take Julie through the fen and show her the insect-eating sundew plants. Julie’s never seen a sundew and she’s never met anyone quite like Derek.

I admit that an accountant who knows his way around a bog is a rare find, indeed.

I’m thrilled for Julie. I think it’s great hearing her so excited. It’s just unusual, that’s all. For the last three years she’s been single and too set in her ways to make room for anyone else in her life, or at least that’s what she said. I tell her about my plans for the work shop.

She tells me about her plans to quit the restaurant just as soon as Kate, the manager, gets back from England.

"But you can give them notice, now," I tell her.

Julie wants to wait until Kate gets back, which will be in three weeks time. Julie’s covering for Kate and things are crazy enough around the restaurant without her giving notice, now. Besides, she’s hoping that she won’t have to quit. She wants the restaurant to lay her off. She wants to talk to Kate about this possibility when she gets back.

Julie wants to take it one small step at a time.

This is where we differ, I suppose. I like to make changes in leaps and bounds.
"If you're worried about getting a waitressing job up here," I say, "Maybe Derek can get you a job at his mother's restaurant."

I know it is the wrong thing to say as soon as I've said it.

The last thing that Julie would do on the face of the earth, she says, is waitress in Derek's mother's restaurant.

There is silence on the other end of the phone.

"Oh come on Julie," I say. "I was just kidding."

"You weren't kidding," she says.

"Okay, maybe I wasn't thinking," I say.

This Derek thing is more serious than I thought. I apologize for my stupidity. I change the topic to buttetarts. I tell Julie that she makes the best buttetarts.

She tells me that any moron can make buttetarts.

Not me, I tell her.

She laughs. She tells me to get off the phone. This is costing me money and she'll see me in a few days and yes, she'll bring buttetarts.

*****

I've been staring at Carl Wettlauffer 741-0756 and B. Wettlauffer 650-8945 on my note pad for two days. I'm afraid that if I call them, I might actually find Andrew Wettlauffer and then I'll have to talk to him. And do I want to talk to him? He probably doesn't care about a bunch of old letters. He didn't care about anything else. Emalien's things. Her house. Her property. He certainly wasted no time unloading her hundred acres. No sentimentality there. The Sullivans were grazing cattle on it a few days after the funeral, so my father said. And as far as the house, Andrew Wettlauffer let it get so run down that nobody in their right mind wanted it. Until Gerard Baines, that is.

I dial Carl Wettlauffer's number. I get Carl, himself. I tell him I'm looking for an Andrew Wettlauffer. Would he know anyone by that name?

He tells me his father's name is Andrew, and who am I?
I am the woman who lives in the house that used to belong to Emaileen Gruhn. I introduce myself to Carl. I give my phone number to him and ask him to please pass it along to his father.

Andrew Wettlaufer calls me about fifteen minutes later. He is surprised to hear from the woman who lives in Emaileen Gruhn's house. So Gerard Baines doesn't live there any more, says Andrew. And how is the place? he asks.

I ask him if he'd like to come for a visit.

He is surprised and pleased with the invitation. He would like to see the house again, he says.

I tell him that I have a few photographs and letters that belonged to his aunt, and I would like to give them to him.

He says that he didn't think there was anything of Emaileen's left.

I have to bite my tongue.

We make arrangements for him to come after Thanksgiving. Tuesday or Wednesday, he says. If that's all right with me.

Tuesday then.

I hang up the phone. It went better than I thought. He sounded, I don't know ... excited, I guess.

******

Larry's house smells like ginger. He's been experimenting on the sweet potatoes, stuffing them with ginger and raisins.

"And we're the guinea pigs," says Wanda, putting her arms around me and hugging me like an old friend.

Wanda remembers me, and for the first time I realize that Larry's friend, Wanda, is Mrs. Hazel. She used to be a teacher at the Melford Public School. Not my teacher, but I knew her. She was a hippy. She wore sandals and long skirts and she walked on the wrong side of the hall. She walked on the left side, when everyone knew that going
past the library and to the office, you had to walk on the right side. Her grade fours al-
ways sang the best songs at school assemblies: "Pinball Wizard" and "Revolution." All
the grade sixes wanted to have her for a teacher instead of old McGregor, who made us
sing, "Who Put the Overalls in Mistress Murphy's Chowder?" and Tommy Boyd forgot to
put the overalls in the pot, so there was nothing to pull out at the end of the skit.

Wanda's hair is purple-red. It is a mistake. She tells me that it's not usually this
colour, but something went wrong with the henna.

Her husband, Phil, says he likes it. He had a car that colour once.

Wanda is not teaching any more. She and Phil have a goat farm on the outskirts
of Melford. It is open to the public. Mostly school groups. Grade one's and two's who
come to feed the goats or watch them being milked. But Wanda wants to get the older
grades out. She's pitching a new tour to the Bruce County Board of Education based on
the three R's: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Phil and Wanda do all the R's at the farm.

"So, you're living in Mrs. Gruhn's old house," says Wanda.

Wanda knew Mrs. Gruhn. Well she didn't know her, but she used to hear her on
the C.B. radio, talking to my mother. She and Phil didn't have a phone then, she says,
just a C.B. radio.

"Like my family," I say, surprised. I didn't think that anyone was like my family. I
didn't think that anyone else lived for seven years without a phone.

Wanda says that she and Phil lived for ten years without a phone. Phil used to be
Santa Claus on the C.B. radio. Do I remember that?

I remember asking the C.B. Santa for a pet rabbit and never getting one, I tell Phil.

"Hoh, Hoh, Hoh," he laughs.

"Mrs. Gruhn was a cantankerous old soul," says Wanda. "Your mother had a way
with her though."
My mother? I suppose that’s right. It was my mother who took the calls on the C.B. and not my father because he was usually in the shop, painting signs.

Mrs. Gruhn didn’t know C.B. language. She didn’t know that my father’s handle was Signman and the way to call him was, “How about that Signman. Are you in there Signman?” Real smooth and nonchalant, like the person who’s calling doesn’t care if the Signman is there or not. Mrs. Gruhn didn’t do that. Her voice boomed into the living room because she held the microphone too close and she thought she had to yell. So she did.

She yelled all in a panic for my father, "Doug. Doug Hatch. It's Emallen Gruhn. Have you got my paper?" It was difficult to have a conversation with Mrs. Gruhn over the C.B. radio because half the time she held the button down when she should have let it go, and she let it go when she should have held it down. Usually my mother sent Matthew or me down the road to see what it was that Mrs. Gruhn wanted. When I was fifteen and learning to drive, I welcomed any opportunity to tear down the road in my father’s dune buggy, barely stopping in time to take the turn into Mrs. Gruhn’s laneway, and God help any cats that got in my way.

I'd stay at Mrs. Gruhn's house only long enough to deliver her newspaper or pick up a bushel of pears. She was the same as she ever was. All that grey hair hanging down. It would have looked better if she'd tied it back, not that I ever told her that. I mostly stared at her feet and wondered what it felt like inside those tight, shiny feet. Her legs were swollen too. She always said, "Thank-you Rosemary" when I gave her the Melford News, even when it was a week late. She may have been cantankerous, but she was polite once she got what she wanted.

Wanda tells me that she is the proud owner of Mrs. Gruhn's old copper wash tub.

I'm not surprised. I always thought that Mrs. Gruhn's things were scattered about the peninsula.
Mrs. Gruhn sold it to Wanda, herself. It was at the church bazaar, says Wanda.

Mrs. Gruhn usually sold herbs and flowers at her table, but once in a while she'd bring in an antique to sell. All the proceeds went to the church. She was a real church goer, says Wanda.

"But did she ever get her beasts blessed?" says Larry, putting cutlery on the table.

"What?" I ask.

"Don't you read your Melford News?" he says. "Last week a minister from Arizona blessed my Aunt Rita's pot bellied pig."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because the pig was getting old and she thought some divine intervention might help it live longer."

"So she took it to church?" I say.

"To the Melford Anglican Church," says Larry.

Larry explains that every year around Thanksgiving the Anglican Church has a ceremony in honour of Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals. A couple hundred people attend, sing hymns ("God Sees the Little Sparrow Fall") and go home happy.

We stare at Larry's dog, Jake, who has just walked into the centre of the room and dropped his solid seventy pound body down on the floor. I notice that his cheeks are puffy.

He looks at me with bulgy brown eyes and thumps his tail on the floor, once, twice.

I look closer at his puffy cheeks and see a thin, tall dangling out one side of his mouth.

Larry praises Jake for catching the mouse, but pushes the dog out the door with his foot so that we don't have to hear the crunching of tiny bones.

Dinner is served.
Larry has a lot to offer. He gave me his neck in grandpa's chair and now he serves me fat chicken thighs with peanut sauce. A way to a woman's heart is through her stomach. Larry knows how to cook. Really cook. He knows how to rub things down with garlic and ginger -- bowls and frying pans and chicken parts. He grinds his own coffee beans. After dinner we talk about septic systems. I just had mine pumped. I didn't know what was wrong with the toilet. It wouldn't flush. I stuck the snake in it and that didn't help. Finally found the cover to the septic tank, cranked it open and it was full to the brim. I'd forgotten the most obvious reason for a plugged toilet was a full septic tank.

Wanda tells me that a cup of yogurt down the toilet about once a month is good for the septic system. Wanda and Phil don't stay late because they have things to do in the morning. They aren't night owls, like Larry and I.

Wanda has lumped Larry and me into a couple.

Wanda hugs me good-night. Phil shakes my hand and elbow. He says that if I still want that pet rabbit, he knows a woman who sells rabbits over on the fifth concession. Big ones. Mostly they're stewing rabbits, but they make good pets too, he says.

After Wanda and Phil have left, I put my coat on. I ask Larry to come home with me. Unless he wants to stay and do the dishes?

He laughs. He says that they'll wait until tomorrow. Larry doesn't ask any questions like, what does "come home with me" mean?

It's raining. I turn the wipers on. Bugs and raindrops smear across the glass, making it impossible to see for a few seconds as I drive down Larry's laneway. I tell Larry that dinner was wonderful. We don't talk about sex even though it's just down the road. I tell him that Wanda and Phil seem awfully fond of him and that Wanda told me about the time that he took a glue gun to the seat of his jeans, and how the glue
melted when he was standing next to their woodstove, and how she had to take the scissors and cut the little hairs on his backside so that he could get his pants off.

"When did she tell you that?" asks Larry.

"When you were in the washroom," I say, pulling into my laneway.

"She likes to tell that story," says Larry.

But she doesn’t like to tell the story about the time she walked in on Larry having sex with her best friend, says Larry.

"Really?" I say, yanking up the emergency brake.

"Maybe I shouldn’t tell you that story," says Larry.

"Go ahead." I say, getting out of the car.

I can hear Fred on the other side of the door as I put my key in the lock. He hurlis his body against me as soon as I get inside the house. I try to take the brunt of his greeting so that Larry doesn’t get knocked around. I’d hate for him to break any bones, tonight.

"Well there’s really nothing to tell," says Larry, deciding to go with the condensed version of his story.

Helen was visiting from Toronto and Wanda thought that Larry and Helen should meet. She invited Larry over for dinner. It got late. Phil and Wanda went to bed. So did Larry and Helen. And in the morning Wanda came bounding into Helen’s bedroom expecting to find her alone. Surprise. She walked right into ... Larry pauses for a second. Right into something she didn’t expect to see. Larry will never forget the look on her face when she came through the door. And since that time, Wanda’s never introduced him to any more of her women friends.

"Go figure," I say, handing Larry a Scotch.

I have this image of Larry and Helen having sex, and Wanda walking in and out of the room in a hurry.
I have this image of Larry and me having sex.

I take Larry and the bottle of Scotch up to my bedroom. It is cold in the room because I've left one of the windows open. Larry and I undress hurriedly and slide under the covers. It's been a long time since I've felt soft, warm skin next to mine. Larry laughs because I am everywhere at once on his body. He tells me that he has no feeling in a lot of places because of the motorcycle accident. He has no feeling around his navel, unless I bite really hard, then he can feel it. I bite him really hard.

He bites me back. Not a sharp nip like I gave him, but a bite that starts on my neck and travels right down my spine and into soft wet parts. Larry finds them with his fingers and rubs the head of his penis up and down, up and down against softness and then hard, he pulls away because he isn't wearing a condom. He has one in the pocket of his jeans. I have some too, but Larry's jeans are closer. On the floor right where he dropped them, and there's a condom in the pocket, and a condom pulled out of the package and slid on top of Larry's penis and I say that it looks funny, like a hat. Like a floppy hat, now. Because I've laughed.

But Larry says to give it a moment, it'll come back to life. He curls his body around mine, rubs against me. Larry says it's been a long time since he's used a condom. He wants to make love to me, but with this damn thing on he can't seem to get anywhere.

I tell him that's okay, we can fuck later.

Larry frowns. He asks me why I call it fucking.

I ask him what he calls it.

He says he calls it making love.

That's a euphemism, I tell him. My generation calls it fucking.
Larry and I don't make love or fuck. We sleep together in the literal sense of the word. In each other's arms for some of the time, and always with some part of our body touching.

When I wake up it's four o'clock in the morning. I move against Larry's body. He kisses me. He rolls over so that his back is toward me. He breathes deeply. I don't wake him, even though I'd like to.
Yvonne, the fortune teller, was right about one thing. She told me that I would win some prize money and that the money would be connected to a man. And here's a fifteen dollar cheque, just arrived this afternoon from the Melford Agricultural Society for my award-winning, second place sketch. The money will be connected to a man soon because I'm going to give it to Larry. I want to pay him for his nude modelling. I wonder if Yvonne saw Larry in her playing cards. I wonder if she saw him lying naked on my quilt with a pumpkin under his arm. But I doubt that second sight is so specific.

I put Larry's money on the kitchen table so that I won't forget to give it to him whenever I see him again. I haven't seen Larry all week, but I've been too busy to notice. Bill Stead was in no hurry for the store-front signs a week ago, and then when I delivered his sandwich board on Monday, he said that he'd really like to have the other signs up by Thanksgiving. If that wasn't asking too much. Seemed that no one could find the dry cleaners and Laundromat when the sign went down, and people began to call the owner, Barry Campbell, and ask if he'd gone out of business. So the signs had to be finished in a hurry. First Barry's sign then the real estate office and then Norma Fayne's beauty shop.

Norma's sign is drying on my easel. It's the only one that won't be up before Thanksgiving, but Norma doesn't mind. She told me that if her customers can't find her after thirty years of being in the same spot, then it's their problem. "You just enjoy your turkey, Hon," she said.
Julie’s sign is sitting next to Norma’s. It’s just a small one that can go across the door of her pottery studio or maybe she’ll want to hang it at the bottom of the laneway. She’s had the name, Sunpots, registered for two years. I did the letters in mustard and rust colours, but I can do it over if she doesn’t like it. The important thing is that she sees her company name. Then she’ll know that things are really happening and that having her own studio is not just a pipe dream.

Julie should be arriving in a few minutes. I have no milk. No groceries of any kind, I realize, opening the fridge. I don’t have enough time to run into town. I need to take a shower. When was the last time I showered? The last time was two days ago. Wednesday, and the time before that? Sunday morning with Larry. That was a more memorable shower than Wednesday’s. Very sensuous and long too. We drained the well that morning.

That’s one of the problems with this place. There isn’t a good water supply. Ralph Sullivan says there’s a well where the old barn used to be and that I can open it up if I need it. It’s Ralph’s property, now, so I appreciate the offer, and likely I will open the well when Julie moves her pottery studio into the farmhouse. I’ll have to talk to her about that this weekend. Make some definite plans before winter. I wonder if Julie has told her landlord that she’s leaving. She won’t have any trouble finding an apartment in Melford. I saw in The Melford News that Wally of Wally’s Bait and Tackle has an apartment to rent in his big house at Colpoy’s Bay. Beautiful old house, if Julie doesn’t mind a basement full of night crawlers and minnows.

I pull off my jeans and t-shirt and step into the shower. I close my eyes. The hot water and steam take all the worries away. The Thanksgiving turkey will not be undercooked like last year’s bird. Larry and I will take more showers together, maybe. Which reminds me that I have to pick up my turkey from Peacock’s Meat Market, and I should invite Larry for Thanksgiving dinner. The thought of roast turkey and cranberries and
stuffing is making my stomach growl. I haven't eaten in hours. When Julie gets here, we'll go into town to the Grain Bin. Used to be the Melford Co-op before it was converted into a feed mill for people.

I am not alone. When I shut off the shower taps, I can hear two voices. Julie and someone else. I wrap my head in a towel, pull on my clothes and go into the kitchen. Julie is showing Derek the polar bear head that she made me.

"My hair is dripping wet," I protest as Julie draws me into a communal hug. One arm around Derek. The other around me. Derek and I look at each other out of the corners of our eyes. It looks like we're going to be friends. Julie asks me if I want to go to Derek's mother's restaurant for dinner. Tonight's Special is Georgian Bay Whitefish.

I tell her that's a possibility.

I notice that my answering machine is flashing. It's Larry. He says that he's been busy with the contracts for his American patents, and he had to go to Toronto for a few days to talk to his lawyer, but now he's back and he'd like to see me. I'd like to see him too. I have to give him his prize money.

It is decided then, says Julie. Ruth's Cafe for whitefish and Beesting cake. Beesting cake, she explains to me, is a white cake layered with whipped cream and berries. Derek's mom is famous for her cake, says Julie.

"Sounds good," I tell her.

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Ruth Patterson is happy to see us again. She takes our order and suggests to Derek that we have our dinner out on the porch. It is such a beautiful, warm evening, she says, handing him a wet cloth to wipe the table. So we sit on the porch next to pots of purple and yellow chrysanthemums, and Derek tells Julie about the time he drove his father's truck into a cement wall. Derek was only five at the time, but he started the truck the way he'd seen his father do it so many times before, turning the keys and yanking the gear shift lever, and then the truck just started heading toward the wall.
Or so everyone tells him. He doesn't remember too much about the incident. Just the part where his father hauled him out of the driver's seat and shook him and held him. shook him and held him.

Sharing Derek and Julie's company, I feel more alive than I've felt in days. I didn't realize that I was starved for companionship, but it must be so. Derek tells a good story. He makes Julie and me laugh many times before our whitefish arrives. He has a habit of running his hands through his dark hair so that by the time he's finished his tale, his hair is standing straight up. Julie says he's thirty-six, but in his trendy shorts (a combination of ripped jean shorts over boxer underwear) he is a young-looking thirty-six. With nice legs. Smooth, tanned legs. Defined calf muscles and just a bit of stubble at the ankles where he hasn't shaved in a few days.

Derek tells me that he doesn't shave his legs every day, just a couple times a week. He's a cyclist and he says lots of cyclists do it because if they fall and get scraped up, it's easier if there's no hair around the wound. Hair can cause an infection, he says.

But how often does he fall? I ask.

There isn't a nick or a bruise on Derek's legs.

Derek rarely falls. If I want to know the truth, he says, he's been shaving his legs for five years and he just likes the way they feel.

Sounds reasonable. That's the same reason I shave my legs, I tell him.

He wants me to go with him and Julie to Bruce's Caves tomorrow. I wasn't going to go with them. I have to pick up my turkey and drop by Leedale's Vegetable Farm. I also have a few pies to bake. I promised Julie and my father that I'd make them a pumpkin pie that they wouldn't forget, although Tom of Tom's Bakery in Sauble Beach makes a memorable pumpkin pie.

So we'll buy a pie from Tom, says Julie. I have to come to the caves she says. And Larry too. We'll do all our errands in the morning and then we'll go to the caves and the
fen and whatever else we can fit into one day. But no camel rides, says Julie. She got the article that I sent to her about the camel stomping. Prancer would never do a thing like that, says Julie, but there's no point pushing our luck.

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Julie is not a morning person. She groans when I walk into her bedroom. I tell her she doesn't have to get up if she doesn't want to, but I'm going into town to pick up the turkey and a few groceries. She groans again. She does not get up. I pull the comforter over her shoulders and close the bedroom door behind me. I don't want Fred coming into her room, jumping on her bed and sticking his cold nose in her ear. He has a habit of doing that. It's okay if you're used to it, but it's a rude awakening if you're not.

Melford is busier than usual this morning because of Thanksgiving and people picking up last minute items or in my case, picking up everything from turkey to pepper corn squash. Peacock's Meat Market is so full of customers that it's hard to squeeze in without hitting somebody with the door. I have to take a number which is a rarity.

Things aren't moving along as they should because Mary Peacock can't find the ducks that Dr. Stanson ordered a month ago. He says it was a month ago, and his face is getting redder and redder. I'm thinking that Dr. Stanson might have to eat turkey when Frank Peacock emerges from the back room swinging two ducks by their webbed feet and saying that the darn things got shoved to the back of the cooler, but he knew they were in there somewhere. Thwack. He thumps them on the counter, and says, "Sorry about the wait, Dr. Stanson."

The woman next to me whispers, "It's not every day that you see a doctor waiting."

"True," I say.

I know this woman. I used to be friends with her daughter, Clarice.

"Mrs. Weatherall?" I ask.

"Oh, Rosemary," she says, recognizing me.
Mrs. Weatherall is still nursing at the Melford Hospital, which is what she was doing fifteen years ago.

"And Clarice?" I ask. "How is she?"

Clarice is good, says Mrs. Weatherall. She's living in Oakville. She's got two boys now.

I haven't thought about Clarice in years, but there was a period in our early teens when we spent a lot of time together. When I stayed overnight at Clarice's house, she and I used to shake the Eight Ball until the wee hours of the morning, until we were so tired we couldn't see into its murky green depths. The black, plastic ball was about the size of a softball and it was filled with green liquid. And you could shake it and ask it a question like, "Does Tod Good really have warts on his penis?" and it would answer, "YES," "NO," or "SOMETIMES." Tod Good had warts SOMETIMES. When we were thirteen, we shook the eight ball so much that the white block that contained all the answers lost its buoyancy, and would no longer bob to the window. Even better.

"Is there a heaven?" asked Clarice.

We had to peer into the dark water to find the answer.

"I think it's saying, yes," said Clarice.

"I think it's saying, no." I said.

We each found the answer we were looking for. It worked this way with other questions too.

Mrs. Weatherall wants to know how my mother and father are getting along. "In London, is it?" she asks.

I tell her that they're coming up tomorrow to spend Thanksgiving with me.

"You'll want the company," says Mrs. Weatherall. "Living in that big house all by yourself."
She knows that I'm living in the old Gruhn house, then. "Oh yes," she says. "Fourteen rooms." she says. Do I use them all? And isn't that a lot of cleaning or do I have some of them shut off like Mrs. Gruhn did?

There are one or two rooms that I don't use every day, I tell her, but nothing shut off.

"Mind the stove then," says Mrs. Weatherall.

"The stove?" I ask.

She doesn't know what made her say that. Just that it left some awful scarring on Mrs. Gruhn's leg. The burn, she says by way of explanation. She had to change the bandages a couple of times when Mrs. Gruhn was in the hospital.

"I don't know about the burn," I say.

"She burned her leg on the stove," says Mrs. Weatherall. My mother can tell me all about it, she says. My mother visited Mrs. Gruhn in the hospital. In fact, she was Mrs. Gruhn's only visitor, which was too bad because Mrs. Gruhn was a lovely, sweet woman.

It is number eighty-nine's turn at the meat counter. That is Mrs. Weatherall's number. She can't talk any more.

"Tell your mother I said hello," says Mrs. Weatherall.

I don't remember anything about a burn and I've never heard anyone describe Mrs. Gruhn as lovely or sweet. I thought Wanda hit the nail on the head when she said that Mrs. Gruhn was cantankerous. I'll have to ask my mother about the burn, but I doubt that she can tell me anything about Mrs. Gruhn's sweet side.

When it is my turn at the meat counter, Mary Peacock finds my fresh, sixteen pound turkey in seconds. As an afterthought, I ask her to slice me up some roast beef and ham. Might as well pack a lunch for the caves.

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"So did he actually live in the caves?" asks Julie on our drive over to the village of Oxenden.

Derek doesn't know. He knows that Robert Bruce was a Scottish hermit who wore bed sheets.

From my readings, I know that Robert Bruce died around the turn of the century and he was buried in the Oxenden Cemetery.

Larry doesn't say too much until everyone's had a chance to show off their knowledge and then he tells the story as he knows it. Robert Bruce didn't actually live in the caves, like a caveman. He lived in a shack by the caves, and sometimes he lived in the county jail when the weather was bad. He always paid for his room and board when he stayed in jail. He had money, says Larry, and a couple hundred acres of property. People thought he was strange because he used to bathe outside, even in the worst weather, but he lived to ninety years so it couldn't have done him any harm, says Larry. When he died, they buried him in a suit that they found in the bottom of an old steamer trunk.

"I wonder if he wanted to be buried in his good suit?" I ask, thinking that Robert Bruce might have been more comfortable in his loose fitting blankets with the pink stripe down the side.

"We'll have to ask his ghost when we get there, right Rosemary?" says Larry.

"Is there a ghost?" asks Julie.

"There's always a ghost," I tell her.

We take the STEEP PATH, USE AT YOUR OWN RISK to the caves, as opposed to the Bruce Trail. We want the adventure that the sign promises, but the path is worn smooth by adventure seekers like us, and the incline is hardly noticeable. Leaves fall around us in yellows and reds and Julie says that this is like the Thanksgivings she remembers at home in Onaping. Up ahead I hear a child's voice and around the bend
we see her, sitting by the path waiting for the rest of her family to catch up. She is twirling a red leaf. She doesn't say hello because we are strangers. Her mother and father and brother are not far behind, but their progress has been slowed by their little boy. He is crying because he's skinned his knee on the dangerous path.

The trail takes us close to the escarpment and I can see cave-like indentations in the rock. I wonder if that's all we're going to see when we get to Bruce's Caves. A small indentation in the escarpment. Will we even know that we've arrived once we get there?

The arrival is sudden and I have no doubt that this is the cave that people come to see. It has two archways and an enormous pillar in the centre. There is a big peace sign painted in white against the far wall and names scratched into the rock everywhere. True love, Gordon and Melissa. As if their love will last as long as this cave. Thousands of years. As if.

The rock is cool to the touch and grainy where water and limestone have mixed together and formed something that looks like cement on the walls, but isn't. There are mosquitoes in the cave. Julie and I slap our way through a narrow passage that takes us out of the cave and into cedar trees that hang on to the side of the escarpment by their roots, and ferns that grow in less than a thimbleful of soil on rock.

There are other caves, not as big, but deep with natural skylights and windows. We find toeholds in the rock, and trees to hold on to, and we climb for a view of the forest. It's harder going down then going up. Larry offers me his hand. I tell him I don't need his help. I want to do it myself. Coming down, I disturb a garter snake with my hand and the snake drops off the rock just before I do. We both land safely at Larry's feet. The snake slithers away and I shake the dirt from the seat of my pants, and Larry tries not to smile. We stop for lunch in a small cave which has no broken beer bottles or graffiti, if you don't look too closely.
After lunch, Derek wants to do more climbing. His bicycle muscles are just getting warmed up. Larry says he'll go with him. It wouldn't be safe Derek going off on his own. I'm glad that Larry and Derek have gone climbing and that Julie and I have a chance to talk, just the two of us. Julie says she's having a great time and she can really feel the muscles in her legs. Can I feel the muscles pulling? she asks.

"I can feel them," I tell her.

"Is it all right if Derek comes for Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow night?" she asks.

I tell her that it's fine.

"Is Larry coming?" she asks.

"I think so," I say.

There's something about this couple thing that's making me edgy. I tell Julie that Larry and I are not getting close, not in the way she thinks. Not like her and Derek.

"No?" she asks. "Does Larry know that?"

"Yes," I tell her, exasperated by her assumptions.

Julie says that she has something to tell me. Something that I'm not going to like. She's found affordable studio space in Hamilton. On Locke Street. She's decided that it's just easier to stay in Hamilton and set up her pottery studio there. Easier financially. Easier all the way around. "Do I understand?" she asks.

When we first talked about her moving to Melford, she was caught up in the excitement, she says, and she really didn't think it through. It was more my dream than hers. She's happier in the city with its pollution and overpopulation. It's in her blood. She laughs. All this beauty, she says, encompassing the cave and the forest with a wave of her hand, is too rich for her blood. Julie doesn't think she can afford to relocate. Not right now, anyway. And besides, with Derek living in Toronto, it makes more sense to stay in Hamilton which is only forty-five minutes away from him.
What can I say? I tell her that of course I understand. And that if her dream is to have a pottery studio on Locke Street, then that's what she should do. Although I don't understand why she'd want to work out of a studio in the city when it's so much more beautiful up here.

Julie says she doesn't need beauty. "That's you," she reminds me.

And if it's a question of finances, wouldn't it be cheaper to live up here? I ask her. I wouldn't charge her anything for the studio space, except hydro because the kiln would use up a lot of hydro, wouldn't it? I tell her about Wally's apartment, which is just the kind of apartment she's always talked about having. The top floor of a big Victorian house. I bet there's even a bath tub with claw feet. I don't tell her about Wally's worm business, though.

Derek. I don't say anything about Derek. I know that Derek is non-negotiable, and besides I can see him and Larry coming through the trees, now.

Derek's got a scrape on his leg. The patch is red against his tanned skin, but he says it doesn't hurt too badly. Just stings a little. The rock that he was holding came loose and he took a fall.

Could have been worse, says Larry. He tells us about a friend who fell, tapped his head on a rock, and died.

Could have been worse if Derek had hair on his legs too, but I keep that thought to myself.

When we get back to the car, we all agree that the caves were enough for one day. Derek will take Julie to see the fen and the turkey vulture another time.

He really should get some antiseptic on his leg, Julie tells him.

The ride home is quiet, like it always is with rides home.
In the morning, I'm awakened by the phone. I can't imagine who is calling me at 8 a.m. I am even more surprised to discover Larry on the other end of the line. He tells me that there's something strange going on at his house and he thought Julie and I might like to see it. He won't say what it is. Just that we should come, and it might be better if we walk instead of drive or we might scare them into the bush. Deer? Wild pigs? What's he got? I wonder as I pad into Julie's room.

I take two steps in and two steps out. Julie is not alone. When I went to bed last night, she wasn't alone either. She and Derek were curled up on the sofa in front of the wood stove and Derek was telling Julie about a place on Aberdeen Avenue in Hamilton that she might be able to turn into a studio. Derek thought that maybe his friend would rent her the carriage house behind his place for much less than the studio on Locke Street. Maybe there was even living space in it. Derek wasn't sure.

So now it's a carriage house on Aberdeen, is it? It's probably a good idea that I walk to Larry's this morning without Julie. I need to clear my head, instead of stewing over what could have (should have) been. But it's hard not to think about it. I was looking forward to having Julie back in my life. I was counting on it. And now I'm faced with life alone again, and I don't know how I feel about that. I'm not so enthusiastic about my house as I was six months ago when it was a haven from the world. From Henry. From everything. Now I'm wondering if the isolation is more than I bargained for.
It's as strange a sight as Larry promised. Like walking onto a movie set. There are horses everywhere and they are not calmly grazing on Larry's grass. They are galloping with manes flying. There are about forty of them, Larry figures. And as clichéd as it sounds, the horses are being led by a huge, white stallion. The stallion (Larry is calling him Thor) takes the group toward the swamp, back to the bush, across the field and down to Sky Lake and then up around Larry's house again and again. Larry says they've only been running around like this for the last few minutes. When he first discovered them, they were quietly grazing. He points to the old syrup kettle on the corner of his porch which used to be full of flowers. There is not much left of Larry's petunias.

Larry thinks the horses are escapees from the Limberlost Riding Stable. He hasn't called the stable yet. Like me, he's enjoying the illusion of wild horses. We both know that as soon as Larry calls the stable, the horses will be collected and taken back to work.

When the owners arrive from Limberlost they are apologetic. This has never happened before. It only takes them a few minutes to get the horses under control. They go for the white horse, and as soon as they have Casper (not Thor) rounded up, the others follow obediently. They lead the horses over Sullivan's field toward Highway 6 and the riding stable. All that remains of the wild horses are hoof prints in Larry's lawn and half-eaten petunias in his kettle.

Larry invites me for breakfast. He tells me that he is going to make grits for me. Not only will they stick to my ribs, he assures me, they will soak up any radioactivity in my body. Sometimes I swear he makes this stuff up, just to see if I'm gullible enough to swallow it.

Do I want my eggs boiled or scrambled? he asks.

Boiled, I say.
He asks me where Julie is and I tell him that she is sleeping with Derek in my guest room.

"And you’re not too happy about this," says Larry, picking up something in my tone that I didn’t mean for him to hear.

"It’s okay," I say.

But then it comes out in a flood. How I wanted Julie with me and now she’s not going to be with me, and I’m alone in that house and maybe it isn’t what I want any more.

"So sell the house," says Larry, leaning against the oven door, his back to the stove.

"Sell the house?" I ask.

"Sure," he says.

"Then what?" I ask.

"Move in with me," he says.

Is he kidding? He must be kidding. The last thing I’d do is move in with Larry, or any man. I’m just about to say some wise-ass remark when I realize that Larry is looking at me intently, and that his offer is serious. As serious as me wanting to share my house and my life with Julie, only to have her fall in love with Derek, the accountant with nice legs. Life is too weird.

"Just think about it," says Larry, turning back to the stove to stir his grits.

Larry’s back is on fire. Larry feels the heat at the same moment that I see the flames on his sweatshirt.

"Is my back on fire?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, grabbing the nearest thing I can get my hands on which is a dish towel. I try to smother the flames with it.

Larry asks me if it’s out yet, and I say, "Not yet."
At which point Larry decides that this is not working. He sprints for the front door, jumps off the porch and onto the grass where he rolls around like a dog with an infestation of fleas.

"Is it out now?" he says, turning his back to me.

"It's out," I say.

Larry's sweatshirt has a hole in it. The t-shirt he was wearing underneath the sweatshirt is singed, but Larry's pony-tail, which was tucked under the t-shirt, is unharmed.

"It was getting awfully warm back there," Larry says, tugging at his sweatshirt to get a look at it.

"It's ruined," I say.

"Not ruined," says Larry.

We go back in the house. Luckily, the grits are not overcooked although the eggs are now hard-boiled. Larry turns the burners off and puts some toast in the toaster. It is not a pop up toaster, but one of those old-fashioned kind with doors.

"You have to watch it like a hawk or else the toast burns," says Larry.

"You wouldn't want that," I say.

Larry asks me to trim off the singed parts of his sweatshirt. My trimming leaves a hole the size of a basketball. Larry says it's too bad about the sweatshirt. It was one of his good ones. He says he'll just have to wear it around the house now.

I wonder why he would wear a sweatshirt that has no back, but I don't bother him with questions. I don't want to distract him from his toast.

Larry's grits are good with honey and cinnamon, and the toast isn't burnt.

I thank Larry for an exciting breakfast.

He kisses me and says that we could do this all the time if we lived together.

That's something to think about.

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My potato peel sprays the sink, the counter, and sometimes drops to the floor. My mother's peel drops neatly into a strainer in the sink. She has three potatoes peeled in the time it takes me to do one. She tells me that the doctors have put my father on a new kind of medication. Something to make him breath easier. She tells me about the speeding ticket that he got on his way back to London the last time he came to see me. She tells me that it looks like they're going to Mexico at the end of the month. Flying. Not driving. If my father wants to drive down the Baja peninsula, he can rent a car once they get there, she says.

My mother and I have always come together at the kitchen sink. Washing dishes, peeling potatoes, and catching up on family news. My mother doesn't talk about herself. She talks about Matthew or my father. She tells me that Matthew called her a few days ago from the Northwest Territories and it looks like he won't be home until Christmas.

I tell her that he called me too. Sounds like the work at the diamond mine is going well and that he's excited about the all-weather tent that he's designing.

"And you're doing well?" my mother asks.

It's just the two of us in the house. Derek and Julie have gone to the flea market in Mar, and my father has gone over to Larry's. At Larry's invitation. My father was pleased. It's been a few years since he's seen the house and he wants to see if Larry is keeping it up. He wants to see how many of the blue spruce trees that he planted just behind the house are still alive. The winters are so hard on them.

"I'm doing okay." I tell her, drying my hands.

I can feel the temperature in the house dropping which means that I need to put some wood in the stove. It's cold today. If I was keeping a calendar on the weather, I'd write: Cold and Sunny. It's the kind of day that you need a fire to keep the chill out of the house. Not a fire on your back, though.
My mother is finished with potatoes and now she’s cutting the turnip into smaller cubes because she says it will cook faster this way.

I tell my mother about meeting Mrs. Weatherall at the butcher’s. I tell her that Mrs. Weatherall says, "Hello."

My mother is pleased. She always liked Kay Weatherall.

I ask my mother about Mrs. Gruhn’s burn. How did it happen and how come I didn’t know about it?

"You were away at university," she says.

My mother is sure that she told me about it at the time.

I don’t remember.

It was in March, says my mother. They hadn’t heard from Emallen in a few days, so my father went to check on her. He said that when he got there, the snow was piled to her door and it didn’t look like she’d been out in days, which was unusual for Emallen. She always got outside at least once a day to check the temperature if nothing else. My father found her wrapped up in blankets sitting by her stove, which wasn’t unusual, but she was in a lot of pain. And that was unusual. So he asked her what was the matter and that’s when she showed him her leg. She’d been trying to treat the burn herself, he said, but it was infected and it was a mess. My father took her to the Melford Hospital and they kept her for two weeks. It was the best place for her, says my mother.

"Mrs. Weatherall changed her bandages," I say.

"Yes. she was really good with her," says my mother.

"She said that Mrs. Gruhn was a lovely, sweet woman." I tell my mother, smiling.

"She was," says my mother.

"Sweet?" I ask.

"In the end, she was a lovely, sweet woman," says my mother. "That’s what killed her."
My mother wants to know if we really need the broccoll. There are so many other vegetables.

I tell her we need the broccoll.

Stubbornness is what kept her alive, says my mother. And she wasn't really that bad, not as bad as everyone made her out to be.

The Whites and the Sullivans wouldn't have anything to do with Mrs. Gruhn, and they told my mother and father that if they were smart, they wouldn't have anything to do with her either. My mother remembers Flo's words, exactly: "The more you do for Mrs. Gruhn, the more she wants. And she never gives you so much as a thank you."

My mother didn't understand at the time.

"I guess I must have said something or maybe it was the expression on my face," says my mother, "but I remember Flo saying that I'd find out soon enough what she meant."

"What I found out," says my mother, "was that Mrs. Gruhn was eighty years old and she had no one taking care of her and she was grateful for whatever your father and I did for her. You remember all the things she gave us? The fruit, the bottles, the dishes. She paid her way."

I'm sure my mother is right. I'm sure that Mrs. Gruhn was grateful for all the things that my mother and father did for her.

My mother says that sometimes she wished that Mrs. Gruhn had family or friends and that all the burden didn't fall to her and my father's shoulders, but Emallen didn't have anyone. At least she didn't have anyone close enough. My mother knows that Andrew Wettlaufer is coming to visit me in a few days, but she has nothing to say on that subject. Except that she says she doesn't understand why I would want to talk to him or why Andrew would be interested in his aunt's house after so many years of
disinterest. He might have paid a little more attention to his aunt when she was alive, she adds.

"I know," I say.

"She wasn't an easy person," says my mother. "You remember how she was when we had her over for Thanksgiving dinner."

I remember Mrs. Gruhn tossing her wine back with one jerk and holding her glass out for seconds. I remember doing the same thing with my small wine glass and being told never to do it again. I remember another Thanksgiving a few years later when my father asked Mrs. Gruhn if she wanted another piece of turkey and instead of saying "yes please" or "no thank you", she reached over and ripped the drumstick off, leaving my father with his knife poised and nothing to cut. Every time my father tells that story he says that Mrs. Gruhn darn near pulled the bird right off the table. And then there was the time that Mrs. Gruhn gave Sidney, our long-haired persian, a piece of turkey skin and the cat threw up under the table during tea and pumpkin pie.

"I can laugh about it now," says my mother, trying hard not to laugh. "But it wasn't so funny at the time."

Still my mother likes to remember Mrs. Gruhn this way rather than that sweet, lovely person that she became. It all started with the burn. Mrs. Gruhn healed on the outside, but she was afraid after that, said my mother. She was afraid she'd do the same thing again. Fall asleep against the stove. Maybe burn more than her leg the next time around. It was about a week, maybe two weeks after she got out of the hospital, says my mother, when she asked about the old age home in Melford. Was there room for her?

It was strictly her decision to go into Melford Haven, says my mother. Once she was there, she never complained about anything. It was just like Kay Weatherall said. Mrs. Gruhn was a lovely woman. My mother visited her every other Saturday. Mrs.
Gruhn liked the food. She liked the nurses. Everyone was so kind. About two months after she moved into Melford Haven, Mrs. Gruhn got shingles on her face and head. She wore hats to hide the sores and she never complained about the pain.

My mother believes it was the stress of being in the old aged home that eventually killed her. If she'd only complained a little. If she'd only talked about all the things that she was missing. Her gardens and her house and her cats. But she never did. She sat in her rocking chair in her semi-private room for six months and then she had a stroke. She died in the Melford Hospital. She was eighty-nine years old at the time.

"She didn't die in her kitchen, then," I say.

"Of course not Rose," says my mother. "She died in the hospital."

"I guess I just wanted her to die in the kitchen," I say.

"Well, I'm sure she would have liked that too," says my mother.

My mother has no more vegetables to scrape, peel, wash or cut so the conversation is over. She asks me for Larry's phone number. She is going to call my father and tell him to come home now. She knows how long it takes him to get going and she wouldn't want him holding everyone up and ruining Thanksgiving dinner.

I can hear Derek and Julie coming in the door. They are back from the flea market.

"What a mob," says Julie. "And all that junk."

Julie shows me the spoon ring that she's bought. Tiny silver roses along the edge. And the best wind chime, she says pulling it out of a bag. It's made from old spoons and forks with curled tines. And for me, a gravy boat, says Julie, because just this morning I was saying that I wished I had another gravy boat because one was never enough at Thanksgiving. And this boat is hand-painted, says Julie, and an antique.

And real gold along the edge, says Derek.

A gold-edged boat. It's just what I need, I tell them.
"I have something for you too," I say to Julie.

I get her Sunpots sign out of the workshop.

Julie says the colours on the sign are perfect. She loves the sunflower in the corner. It's exactly what she imagined.

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There is only one casualty at dinner. Larry's mashed potato sculpture ends up on the floor. And it was such a good likeness of a turkey, too. Larry doesn't know how the bowl slipped out of his hands and onto the kitchen floor. It just happened.

It's really not a problem, I tell him. There are more mashed potatoes in the pot.

I turn down Larry's offer to slice the turkey. I have visions of Larry sawing a finger off. I tell him that it's a tradition in our family that the daughter slices the turkey with an electric knife and lays the meat out on a platter in the kitchen.

He says he's never heard of that tradition.
Chapter 13

Offering

Andrew Wettlaufer is well-preserved for his seventy years. He is tall. Big-boned, you'd call it. Not much hair left. Glasses. He's wearing an expensive blue suit, and he shakes my hand with a firm, warm grasp. I show him inside the house. He remembers it well. He marvels at the plaster walls because he's never seen the walls stripped to their plaster before. They were covered in wallpaper in his day. He peers at the woodwork, impressed with the workmanship.

"Still no closets," says Andrew, as I take him through the upstairs bedrooms.

I point to the wardrobe that I use, and that I prefer because of its beauty.

Andrew agrees that antique wardrobes are beautiful, but women these days, he says, prefer walk-in closets for all their clothes and shoes. He says that an ensuite bath would add to the resale value of the place. I could do it easily by knocking down a wall. Andrew's been in the real estate business for over forty years. He knows what people want. He gives me his card.

I take him back to the kitchen for coffee. He admires the banister as he goes down the stairs. So far, he hasn't asked me anything about his aunt's photos or letters. But lots of questions about the house. Do I have plans for the kitchen floor?

"Looks like there's no way to bring back the pine flooring in here," he says, peering under the linoleum.

He's right. The kitchen needs a new floor, but right now I don't have that kind of money, I tell him.
"Needs new cupboards, too," says Andrew.

I serve coffee in mugs that Julie made me, and I arrange shortbread on a plate that Mrs. Gruhn gave me years ago for a Christmas present. Maybe Andrew will recognize the plate.

He doesn't say anything about the plate. He admires the mugs though.

I bring out the box of letters and cards that is all that is left of his Aunt Emalien. I put them in front of him, and then I take Fred to the door. I don't want Fred to beg at the table for cookies, and I want to give Andrew a few minutes alone with his aunt's things.

When I return, Andrew is looking at the photographs. He has the maple syrup one in his hand. The one with Austin and Emalien, looking grim. He tells me that when he was a boy, he helped them make maple syrup and it was nothing like the way they do it now. It was a lot of hard work, he says simply.

I want to ask him straight out. Were you Emalien's son? But I've only known the man thirty minutes. So I lead up to the question by fishing around in the photographs and drawing out the young Emalien and baby Andrew photo.

"This is you, then," I say, putting it on top of the pile.

"That's me," says Andrew.

"Emalien looks beautiful in this photograph," I say.

"I don't remember her ever looking that young," says Andrew.

"Me neither," I say, smiling. "She was seventy-nine when I met her for the first time."

"I remember you as a kid," says Andrew.

I don't remember him.

He tells me that he saw me a few times, but the one time he remembers was when I was walking down the road and I stopped and stared at his convertible.
I don’t remember, but it’s possible.

"Did you visit Mrs. Gruhn often?" I ask. I can’t resist rubbing his nose in his absence, just a little.

"No, not often," he says.

He tells me that this farm holds no fond memories for him. He lived in this house until he was thirteen and then he left. Ended up in Preston.

"With Anna and Albert Wettlaufer," I say.

He looks at me, surprised that I know so much about him.

"It’s in the letters," I tell him.

"So, you know that Emallen was my mother, then?" he asks.

I know now.

Andrew doesn’t tell me much, but he tells me that he didn’t like life on the farm. Didn’t like it when he was a kid, and didn’t want any part of this farm when it was left to him after Emallen died. So he sold the land to Sullivan and although it took some doing, he finally found someone to buy the house. Gerard Baines didn’t pay him too much for it, but he took it off his hands and now, Andrew says that he’s willing to take it off my hands.

"How much do you want for it?" he asks.

"What?" I ask.

Andrew wants his aunt’s house back. Not for sentimental reasons, he assures me, but for his son and daughter-in-law who live in Owen Sound. His daughter-in-law wants to open up a bed and breakfast place, and if the price is right, Andrew thinks my house would make a good B. and B.

"Make me an offer," I say. I want to hear what Andrew’s willing to pay for Emallen’s house now that it’s fixed. Now that Gerard Baines did all the dirty work, and raised the foundation an inch at a time.
Andrew offers less than I paid for the house.

I laugh.

Andrew asks me if I want to trade. This house for one in another location. Andrew knows a lot of people in the real estate business. People from Hamilton, he says.

Andrew plays his cards one at a time. So he knows that I'm from Hamilton, but what he doesn't know is that the city holds no fond memories for me.

"Not just Hamilton," he says.

My face is too easy to read.

Andrew tells me that he can get me a house just about anywhere I like. He has connections. A better house than this one, he adds.

"It's a lot to think about," I say.

"You've got my card," he says.

When Andrew leaves, he forgets to take the box of photographs and letters. But then, that's not the reason he came. He came to see if the house was worth anything.

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Larry won't take the fifteen dollars in prize money that I offer him. He says it's all mine. That I did all the work on the sketch.

I put the money back in my pocket. It's pointless to argue with Larry. But I will leave the money somewhere, before I go. Maybe in grandpa's chair. It doesn't matter that Larry's going to make a million dollars on his inventions some day. That's not the point. I always pay my debts.

I tell Larry about Andrew's visit. About Andrew's offer out of the blue. Larry listens. He asks me if I'm going to sell.

I tell him that I don't know. Maybe I'll sell the house in the spring.

He says that I should sell right away if I'm going to sell. The winter's not exactly something worth sticking around for, if I'm not really committed to the place. Am I committed to the place? he asks.
"I don't know," I tell him. "I'm not sure that I should have come back to Melford."

"You've only been here for six months," he says.

"And ten years, don't forget." I add.

"When you were a kid. That's different," says Larry.

But I know this place. I know both houses, Larry's and mine. I know the neighbours. I know Melford. And Melford knows me or they think they do.

"Rosemary Hatch isn't it?"

I know this place like the back of my hand, I tell him. Maybe it's time to try some place new. Push the boundaries of my experience.

Larry says we should take the canoe out in the lake.

"When?" I ask.

"Now," he says.

Have I ever canoed in Sky Lake? he asks me.

Once, when I was about sixteen, but that was a long time ago, I tell him.

"Did I go as far as the Point?" asks Larry.

"No," I say.

So I've never seen the old log cabin that Nell Forbes built on the tip of the Point.

Would I like to see it? Larry asks.

"I haven't paddled a canoe in a long time," I tell him.

"It doesn't matter," he says.

Larry has an electric motor. He says it will get us out there, but we might have to paddle home.

I tell him I'm wearing a life-jacket for sure. I know his track record.

He laughs. He tells me to bring along all the safety devices that I want, as long as I come with him.


Vita Auctoris

Laurie Abel was born in Hamilton, and then transplanted to the Bruce Peninsula when she was nine years old. At nineteen she returned to Hamilton, attended McMaster University, and earned a B.A. in English Literature. This degree was followed by a B.Ed. from the University of Toronto, and an M.A. in Creative Writing and English Literature from the University of Windsor. Laurie is a writer and teacher.