The Opening

AND OTHER STORIES

Joni Miller

The Opening & Other Stories

by Joni Miller

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About the Author

Joni Miller has been writing, playing music and taking pictures for as long as she can remember. She has published poetry, fiction, non-fiction and songs.

Intermezzo

THE NURSE practically pushes him on me.

“This is the young adult lounge,” she says, her voice syrupy. “And this is Stephen. Stephen – Marianne.”

He’s sprawled out on these big cushions. I’m standing in the doorway like some inarticulate nerd. His expression is too neutral to read. I want to get out, run back to the room they gave me and read magazines or sit staring out the window.

Why won’t they leave me alone?

“I’ll leave you to get acquainted,” the nurse says, slamming the door behind us. I remind myself that she’s not locking us in. This is voluntary, she said, herding me down the hall. In Juvie, every door locks behind you. You get used to it real fast. There’s like no freedom. None.

But kids escape from there. That’s what I heard. This place ought to be a cinch.

“Are they all like her?” I ask.

He seems amused.

“No,” he says, “Nurse Benson is a particularly odious individual. The Day Staff – they’re different. They’re all young, kind of cool, and friendly. You’ll like them. I like them. We’re supposed to like them. They relate.”

He’s educated or something. His bones are what you call refined. He’s handsome – except for the zits. His hands move gracefully when he talks and then fold neatly over his stomach. One foot taps constantly.

“Can you stop that?” I say.

“When I think about it.” The foot stops.

I can't imagine him swearing. The kids in Juvie swear all the time. Fuckin' this and fuckin' that. Some have track marks or crude tattoos and everyone gets fat after awhile. The only interesting thing there is the food. If you're good, you get an extra dessert.

"What brings you here?" he says, like we're at some resort.

"I was at Juvenile Detention," I say, "I'm a dangerous runaway. Only now I guess they've decided I'm not a criminal, I'm crazy. My parents had me put in here."

"Sensible of you to run away then."

I'm beginning to like him. "What's your name again?"

"Stephen." He extends a hand. "Pleased to meet you – do sit down." He motions towards a pile of pillows on the floor. "Sorry there's no furniture – but the Young Adults voted for informality."

"You mean you got to decorate this room?" Six weeks in Juvie and I've forgotten what it's like to get a say about anything.

I look at the walls – big posters of rock stars – Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix.

"They're all dead," I say.

Stephen grins. "Our little joke. They asked us to find pictures of people we look up to."

"And you?" I say. "What brings you here?"

"An ambulance, this time. I'm a repeater. I'm a failure at most things – including suicide." He laughs. "Sometimes I check myself in."

"Why"

“It’s for the décor….”

I ask if he has to fill out the questionnaires every time he comes. It took me hours. The question that got me was about voices.

“They asked if I hear voices!” I say. “What do they mean? Do people hear voices?” His foot begins twitching, like the tapping will start again.

“Oh yes,” he says. “People hear voices.”

“Well, I don’t,” I say. “I just picked all the normal answers. I’m getting out of here.”

I meet the Day Staff. This guy pokes his head into my room and he’s whistling away.

“Good Morning,” he chirps. I’m in the middle of the bed, dressed, fortunately. He locks eyeballs with me.

“You know – YOU could be Miss Canada if you want to be. YOU can be anything you want to be.”

“I don’t want to be Miss Canada,” I say. “It’s a stupid meat show” – but he’s already gone. I turn back to the window – security glass, criss-crossed with little wires, but at least you can see out of it. We’re on the sixth floor and the hospital is on a hill. I see rows and rows of houses, and then a clump of trees and the river bed. Swallows soar past my window, banking into the breeze and riding the wind.

There’s no windows in Juvie, just a patch of caged sky through the courtyard roof.

I meet the other patients. “Fellow Guests” Stephen calls them.

The older ones are a sorry lot, shuffling along in their

hospital slippers. They have stooped shoulders, pasty faces and eyes that never meet mine. Some mumble to themselves. An old woman grabs my arm and starts a story about something long ago.

Stephen introduces the teenagers, waving a gracious hand over the cafeteria table. They look me over with sad, confused, frightened eyes. Stephen names them.

There's Curt – a small guy with sandy coloured hair curling over his collar. He looks looks up briefly but mostly stares at his hands. Ruby is a plump, freckled girl who exudes maturity and sadness and looks kindly at me. At the end of the table, a gangly boy – Robin – has gold blonde hair and a spaced out expression and waves at me. He looks like a lot of guys I met downtown. Linda with the long black hair and granny glasses talks non-stop.

I look for a place among them. Ruby befriends me. Robin lists the drugs he's taken. Linda irritates me. Stephen confides in me. Curt jumps me in Group Therapy. We're supposed to talk about our Stuff – about what's wrong with us.

"Why'd you run away?" he says, accusingly.

"I didn't want to be there." I say. Nobody asks in Juvie. You don't have to spill your guts, they don't want your sordid story. Hell is where you live. Hell is for children."

"That's not an answer," he insists. "Why did you leave? What was going on?"

"I didn't wanna be there. It wasn't my scene."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't like it. Okay?"

"Why? Why didn't you like it?"

I'm looking around the room. Everyone is staring at me. "What's his problem?" I say.

"He wants to understand you, Marianne," says the female Day Staffer. "He's concerned about you… is that so foreign?"

"Well, it's none of his goddamn business…

The Male Staffer is approaching and whispering in a sticky voice "why are you scared, why are you scared to talk about it…."

Christ! Panic rising, I look around the room for help. Stephen winks. "I just don't wanna talk about it," I explode. "Talk about your own damn childhood – let's talk about why Curt doesn't want to be at home. Just leave me alone." I run out of the room, gasping for breath, tears streaming down my face. The female staff comes after me, holds my hand, hands me a tissue. I wish I could tell her everything. I wish I knew what to say.

Stephen takes me to where they park the wheelchairs. We dawdle in the hallway, turning circles, bumping chairs. I tell him about the squat where I was crashing before I got busted. This motorcycle dude dropped me there. He didn't want me at his place anymore. That guy gave me crabs. He denied it, of course.

"Let's have a race," Stephen suggests, and we go wheeling up the hallway, collapsing into giggles at the other end. I keep expecting somebody to stop us.

Stephen in the lounge, enraptured by a scratchy Beethoven record. Eyes closed, he leans his head against the wall, in some other zone. When the piece is finished, he opens his eyes and nods appreciatively at the record player. "I like to let him know when he's done well," he says.

"How can you be crazy?" I say. "You seem so sane."

His eyes moisten. “I think that too,” he says, “but then – I’m crazy.”

He tells me about the voices. Some have names, personalities. The one called Clarence gets him in trouble. This is the death voice, the one that finds the pills, the one that puts knives into his hands. Some voices are real jokers. “Hide under the bed, Stephen,” they urge. “Stuff yourself in the closet….”

A nurse finds him face down under his hospital bed. “What are you doing?” she demands. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m psycho-neurotic with an anxiety-depressive reaction and a schizoid personality,” he says pleasantly. He drags himself out. She hands him his meds and leaves.

Once he drove a car into the middle of a field, swallowed a lot of barbiturates and crawled into the trunk to die. Hours passed. He vomited, got drowsy, then revived. It began to get lighter. He wasn’t dead, just locked in the trunk. He thought, “I’ll suffocate!” and managed to push and dig his way through the back seat. Like a newborn baby greeting the day, encrusted in crud.

There is a dark personality that takes over sometimes, and then he, Stephen, becomes a tiny voice in the back of his own head while Jason, the other, runs rampant. “He doesn’t like you,” Stephen observes.

“Why?”

“You’re being kind to me.”

“That’s bad?”

“Jason thinks so.”

“How do you get rid of these characters?”

“I don’t know.” Stephen looks at me, seeing something else.

“They drug me, they shock me, nothing works. I can’t hold a job, I can’t go to school. All I’m good for is taking up space here.”

I watch a big bearded man fresh out of shock treatment, walking like an automaton, bumping against the walls. Early one morning, a woman starts screaming. “My baby, my baby, they put it in a garbage can!” Two aides rush forward. A hypodermic is pushed into her upper arm. She collapses between the two men. The doorways fill with curious patients. A nurse waves everyone back into their rooms. “It’s none of your business,” she says.

Stephen, his knees buckling in the hallway. The aides rushing in, the hypodermic sinking into his arm. “Stephen, Stephen – “ I come running, but a rough arm pushes me back. None of your business they say again. None of your business. He’s having an anxiety attack.

I’m supposed to be getting better, so I get a 24-hour pass. I hitch-hike to the mall and run into a guy I know. He takes me driving. We smoke joints, listen to his tape deck. He parks the car and I let him kiss me. I don’t want to fuck him, so I lie. I say I have to be back at the hospital. They let me in, but the night nurses scold me. “You’re supposed to stay away overnight,” they say.

“Did you have a good time on your pass?” Stephen asks.

I get moved into Ruby’s room. She wakes me in the night, pale-faced in the weird institutional light. “Look!” she says, dripping her slashed wrists over my bed. I call a nurse and Ruby gets a private room. Her street clothes are taken away and we don’t see her for awhile. There’s something about Ruby’s father that I can’t get the details on.

The administration discusses my release. Arrangements are made. I’ll get welfare, live at the “Y” and go back to high

school. I get anxious. Am I cured now? I still want a light shone in my secret heart. I want their experts to disengage my pain.

Stephen says the psychiatrists are not god. “They don’t know how to fix me,” he points out. “It’s not for lack of trying.”

I play lookout while Stephen rifles through the filing cabinet at the nurses’ station. “I found it,” he whispers, and we dash for the deserted hallway. His hands shake as he holds the file with his name on it. He scans the pages, a chronicle of medications, shock treatments, group therapy. His face whitens. He puts his head in his hands.

I think he’s found something terrible. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” He sits there, body in defeat. I take the file from his hand. Severe acne. That’s what it says. A young man with severe acne who has a bunch of mental problems and tries to off himself several times but never manages to put out the lights. They’ve documented our entire relationship. “Stephen talked with Marianne for nearly and hour… Stephen and Marianne were laughing…” I keep looking for the bad thing, the cancer, the brain tumor.

And then I get it. “You thought they knew something.” I say. He doesn’t answer, just leans his head against my shoulder, silent.

The staff tries something new. They put on a little play, pretending to be all of us. It’s supposed to give us insight. The man playing Stephen has an attack and falls down. The woman playing Marianne runs after him calling his name.

I feel like punching somebody.

The hospital terminates me. I pack my things into a paper bag. An extra t-shirt, my denim jacket, a paperback, and

some stuff I made in Occupational Therapy – a clay pipe and a wind chime.

Stephen has ground privileges and walks me to the front door. The social worker's car takes me away and Stephen stands there getting smaller. I'm left at the "Y" like a bundle of giveaway clothes. A plump woman shows me the room I'll be sharing with some girl who isn't in. I set my paper bag on the upper bunk. The walls are white. The windows don't open.

December 14 '79

Dearest Marianne,

I'm sorry. I've been most remiss in answering your letter of last summer. Thanks for the book of poems – I enjoyed meeting myself.

I've often thought of writing to you, but have been very caught up in trying to get my body back after my suicide in 1972. I haven't succeeded. My life pf persecution and degradation goes on much the same as usial – thoughts and moods controlled and manipulated by the electricity. Tears come to my eyes and my heart feels like bursting as I beg them to leave me alone – they reply by increasing the chlorpromazine. A doctor says I have "flattening of affect". I say I have XXXXXX paralytic depression.from the electricity. I tell them I was Cleopatra in a previous life to explain the way I love other men. They in turn tell me I'm delusional. My thoughts, regulated by the electricity, alternate between the speed of light and the speed of cold molasses. Sometimes my thoughts slow down so much it's hard to remember what I was thinking about because it takes so long to think about it.

I fear I will die my second death, and since I'm not a cat the number of deaths happening is rather disturbing. One of these days they'll electrocute me.Until that time I will continue my solitary struggle.

I always loved you,

Stephen

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The Opening

He makes love like it was an obligation. I think he'd rather be reading the newspaper or watching a hockey game on T.V.

With his little glass of sherry perched on the end table beside his chair, he lights up his imported cigarette and launches into a speech about something he thought of during the commercial.

"You're distant tonight'', he says.

He means I'm not listening closely enough. I shift in my chair and smile mysteriously. I'm thinking of leaving him again. I'm in the middle of a fantasy about the lover I had before him, five years ago.

I don't care about hockey. What's the deal with it anyway?

I wish I could phone Dena. We could meet down at the Italian's place and huddle over mugs of coffee talking about something. We used to talk about men. The ones we had and didn't want, the ones we wished we had – the ones who got away.

The game is on again and Charles turns his attention back to the screen. He takes a delicate pull on the cigarette and sips at his drink. Liberated from his attentions, I turn my thoughts back to my reverie. He was a gangly young man – all raw nerves and energy. And only 19. I was 27 then and I felt a little wicked. We didn't have much in common.

He liked me because he could talk to me.

I liked him because he would make love any time I wanted to. He never seemed bored. He seemed like he could go on forever.

"What are you thinking?"

“Hunh?” Is it a commercial all ready? Charles is turned towards me, and I can see that the game is still playing in the background. There’s a soft, worried expression on his face. I can never decide whether Charles is handsome or merely bland. Sometimes I think he really does love me. He’s not like so many other men. He cooks, he cleans. More than I do, actually. I feel like a real slob beside him.

“Um – someone I used to know”, I say vaguely. It never works to be honest with men about sexual things. They’re too sensitive, too easily threatened. They want you to say “Oh yeah, baby, it’s great. You’re the best.”

“Are you okay?” he asks, that expression still on his face.

Sometimes I worry that he can tell what I’m thinking. I don’t want him to know, I really don’t. I don’t want to hurt him.

“I’m just bored with hockey,” I say, impatiently, and to emphasize my point, I get up and go to the kitchen to see if there’s some small task I can amuse myself with. There isn’t. It was his turn to clean up, and as usual, everything is perfect. When it’s my turn to clean up, he always finds something wrong. (That pan goes in the left hand cupboard, not the right. Look – you left some crumbs on the floor, and jesus – that tablecloth! Anyone can see it needs washing. There’s no point in doing something unless you’re going to do it right. Sometimes I think you just don’t pay attention.)

I decide to go for a walk to the store, to get some fresh air. They might have something I need. I have to walk in front of him to get my coat from the front hall closet.

“Are you going out?” he asks, with surprise.

“Yah. Just to the store. Do you want anything?”

“I’ll come with you.” he says brightly, rising from his chair. I’m starting to get annoyed. What will I do with my fantasies? He sees something in my face. “Unless you’d rather be alone...”

“No, it’s okay, come on” I insist.

As he pulls his old jacket on (the one he only wears around the neighbourhood) he begins whistling. I find this annoying too. When we get out in the street, he starts horsing around, bumping me with his hip and mussing my hair. I decide to make no response whatsoever. He accelerates his efforts and manages to knock me onto someone’s lawn.

“What the hell are you doing?” I explode. He stoops to pick me up and stops, stunned, that wounded deer look in his eyes.

“It was only a joke,” he says. “What’s wrong?”

“Can’t you act like an adult!” I say. I think I’m very twisted. Here I am mooning over the memory of a boy.

The rest of the way to the store he puts on an exagerrated air of maturity. He holds my arm stiffly, and keeps his head straight ahead, nose in the air. Every now and then he asks me “Is this adult enough? Are we being mature now?”

At the store, he gets a new package of cigarettes, and one of those fruit leather things. I pour over the magazine rack and pick out one that declares: “Tangled Signals: Can Women and Men Ever Communicate? A Special Report.” When I get up to the counter, I discover that I’ve forgotten my money, and I have to ask him for the $2.50. He holds his wallet close to his chest and makes a big show of peering suspiciously at me, while perusing the billfold.

“And what’s it for?” he asks, in a deliberately nasal voice.

“A magazine.” I say.

“Which magazine?”

“Just a magazine.”

“Well, show me.”

“Look – are you going to lend me the $2.50 or not? I’ll pay you back when we get home.”

The trouble is, over the course of five years, my debt to him, as I calculate it, is approximately $1,084.65.

It isn’t that he lends me money, exactly. It’s just all those drinks and dinners and movies he’s paid for over the years. He likes to treat me. It makes him feel good. I don’t make nearly the money he does, and I can’t reciprocate. He insists it’s no big deal, that the money is freely given.

If I ever get rich, I’m going to pay him back and be free.

He pays the store keeper, who has been watching us with a bored expression on his tired, chubby face. I feel embarassed.

“What’s wrong?” he asks again.

“Nothing.” I grab my magazine and head for the door. He follows behind me, and tries to hold my hand. I shake him off.

As we are walking the three blocks home, he asks me about work. Am I happy there? How’s the situation with my boss? He’s searching for clues.

I’m like – humph and humph. What’s with the questions? The situation with the boss is the same as it’s been for the last three years. I don’t like her much, and she doesn’t like me much, but we don’t talk about it. I have been recently assured, again, that I’m in no danger of losing the job. I’m a good receptionist. I should be happy about that. I don’t exactly hate my job. It’s a pleasant office, in a way. We deal in real estate. Everyone behaves. The pay is okay. Not great, not terrible.

If she fired me, I might have to do something WILD.

Like that summer Dena and I quit our jobs and hitch-hiked to California. Okay, okay, it wasn't all we expected, but we did meet some artists. I had this idea it was still 1967 in California, and that the Diggers were still feeding people.

But we did meet some artists – people who slept in their studios and woke up each morning surrounded by paint and brush and canvasses. Dena and I came back with a gleam in our eyes and determined to live life on the edge. We got a cheap one bedroom in the east end and put foam mattresses on the floor for beds. I did my paintings in the living room, and she took over the kitchen for her batiks. We worked feverishly, and even sold some of our stuff, but in a few months we were broke and needed to find work. I got a job as a waitress. Dena worked for a recreation centre.

It was never the same after that. I came home too tired to do much art, and Dena worked nights. But we kept trying.

"Maybe I should find another job." I tell him. He frowns. I imagine he is worrying that he'll end up paying for more than his share. He works as a copy writer for an ad agency. It's not quite the novels he planned to write when he was younger, but at least he's making a living as a writer. He says he's happy, he's matured, that he can handle the compromise.

He's hinted that he'd like to holiday in Hawaii this year. But that won't work if I leave my job.

Dena moved out the next spring to live with a guy she met at the bar. It only lasted for six months, but in the meantime I took a bachelor suite. Later she told me that she regretted that decision.

Back at the house, he's left the TV running, and the game is over. They're doing the wrap-up interviews. His team lost. He turns the set off without comment. He stretches his lanky

body (kept in shape by aerobics and light weight training twice weekly at the gym) and turns to see if I'm watching him. I'm watching him. One of the things I always liked about him was that long, wiry body. And his playfulness. I liked that a lot when we first met.

"Maybe we should go to bed early..." he says, grinning, so I can understand his meaning.

I can't get over the sense that it bores him somehow. He's so silent. He only makes noise when he's coming, and then only sometimes. He doesn't like to explore. He only touches me in the places that the book says are erogenous zones. He prefers it with the lights out.

"Are you bored?" I ask him, as we're lying there in the darkness. The condom is still hanging off his receding penis.

He laughs. "Don't be silly. That was very exciting, I'm just tired." He yawns, rolls over, and pulls the condom off.

"Well, I better do this before I nod out." he says, and he gets up to take the plastic and sperm into the bathroom. I can hear him flushing it down the toilet. Out of sight, out of mind.

The young man would never use condoms. He didn't like my diaphram either. He wanted it naked and wild. I took a lot of chances.

Charles comes back, curls himself affectionately against my side and whispers "I love you" into my ear. Then he drifts off into a peaceful sleep.

I lie awake staring at the ceiling.

The young man used to stay up all night making delicious, endless love. He seemed to delight in prolonging things. I almost always had more than one orgasm. I wonder where he is now.

The next day Dena calls me at work. I'm dealing with a customer, when the phone rings and it's Her.

"Dena!" I say, "I'm surprised you still remember the number." It's been almost two years since we saw each other, and our parting was not pleasant. But I'm not thinking of any of that.

"I didn't actually", she says, "so I called Charles at work, and he gave it to me." Good old Charles. He's had the same job since we met him. Dependable Charles. A man you can always find in the phone book. A good man, a great man. Everyone tells me that.

The young man had three different jobs during the eight months that I knew him. He lost one job because we were making love late into the night and I forgot to set the alarm. We didn't wake up until noon. He said it was worth it.

Dena tells me that she has an opening, an art show at a real gallery, and she wants me to come. She's doing things with clay and wire now. She gave up on the batik a while ago.

The customer is standing impatiently in front of my desk, so I tell her I have to go, but she keeps rattling on.

I'm happy for her, really I am. She asks me if I'm still painting.

"Uh no – not much, well sometimes" I say. I promise her that I'll come to the opening. Then I tell her again that I really have to go. She hangs up before I remember that I don't have her phone number. But I have an address, a date, an opening.

The customer, a middle aged man in a suit and tie, is almost foaming at the mouth. "Could you possibly do your personal calls on your own time?" he says sarcastically. Real estate people are always in a hurry.

But I'm already thinking about what I'm going to wear. God, I don't know. What if I turn up looking completely square? I wish I was still painting. Maybe I can paint again.

When I get home, Charles is baking a spinach quiche. He's already marked the date of Dena's opening on the calendar and he asks me what he should wear.

"Oh. Are you going?" I say.

"Don't you want me to?" he says, sounding hurt.

"Oh. Of course. You should come. I just didn't think you'd be interested." I forget. He always liked Dena. He never did understand about the quarrel.

Maybe because I didn't tell him anything.

We have a pleasant time eating dinner. I crack open the bottle of white wine I've been saving for something, and the quiche is delicious. He's a better cook than I am, and I know I shouldn't resent him for it. He lets me tell again, for about the seventh time, the story of how Dena and I went to California. Now I tell it in several layers, describing how we told the tale back then, and how it actually was.

It was grimmer than we at first admitted to. We wanted everyone to believe that it was an absolutely wonderful time. But it wasn't. We had hardly any money and we slept in lousy motel rooms. Some of the people we met were pretty strange, and not in a nice way.

Charles offers to go to the rental place to pick up a couple of videos while I'm cleaning up. I think it's a good idea too, and he comes back with an old Ingrid Bergman film and a short musical documentary. We watch both of them. I do yoga exercises on the living room floor during the documentary. It's late when we get to bed, and we both fall asleep immediately.

The day of Dena's opening, I decide to wear the purple denim jumpsuit that I've been saving for something. I figure it's kind of hip. Charles opts for that yuppie look--a white shirt and narrow leather tie, with a pair of stone washed blue jeans and his black dress shoes.

The opening is in a small gallery downtown that I've never heard of. We take Charles' car and spend about ten minutes driving, and fifteen minutes looking for parking. The gallery is on a slightly seedy street, but all kinds of colourful people are flooding in through the door. Some are dressed in formal clothing, but they look somehow like it's a parody. Some of them are dressed wild.

When we walk through the doorway, I can see Dena off in a corner. She seems to be glowing, but maybe it's only that silver thing she has on. People are coming up to her and patting her shoulder or shaking her hand.

The room is full of little sculptures on wooden platforms. Only one is large enough to see from a distance, and it appears to be some kind of mystical bird.

Then I spot Ana Magdalena, the reason I haven't been seeing Dena lately. She's wearing a soft blue dress, her hair is longer than before, and she doesn't look like a bull dyke. She spots me and comes gliding across the room, smiling graciously.

"Welcome" she says, and I can tell she really means it. "You must be Charles" she says, shaking his hand.

Charles smiles and nods his head.

"Charles, this is Ana" I say, "She's Dena's--uh - "

"Lover." Ana says firmly. She smiles again.

"Pleased to meet you." Charles says very sincerely, very unfazed. He's never at a loss for words, and he begins

asking her how the show is going and if she was involved in it too. “Looks like a good crowd” he says sagely. I begin to feel left out, but we are drifting in the direction of the corner where Dena is holding court.

When she sees me, she stops talking to the man in the studded leather jacket with the amazing hairdo. Without another word, she takes me in her arms and hugs me, like we used to do. “I’ve missed you,” she says.

I don’t know what to say. I’ve missed her too. We pull apart and the chaos moves in. Dena says she’d really like to take us on a tour of the show, but a reporter arrives just then and wants to talk to her. Ana offers to do the tour with us instead. I can see Dena smiling confidently and talking into the microphone.

As we peruse the sculptures, I know this work is much better than what she used to do. The little figures are exquisite rendering of couples. All kinds of couples. Old couples, young couples. Men together, women together, women and men together. Some of them are quarrelling, some of them are making love, some of them are eating meals, or strolling hand in hand or sitting in comfortable chairs talking.

Charles has something insightful to say about every figure. He and Ana talk quite a lot about the nuances of each gesture, each posture. Charles’ eyes are shining and he’s really enthusiastic. He sees a great future for Dena. All the time he is talking with Ana, he is holding my hand. I feel awkward, speechless. Ana keeps smiling encouragingly at me.

I told Dena that it wasn’t Ana. It wasn’t Ana herself. I liked her a lot, before I knew. It was just... it was just...

“It’s like I never knew you!” I threw that at Dena when I couldn’t explain my horror, couldn’t put a rational face to the feelings that were churning around inside of me.

I thought things like “but what will we talk about now.”

After awhile, Dena shakes off her admirers and comes over to us. We’ve finished looking at all the sculptures and she wants to know what I think. “About what?” I’m tempted to say, but I know she means the art.

Charles jumps in. “Fantastic” he says. “Really fantastic, Dena. You’ve really matured artistically.”

She’s standing there with that beautiful golden hair, now fashionably styled. I’m surprised to see that she’s wearing makeup around her piercing blue eyes.

I thought they didn’t do that.

“And what about you?” she turns to me again.

“I--I like it.” I say. It comes out stilted, like I don’t mean it. I really do, but I’m thinking about other things. I’m thinking about Dena and I on the road to California. Her hair was long and ragged in those days, forever getting in her eyes. She dressed in things like gypsy blouses and patched blue jeans.

She looks so sophisticated standing there. It all seems so natural. Dena and Ana, Charles and I standing in an art gallery having a discussion about art.

At least, everyone else seems natural.

Our little talk doesn’t last long. There are so many other people to attend to. Dena and Ana are busy again in a minute. Charles decides to help himself to some hors-d’oeuvre, which leaves me standing in the middle of the room, clutching a plastic cup half full of white wine. I don’t recognize anyone, but I hear snatches of conversation. These people talk as if they know Dena intimately. They can’t. They’re all kidding themselves. They don’t know Dena.

I see that Charles has run into someone and is talking animatedly over by the food table. When he comes back I ask him “Who was that guy?”

“Oh. I don’t know. We just started talking.” Charles is good at that. He can go anywhere and strike up a conversation with someone.

“Good party” he says, appreciatively. “Dena has come a long ways.” Charles wants to stay late and strike up some more conversations, but I tell him that I’m very tired. With some good-byes and promises to be in touch soon, we say goodnight to Dena and Ana.

“Why didn’t you tell me Dena is gay?” Charles says, when we are at home and getting ready for bed.

“She didn’t used to be” is all I can muster.

He is taking his shirt off and carefully hanging it up in the closet. I am about to throw my pantsuit across the rattan chair when I change my mind and ask him for a hanger. I spend a lot of time carefully smoothing it down and making sure that it hangs perfectly. Then I take off my bra and put it into the top drawer of the oak chest. The panties I drop into the rattan laundry hamper. I look up to find Charles watching me.

“That doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me.” he points out.

I am now completely naked. I go into the little ensuite bathroom and begin running water. Through the mirror I can see Charles spread out on the brass bed - $1200. And a good deal at that.

Charles doesn’t like sleeping on the floor.

The young man liked -- oh, never mind.

Charles just lies there on top of the quilt, thinking.

“Were you in love with Dena?” he says finally, like he’s just put the whole picture together.

“No!” I insist. “I mean – I loved her, of course I loved her, but not like that--” Not carnally. Never carnally. Warmly and passionately and honestly. But not carnally.

I snap off the bathroom light angrily. Then I snap the bedroom light off and climb into the bed, pulling the covers over my shoulder. I turn deliberately away from Charles. He rolls over and turns his bedside lamp on.

“I think we should talk,” he says.

“You start then,” I mumble. I’m trying hard to fall asleep immediately.

“What’s been eating you?”

“Nothing.”

He lets out one of his very exasperated Charles’ moans. Then he picks up his pillow and throws it at me. Playfully. “What do I have to do to make the stone maiden talk?” he says. “Stand on my head?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I mutter.

“I will – I’ll stand on my head,” he warns. He’s leaning himself on one elbow as if any second now he’ll get up.

I turn around, very annoyed. “Charles! Stop being stupid! Can’t you see I’m upset?”

“Of course I can. That’s why I thought you might like to tell me about it.” He’s sitting cross-legged on the bed now, and pretending he has a notebook in his hand. “Now go ahead. You tell Dr. Charles all your problems. Dr. Charles can solve anything....”

I start laughing, but I don’t want to be. He makes a joke out of everything.

That was the problem with the young man, too. He made a joke out of everything.
It was just nervousness, really.

Now Dena and I--Dena and I could talk about anything. Anything. We could go on for hours and never leave the kitchen chairs. We never censored each other. We never said “that’s impractical.”

Charles is pretty much into what’s practical. He knows what sells too. He’s sitting there with that make believe notebook in his hand looking at me expectantly.

“I’m upset about things.” I tell him.

“Hmm. Things.” He pretends to make a note of it. Then he looks at me again.

I roll my eyes. Then I’m angry. “Just fuck off!” I tell him.

He’s hurt again. He drops the notebook facade and looks like he’s about to cry. Then he’s holding me through the blankets. There’s something desperate about his grip. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he says. “I just don’t know what to do. We used to be so close. I see it all slipping away. I’m scared, I really am.”

Close? I’m thinking. What do men know about close? But my eyes are betraying me and I start sobbing.

“That’s it, that’s it,” he’s murmuring. “Let it all out. That’s good.” I told him once that crying is good therapy, and he’s taken this philosophy to heart. He feels better. He’s in control again.

He gets under the covers and holds me close, stroking me all over like I always want him to.

Charles; making love with the lights on.

The young man disappeared without a word. He didn’t call; he didn’t come around. I left several messages with his

mother, which he didn't return. A month later, I saw him going into a movie theatre with a pretty teenager in a miniskirt. It was one of those horror flicks that I just can't stand.

I think I'll start painting again.

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Carrying On

RHENA STOPS at the 7-11 on her way home ad picks up a quart of milk for breakfast. Lately, she hasn't had time to shop. The phone is ringing as she walks into her apartment. It can't be an hour since she stepped out of Tony's place into the crisp spring air.

It's his brother calling. "He's gone," Michael says.

Rhena doesn't answer for a moment. She is imagining Tony's spirit rising like vapour escaping from a bottle. He'd been so thin at the end.

"Thanks for calling," she says "I hope you can get some rest."

"I'll try."

She puts the phone on the end table and massages her temples with both hands. It's beyond fatigue, she decides. Lacking the energy to drag herself upstairs she lifts her legs onto the couch, snuggles down into the fabric and wills herself to be warm. She opens one eye and peeks at the clock. 7 am. Gary and Elaine are holding the placenta ritual at 10. She stayed way late at Tony's, but finally Michael kicked them all out.

"I think he's hanging on for you guys," he whispered as he went around the room shooing everyone along. Tony seemed so reluctant to pass through to that other place. So many times they thought it was impossible for that frail body to survive another hour, another day. In the last days, there was always somebody with him, and sometimes, all of them – the six or seven male friends who stuck with him to the end, his brother, his mother, and Rhena, an old friend from a co-op house back in the hippie days.

Tony said it was surprising who stayed with you. Not necessarily the ones you'd expect. Some people had no stomach for suffering, he said, forgiving the ones who had deserted him.

"Now you, for example, I expected you to stay. It's your job – ushering people through new passages. Did I ever tell you about the tribal people who worked with the dying?"

"Not more than 20 times…"

Rhena had stood that morning, buckling her jacket, getting ready to go, watching the shrunken figure on the bed and wondering as always if this time was the last. She bent down and kissed Tony's forehead. One eye opened briefly and a smile flitted across his face. Tony was older than most of his friends, but hadn't looked it – until he got sick. Then the illness ate his cheeks hollow and wasted his fine athletic limbs.

The mother hen – that's what Michael called her, as she bustled around Tony's bedside being efficient, relying on her nurse training to keep from crying.

Rhena shuffles on the couch and prays for sleep. It isn't real yet. Tony's been in her life for so many years. Sunlight streams through the picture window, touching the miniature palm and the split leaf philodendron.

"Take these plants," Tony had urged her, a month ago. "I won't be needing them, and this way I'll always be around for you." Every time she went to the apartment, something else was gone. He started by giving away his bicycle, his hiking gear, the new cross country skiis. Every time the illness robbed him of a new level of mobility, he shed another layer of his belongings. On the day he found he could no longer leave the bedroom, he started giving away the art in the living room.

“Rhena is all about breeders…” Tony had said, by way of introduction, waving a skeletal hand in her direction. She had flushed slightly, reaching for the hand of the young man now identified as Michael – my brother – a guy who plays with stocks and bonds.

“I’m a midwife,” she said.

Michael’s eyes twinkled. He patted Tony’s shoulder through the covers and said, “Tony’s told us a lot about you. I used to be a stock broker. He keeps forgetting about the market crash – poor fevered mind – at the moment I’m driving courier.”

“My mind is a sharp as the day I was born!” Tony insisted.

“My point exactly.” Michael smiled. “Well, Rhena,” he said, “how shall we torture this bag of bones today?”

“Say that with respect,” Tony admonished, “just remember, you can never be too rich or too thin!”

That day, they’d wrapped him up in several layers of blankets and carried him out into the spring sunshine. Like a baby, Rhena thought.

She turns over on the couch, still searching for comfort. Yesterday, an eternity ago, Elaine had taken her three-day-old baby outside in the stroller. The little one was wrapped in a receiving blanket, a cotton thermal blanket, and a bunny quilt. A hand knit cap covered its still misshapen head. Nothing was visible except the mottled red face.

“Oh – he’s beautiful,” Elaine gushed.

“Now take it easy,” Rhena warned, “walk a bit, but don’t over do it.”

Elaine pouted, “what about all those tribal women who went back to work after giving birth in a field?”

“They died young.” Rhena bent over the stroller, fussed with the blankets and waved them on their way. Elaine tottered unsteadily down the sidewalk. Down the street, a door opened and a small child and a woman emerged. As Rhena climbed into her car, everyone gathered around the stroller admiringly.

When Tony first got his diagnosis, he decided he could beat the odds. Always a health nut, he went fanatic. No alcohol, no coffee, no sugar. A diet of organic vegetables, tofu, rice. Mega-vitamins, massive doses of C, B complex and zinc. He consulted regularly with an elderly herb expert, a short, plump woman who talked incessantly and claimed to have a cure for AIDS. Tony said he felt better than ever. He wrote a long paper on his cure and took it to AIDS Vancouver, complaining bitterly when they refused to take him seriously. They said they’d keep his paper on file.

The herb expert died of cancer, and Tony’s faith in her recipe wavered. When his health began to deteriorate, he said it was just a cold. Then a flu – everybody gets the flu. One night he called Rhena – late – his voice shaky and said, “I don’t want to die in the hospital.”

“What are you talking about?” she said, alarmed.

“You know – it’s the – the flu isn’t going away, Rhena. Dammit, it’s not a flu.” He wouldn’t say more that night, but gradually, the way he talked about himself shifted. He began to read everything he could find on symptoms, the progression of the illness. He wanted to know exactly what happened to people – what finished them. Then one day he asked Rhena to be part of the vigil – the death watch – the last jamboree.

Tony dying. He looks at his bony hand. He feels his stomach, searching for the friendly layer of fat that used to live there. He looks at himself in the mirror and tries to find himself

in the eyes that stare back at him. He fights to endure, scrambles for a new thing to do, a new bottle of pills to pin his hopes on.

He knows he's moving on, going out, going to that other place. Some part of him fears it, but the weariness in his body is overcoming that fear. Some part of him embraces it. Some part of him is wholesomely curious.

He begins a list of euphemisms – passed away, met his maker, gone to the happy hunting grounds, kicked the bucket…

Rhena set the tray down on the bedside table and reached up to feel Tony's forehead – cool and damp. His translucent eyelids opened briefly. There was a hush around the bedside. George on the kitchen chair fidgeted with his hands. Michael paced. Tony's mother sat in the rocking chair wrapped in her crocheted shawl. Her English wasn't too good, and she didn't say much, but she smiled at them often and seemed touched by their presence. Len, Joey, Christopher and Charles were scattered about the room, standing, crouching, leaning against the wall.

Tony let out a gasp and then the frail body lifted and fell forwards, arms flung out. The hush intensified. Head tilted and one eye opened, Tony scanned the room. "Was that dramatic enough?" he asked. He held out a hand, and George helped him to settle back between the pillows. Tony surveyed his visitors.

"Um – I appreciate everyone for coming tonight," he said, "but it looks like the show ain't happening just now."

The next week he took a turn for the worst, and Rhena feared the end could be any minute. Elaine's time had come and Rhena was watching the hours of labour tick by, coaching Gary, waiting for the newborn – and using the phone every hour to call Tony's place.

Elaine's sister hovered in the background with a camera. Rhena stood in the hallway on the telephone again, watching Elaine breathe through another contraction while Gary stroked her back. The camera clicked softly.

"You're doing great", Rhena said, cupping her hand over the telephone, wondering whose practiced hands would catch Tony on the other side.

Rhena wakes up to an insistent jangling. Gary on the line. He sounds disappointed. "We're all ready to begin," he says, "aren't you coming?"

Rhena pushes the hair back from her forehead and asks for the time.

"10:30" Gary says.

"Tony passed last night" she says it again, just to make sure. "He's gone. I was there really late."

Gary is immediately apologetic. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he ways, "Rhena, you don't have to come…"

"Just give me time to wash my face and grab a cup of coffee," she says. "I'll be over."

In the backyard, Gary shows off the tree for the planting. "It's a Japanese Maple" he says, "a dwarf. It'll grow slowly and never get too high."

It's raining lightly. Elaine holds the well bundled baby. Gary solemnly digs a hole and then calls for the placenta. Rhena ceremoniously dumps the bag over the hole and the placenta slithers in the dirt, settling into the indentation. Elaine's sister takes a picture.

"Ashes to ashes," Gary mumbles, tossing a shovel of soil. He picks up the sapling, knocks the shovel twice against the pot and frees the roots. When the tree is standing straight,

he turns to his audience, face flushed happily. “Care to say a few words?”

“A long life,” Rhena says, “a long life for the baby and the tree.”

“Be interesting,” Elaine whispers, “have many branches, grow in all directions.”

“Embrace the sun and the rain through many seasons,” Elaine’s sister directs. The baby begins crying in earnest.

”Feeding time” says Elaine, and Gary proposes everyone go inside for a toast.

Rhena checks her watch. Tony is no longer at the apartment. The city coroners came, zipped him into a big black bag and took the body to the morgue, for cremation.

“I should get going,” Rhena says. “I promised Michael I’d come by.”

“Anything we can do?” Gary asks.

* * * * * *

The Men in Her Life

Katie Anne learned there were men all over the city hungry for her company. This was welcome news. She'd turned 45 the month before and was beginning to feel old.

"Halfway to dead," Max remarked cheerfully.

It was rush-hour on a Tuesday when Katie learned about the men. She'd squeezed in some errands after work and was late picking Max up from his after-school care. Katie bustled in to find her son alone in the large main room, sitting at a table with a 1000 piece puzzle halfway assembled. The one remaining worker greeted her cheerfully, but Max took his time looking up and when he finally did, his thin face was full of reproach.

She knew he hated being last. She didn't know it would take that long to pick up her drycleaning, mail a package and stop at the bakery for some buns.

"Hi, honey!" she said guiltily.

Max snorted, and swept all 1000 puzzle pieces back into the box. It was a rule at the daycare. You couldn't leave things overnight.

He dropped his sullen silence by the time they turned onto Kingsway.

"I'm gonna whup you good," he announced, yanking out his notepad and a pencil, sketching the scaffolding and inscribing eight small dashes underneath it.

Katie relaxed. Her modus operandi was to start with vowels. "O" she guessed.

"Nope!" Max declared gleefully, drawing a circle for her head.

“I”, “D”, and “H” were also wrong. By the time they crossed Boundary, Katie had earned herself two eyes and a mouth. A block later, she was successfully guessing “C”, when a city bus passed by, going in the other direction, with the news about the men. “Get connected now!” the panel declared, under life-size pictures of an impossibly attractive twenty-something man and an equally attractive young woman talking on the telephone, apparently to each other. Katie could tell this because the extra long cord went from her telephone to his.

“You should try that,” Max said, “maybe you could find a new boyfriend.”

“What do I need a boyfriend for?” she said quickly. “I’ve got you.”

“Get a life,” Max groaned.

“P’ Katie guessed.

“Rats,” Max dutifully wrote it down. “I’m serious, Mom,” he said.

“Why? Do you need a father?”

“I’ve got a father.”

“Yah, but I meant a fulltime one. Who’s around all the time. Not –”

“He calls when he can,” Max said defensively. “He’s busy.”

Katie was about to say something, but decided against it. Max didn’t need more of her bitterness about the way things had gone.

“G” she said.

“Nope!” Max drew a body for the little stick figure.

They took a right on Royal Oak and just before they turned

onto their own little sidestreet, Katie got a picture in her mind. She saw herself sitting down to dinner in a cozy little restaurant across from an attractive, yet faceless man. Sexual longing hung in the air...

She parked her compact Mazda behind the Stevenson's Pontiac station wagon. Kelly Stevenson, in her customary blue jeans and bare feet was bouncing a ball on the sidewalk. Max leapt out of the car.

"I'll call you for supper," she yelled after him, as Max and Kelly bounded up the front stairs. The children were constructing an entire village out of cardboard in the Stevenson's rec room.

Katie-Ann schleped her packages up the walk along the side of the Stevenson's house to the entrance of their basement suite - or "garden apartment", as the ad called it. To their credit, the Stevensons had hired a bulldozer to dig away a chunk of earth on the yard side, creating a space for a little private patio, separated from the main yard by a discrete cedar fence.

Not that Kelly and Max were much interested in privacy.

Kids made friends so easily, she thought. Just walked up to each other and said "Do ya' wanna play?"

She scooped the newspaper out of the mailbox, unlocked the door and thought about supper. Pasta, she decided. She was hungry; it would be quick.

She set the newspaper down on the kitchen table, and there it was again. "Get connected." This time the picture featured a handsome couple, around her age, arm in arm. "When I heard her message, I knew immediately that she was the one. Thank you, Dateline,' said the subtext.

Kate put a pot of water on the stove and checked her answering machine. A message from her mother. Another from her friend Pam about Saturday night. They usually went to the Legion, for Celtic music and line dancing. It was supposed to be a good place to meet men, but somehow it never quite happened that way. They were all married, or unsuitable - too tall, too short, not quite the right look. But anyway, she and Pam were starting to get pretty good at the line dance steps. The Stevensons stayed home most Saturday evenings, to snuggle up in front of a video with a bottle of good red wine, and she could generally leave her son with them.

“Always happy to have Max over,” Mr. Stevenson would say cheerfully. Max kept Kelly amused, and then the Stevensons could stop the video if they liked, and have uninterrupted conversations about what had just happened. They were interested – fascinated -– by film technique. They met as volunteers at the Film Festival, although they rarely went out to theatres now.

Katie met her ex-husband at a business conference. She was there because of a temporary office job she’d taken that summer. Things had been slow in the health food industry and her boss at Nature’s Gift reluctantly laid her off. Katie’s passion in life was the promotion of vegetarianism. Her ex-husband was a meat and potatoes kind of guy, a salesman. The attraction between them had been merely animal, she decided.

“Here’s how it works,” the Dateline ad explained. “It’s absolutely free to record a voice introduction, free to set up a voice mailbox to record messages, free to browse other people’s introductions, and we have several reasonably priced packages if you want to buy time to respond.”

There’s always a catch, Katie thought. The water was boiling and she dumped the remains of a box of shell pasta into it.

Checking the fridge, she found a bag of broccolli (organic, of course) that was just on the good side of going bad. She'd chop it up, fry it in garlic butter, add parmesan cheese and mix it in with the shell pasta. It was a fairly healthy meal that Max would actually eat.

After supper, they sat at the table, Max working over some math homework and Katie reading a new book on organic gardening. The newspaper lay on a kitchen chair with the Dateline ad exposed.

"So, you gonna call?" Max said, looking up from his scribbler.

"Call who?" Katie was absorbed in a description of how to grow strawberries inside old tires filled with dirt.

"That phone thing, for a boyfriend."

Katie lowered her book and looked into the innocently inquisitive eyes of her son. He was wearing his glasses, and at that moment, he unfortunately reminded her of his father. It was his way of continuing to push, once he had an agenda. Max shared her interest in natural things, but unquestionably, in later years would find some kind of a business angle to it.

"Okay, Max," she said, "why are you on to this?"

"Oh," he drew out the word, as if he were thinking, "I just thought it might cheer you up."

"Have I been grumpy?"

"Oh, not too grumpy." He was treading deliberately into her guilty zone, she thought.

"I've seen you happier…"

"I have friends…"

"You know what I mean."

Katie decided to change the subject. “What was the word?” she said.

“The word?”

“After work, when we were playing ‘hangman’ in the car. You never told me what the word was.”

“Oh. Culpable.”

After Max loped off to bed, Katie found herself dialing the number in the ad. A cheerful voice welcomed her to the Dateline and presented an array of options. She could peruse the women’s ads, she could peruse the men’s ads, she could leave a message for someone in particular, she could register and set up her own voice mailbox. Without really thinking about it, she pressed the button that allowed her to set up her own mailbox and after listening to the cheerful instructions, hung up the phone without following them.

But the next day, as she helped an elderly lady find the correct homeopathic remedies for arthritis and hemorhoids, she found herself daydreaming. It was herself, on a beach, walking with a faceless, but attractive man. Sexual longing hung in the air...

That night, after Max was asleep, she called the Dateline again and stammered out a message. She was 5-foot ten inches, skinny, no – slender – long sandy coloured hair, brown eyes, a Sagitarrius, concerned about the environment, a single mom, interested in dancing looking for a – she had to put the phone down and call the line again, after she had thought about it. She was looking for a gentle man, a vegetarian preferably, who liked dancing and gardening, who was honest and kind, about her own age, although, she added daringly, younger was fine as well, who read books and liked lingering over coffee on a Sunday morning – who

liked lingering – and here she cut the message off. When she listened to herself on the playback, it sounded like she ran out of breath at the end of her last sentence, but she was tired and didn't bother recording it again. There. No one would call. She was sure of it.

"Thirteen letters," Max announced. "What's your first guess, m'am?"

"O." Vowels again. Always a safe start.

"Darn."

"Oh - is there more than one? Another O."

"Rats!"

"This is gonna be good, I can feel it - R."

"Double rats!"

"I called that line."

"Sorry, m'am, line is not a letter."

"B"

"Triple rats! You called? Really? Did they get you a boyfriend?"

"It doesn't happen like that. It takes awhile. No one will call, anyway. I just did it so you would stop bugging me. T."

"Dee-double darn. You did not."

"Did not what? N."

"Dee-triple darn. You didn't call for me. You didn't. I know you think your purpose on earth is to be the perfect mom for Max McClellan – "

“I do not. There’s a red light coming up. Quick – show me the paper.”

“Oh allright, here, can you see it?”

“Yeah – c - o - r - r - o - b – Corroboration! Right! I’m right, aren’t I!”

“I don’t wanna play anymore.”

“You just like it when I lose –”

“M’am - you offend me! That’s great, mom, very positive. Could you get one who likes Star Trek? You never watch it with me.”

“I don’t like those weird characters –”

“The Klingons –”

“Yeah, don’t they eat raw meat?”

“Only in private. In secret Klingon rituals.”

“You’re making that up –”

“How would you know?”

Katie called the line that night – just to see. The cheerful Dateline voice said there were two messages.

“I’m a romantic,” purred the first man, “I know I’m gonna meet someone who is just right for me –”

The second man had a rich, full voice. It immediately conjured up an image of a tall, broad kind of guy with a largish nose, dark brown hair, kind eyes – someone you could lean against. He assured her that he was a quality individual. In fact, he was a lawyer, but a good dancer. He would love to meet her. Katie quickly hung the phone up.

She didn't wait for the instructions about which buttons to press. She was afraid the men might still be on the line.

Katie lay in bed imagining the lawyer coming through the door of Nature's Gift to pick her up for a romantic dinner – just her, the lawyer and Max in some dimmly lit French restaurant. He would know about that kind of food – being a lawyer and having enough money to eat in places like that. Over the appetizer, he and Max would discuss Klingon mating rituals.

In the morning, while sipping on a cup of Pioneer Coffee mixed with soya milk, she called the Dateline and followed the instructions about how to delete the messages, send the men back to the ozones from where they had come. Max was making breakfast – toasting frozen organic waffles in the oven. All that French food would make her fat, and she didn't want anyone coming into her life and making her meagre salary look like nothing.

She had a moment of regret when a tall, dark man with a largish nose and sad eyes came in to the store looking for some skim milk yogurt. He patted his stomach. "Gotta watch my weight," he said, as he paid.

That night's offerings included an accountant, whom she deleted immediately, and a guy who talked really fast and said an amazing number of things, using big and unusual words to describe himself. She saved his message, thinking about Max. Then there was Jason a carpenter. He had a big dog, he said. He was outdoorsy. He liked dressing in jeans. He ate organic food and enjoyed gardening. She thought she might leave Jason a message – something like have you ever tried that trick where you plant strawberries in old tires? But she realized you had to buy response time to do that. You had to put it on your VISA. $20. She wasn't sure she could afford it.

“You really did that?” Pam was incredulous. They were side by side, two steps forward, shuffle to the right, kick up your heels

“Yeah, really. Crazy, eh? I should erase it.”

“No, no don’t do that. Find out what happens. Maybe Mr. Right will come along.” Shuffle to the left, kick to the inside, now slide, slide.

“What if he doesn’t dance?”

“Well, then he wouldn’t be Mr. Right, would he?”

Over the weekend, a total of twelve men called. A bicycle courier who said he enjoyed the company of older women (she could almost see his finely toned muscles, his bulging thighs outlined by the spandex cycling shorts); a shift worker who seemed to be calling from a bar (he was immediately deleted); the lawyer again, affronted that she hadn’t called him; a salesman who said he once dealt in organic products; a man who left no actual information about himself but painted an idyllic picture of a couple in a snow-covered chalet drinking wine in front of a fire; a musician; a clerk; a man with a sign company; a gardener; someone who was vague about everything except his love for children and the outdoors; a psychiatrist and a guy who worked in retail. All of them wanted to meet her. Most of them left a phone number, and urged her to call.

Katie dutifully wrote down their names and numbers and other pertinent information. Max was in the living room assembling a 3-D puzzle his father had sent for his last birthday. She took the piece of paper with all of the information and sat down on her bed. The room looked shabby to her. The one decorative element was a painting she had been hauling around for at least twenty years. She found it at a garage sale. During the years she lived with

Max's father, it was kept in the basement. Her bed was covered with a worn Indian-print spread. The dresser was something she found in an alley, hauled home and repainted.

She had a phone in her room, on the night table, and if she wanted, she could start calling the many men throughout the city who were hungry for her company. Instead, she started to cry.

Max appeared in the doorway, looking worried. "Did something happen?" he said.

He had that too-mature look on, the one he had worn so often as a five-year-old when they were going through the change – leaving his father, learning to live on their own, readjusting their financial expectations.

"I miss your father –" she said.

He looked honestly puzzled. "Mom – you said –"

"It's not him – it's the idea – of having someone –" she was doing it again. The thing the counsellor advised her against – spilling her guts to a ten-year-old boy, treating him like a confidante. "It's the whole notion of being vulnerable again – of opening myself up, of hoping – you know what I mean?"

"I guess," he said, the look on his face implying otherwise.

"I'm sorry, Max," she said, "I'm doing it again."

He moved into the room and sat beside her, sighing. "It's okay, Mom. I'm unusually mature for my age." Actually, at that moment, he looked unusually small to her. She put her arms around him, and buried her nose in his clean little-boy smell.

"Thanks, Max, I'm okay now."

"Dubious," he said.

Focusing

THERE was a summer when the dragonflies had wings like helicopters.

I remember them so clearly. I stood on the sun-dappled sidewalk, and they flitted past, making that electric sound, their transluscent wings going around and around on top of their little bodies.

I told Janey about the dragonflies and her eyes got big. We were in front of my house, squinting into the evening sun.

Janey's mom was visible through the picture window, sitting in the big chair, her face in her hands. My father, her brother, had his hand on her shoulder and my mother sat leaned forward on the couch.

Janey's dad was away, but he usually was. He travelled a lot, for his job.

"Is your mom okay?" I asked, and Janey's face clouded.

"Let's go to the back yard," she said.

We whooped around in the trees for awhile pretending to be Indians. I showed her my new jack-knife with the two blades. Then I let the dog out and we got the brush and took turns working on him until his white fur gleamed. The sun was sinking down.

My mom stuck her head out the back door and hollered something about cookies, so we put the dog away and raced to the door. The cookies were on the kitchen table and the Rotweillers – Nick & Pete - our brothers – were gathered around the plate, stuffing their pockets with the treats.

"Hey! Leave some for us!" I griped, and Pete put a couple back on the plate. The boys disappeared downstairs. Janey

and I took two cookies each and a napkin and tiptoed into the living room. The adults were sitting around, a half empty bottle of wine on the coffee table.

Janey's mom looked up at us with swollen eyes, smiled wanly and took a sip of wine. I turned to Janey, searching her face for an explanation. She went over to her mom and stood by the chair, one hand tugging at her mother's sleeve.

"I guess we should be going," her mother said.

"Aww…" I moaned, expecting Janey to join in the chorus. I'd been hoping they'd stay late, so Janey and I could go up to my room and hang around on the bed telling stories.

"Stay for another glass of wine," my dad suggested gently. "I think the girls would like to visit a little longer."

I backed him up with an enthusiastic "Yeah!" Janey buried her face in her mother's shoulder and only pulled herself away at my father's urging.

As we climbed up the stairs to my room, cookies in hand, I was thinking about adults. About how they always seemed to be slightly out of focus, in the background somewhere, living their mysterious lives, they were a hand that pulled back the drapes, cleaning up after dinner, saying do this and not that, driving to here and there, announcing the beginning of holidays.

It seemed to me then that only children were real.

We took the dolls out, dressed them all wrong – pants for hats, scarves for skirts, the boy doll in a frilly dress, and made them act out a story. Afterwards, when we were lining the dolls up with all my stuffed animals, I asked Janey "What's wrong with your mom?"

She threw my fuzzy blue bear against the wall and it landed with a thump at the far end of the bed. Then she threw my

rabbit that's also a pyjama bag so hard my nightie came spilling out the back.

"My mom's going to get a job," she said. "In some hokey town, some other stupid place. We have to move." She tossed her pigtails and wrinkled up her sun-burnt nose.

"You can't do that!" I sputtered. I meant it. It seemed absolutely wrong, unbelieveable. Janey's family had always lived in that sprawling bungalow on Fort Street.

People came with their houses, didn't they? Like Grandma and the little wood panelled house. Like she had been spawned there, and Grandpa too, born out of the flowered wallpaper.

But everything was whirling around, and they went to a town three hours away on the Trans Canada, into a kind of a townhouse – a project, Janey said, whatever that meant. Janey and the boys stayed with Grandma while school was out. Her mom was gettling settled in the new town, already typing for some insurance agent Janey referred to as "the viper."

Just before school started, Janey finally gave me the lowdown. Her mom had come to get them all, to take them to the new place.

Janey and I were up in the plum tree at Grandma's, our legs tangled in the bent and well-pruned branches. The plums were overripe, falling on the ground and turning into mush. My grandmother would walk by, pick one up and say it was a shame. My mom put some up in jars, but a lot got wasted. Grandma didn't have time to do anything about them. She'd been busy with the kids and working part-time in the drug store since Grandpa had his stroke. He mostly sat around the house, much stiller than he used to be, with one side of his face gone numb, and smoked endless pipes of tobacco.

The boys were tearing about the yard, pretending to be airplanes. My mom told them to keep it down and they crawled into the hiding place in the hedge, where we could hear them telling stupid jokes.

The adults were on the porch, cool glasses of beer in their hands. There's a photograph of them from that night, in white summer clothes, my mother looking dimpled and shy, Janey's mom all thin and drawn, forcing a smile. Grandpa is in the rocker, pipe in his hand, and my dad is leaning casually against the railing, his arm around mother's waist. Grandma must have taken it. I used to stare at that picture, trying to read the expression in my father's eyes. I wish someone had photographed Janey and me in the tree.

Janey told me her father wasn't coming home.

"He never really grew up," she said authoritatively, quickly looking down at her hands. Her fingernails were all chewed up and she was not making sense. Uncle Tom was taller than the doorway. He was the tallest man I knew. We always wanted him to pick us up and swing us around, because with Tom you got the best ride, the highest off the ground, the giddiest with sickly pleasure.

How could he not be grown up?

I watched my parents on the porch in the dwindling light. Mom slapped a mosquito, and Dad draped his arm around her shoulder. He said something, and my mother laughed lightly, like he'd just made another one of his puns. Janey's mom leaned against the porch wall with her arms crossed and looked out into the twilight as if there were something in the carragana hedge or she was expecting to hear a call. A car drove by, and her head followed the sound.

Three dragonflies flitted past, too fast for me to get a good look at their wings.

It was fall when the news came in. I was sitting at the counter, eating a sandwich and avoiding my homework. Saturday morning jazz was on the radio. I was thinking about the way everyone was starting to pair up at school, and when the news came on, I missed what the announcer was saying.

Dad turned pale and grabbed the telephone, practically yelling into the receiver give me some more damn information, that's my brother-in-law you're talking about.

He stayed on the phone like that for a long time, calling people up, asking for the manager, demanding the goods. My mother paced around looking worried, and in between calls he whispered to her in a strained, urgent tone. Finally, he rang Janey's mom and took the receiver into the other room, pulling the cord as far away as he could, talking all hush-hush.

It was spring time when Janey finally told me how it happened. She was sitting on my bed, her eyelids slashed with black eyeliner and painted gaudily blue. She had on tight blue jeans and her budding breasts were pushed into a kind of bra that made them point through her t-shirt. Janey had already been laid by then, by a boy with blue eyes, blonde hair and the same name as her father. He taught her to smoke, too.

The boy was cruel. "It's too bad you're so flat," he said, as they were lying naked in some club-house he'd taken her to. She wrote me all about it in a letter. We were into 'to be continued' letters then, writing adventure stories starring heroines who were brave and intelligent, with magical powers, who could fly away as soon as the trouble started. She'd write a chapter and then I'd write one. You always had to end with a cliff-hanger. But when she told me about the boy, she forgot to write her chapter, instead filling up a

whole page about Him. He liked cherries, but not apples, he lived with his dad, he'd been in trouble with the law, he had another girlfriend.

Janey's father had gone down to the States, apparently, and gotten mixed up with some bad people. She wasn't specific about what kind of crimes they were involved in, but this was the scene: police had surrounded a house and were calling through a megaphone: "Give yourselves up, come out with your hands up!" And the other people – the bad ones – appeared in the doorway, hands in the air. With a dozen poice sharpshooters aiming revolvers at them, they walked meekly into custody.

Janey had taken to speaking with a new lilt in her voice, almost an accent – a kind of put-on toughness, but her voice got all choked as she talked, and her eyes started to water.

The thing was, Janey's dad decided to be last. Only he didn't come out of the house. Instead – Janey aimed a finger gun at her head, pulled the mock trigger and fell over in a heap on my bed.

I was seeing brain tissue all over the wall and my stomach wanted to heave up lunch. I poked her, and she pushed herself up.

Janey tapped her forehead. "The strange thing is, I can feel him right in here. He's trying to tell me something. Sam and Pete feel him too." That made me sit up. Whatever people said about Janey, nobody ever accused the boys of having wild imaginations.

"I wish you smoked," she said, "then I'd bum one from you." I wanted to hear more about her dad – who found him, where was the funeral, what happened to those other people, how did she feel him in her head, but she abruptly changed the subject. She told me stuff about the townhouse, about a

boys' club, about how girls had to 'put out' to be allowed in. She sounded so worldly. I felt like I was growing up in a box.

After Janey and her family got back in their car and headed home, I took the dog for a long walk on the railroad tracks. The rails were stretching way off into the distance, coming together at a point you can never reach. I was trying to put it all together, to paint a picture of the inexplicables. I tried to see Uncle Tom with a revolver in his hand, with a hole in his head, but I kept returning to this image of him with his blue eyes sparkling, telling a story to make everyone laugh.

If you don't actually see a person dead – a body – aren't they really out there somewhere, waiting to come home? And I kept thinking about that boy on top of Janey, where it seemed to me he had no right to be.

A pair of dragon flies buzzed past my head, their transluscent wings fluttering monotonously up and down, up and down.

The Girl Next Door

AROUND MIDNIGHT, Phillip pulls up on his motorcycle and finds the girl tossing rocks in the middle of the street. She walks sheepishly over to the sidewalk while he's parking and stands there while he throws a denim covered leg over the saddle and struggles with his helmet.

"Whatcha doin' outside?" he asks gently, already knowing.

"Scared," she says. From the road, she feels like she can see what's going to happen. Inside the apartment, it's all ghosts and lonely monsters coming out of the closets.

"Comin' in?" he says.

She flashes him a quick grateful smile and follows as he unlocks his door. He's weary. He'd like to be alone. He fishes a blanket out of the closet and tosses it to her. She is already curling up in a corner of the couch. He finds a pillow and places it under her head. "What time's your mom home?"

"6:30" she mumbles, her face turned away.

He gets the alarm clock from the other room, sets it for 6:15 am and puts it on the floor beside her. "You get to sleep now, you've got school in the morning."

He'd like to flick on the TV and space out by watching anything that comes along, but he doesn't want to keep her up, so he goes into his kitchen and sits on a hard-backed chair, skimming the flyers that came in the mail. A good deal on venetian blinds at Zellers. Cooking pots 30 percent off at the hardware.

Sometimes he thinks about adopting her, but he knows it's hopeless. Strike one: she's got a mother, albeit one who leaves her without care while she works the overnight at the

hospital. Strike two: she's got a father, albeit a drunk who shows up approximately twice a year, stays for a week or so or as long as Aggie, his ex, can put up with him. Strike three: Phillip is a single thirty-year-old male, sporadically employed, a musician. If Aggie knew the girl slept her sometimes – well, he knows what she'd think. He knows the kind of accusations that would be thrown out, the way Aggie would scream at him, her voice carrying down the street and beyond.

It's a joke in the building. "Aggie's at it again – whoops, she's gonna throw the old man out – atta girl, Aggie."

He throws the flyers down in disgust, walks to the kitchen window and stares out at the yard. What to do? He doesn't know.

On the day Phillip moved in, he was sitting on the back porch taking a breather, his rooms full of boxes and mayhem when his new next door neighbours, a mother and daughter, came spilling out of their apartment. The girl was gangly, about ten, with an awkward smile, and long brown hair brushed silky and flowing down her back. She wore a white and navy sailor dress. Her mother's bleached blonde hair was back-combed, her ample body was crammed into a flowered shift. They clutched vinyl purses, smelled of cheap perfume and seemed the picture of togetherness.

The woman introduced herself. "Aggie. Aggie Melrose. This is my daughter Melody. Melody, say hello. If you need anything, just drop over."

"We're going to the PNE" Melody announced, as she bounced out of the yard ahead of her mother.

Phillip, entertaining. He's splurged on an eight dollar bottle of white, salmon steaks, asparagus. Everything worked

out beautifully, and he's proud of himself. Now he and his woman friend are relaxing in the living room, listening to music, talking. Cynthia is telling a story from her gig last night. A little knock comes on the door. Cynthia's face screws up, ever so slightly. He opens the door a crack. Melody is standing there, her feet bare, her long hair tangled, a stain down the front of her pink t-shirt. She looks up at him shyly, looks down at the floor.

"I heard the music," she says. Behind him, Cynthia is signaling no, no, not now. Phillip leans on the doorway, brushes a strand of hair out of his eyes.

"I'm kinda busy, Mel," he says. Her face falls, and he feels bad. "How about tomorrow?" he says, and Melody's face lights up. She heads back to her own door.

"Tomorrow," she says.

Later, when Phillip is in bed with Cynthia, running his fingers across her back, kissing her throat, her mouth, her ears, on the verge of entering her, he thinks about Melody alone and scared in the apartment next door.

"Is something wrong?" Cynthia says, sensitive to his sudden shift in mood. He nuzzles her neck, pushes inside and strives to get back to the feeling. Cynthia relaxes, lets out an ahhh, and Phillip tries to blot the image of Melody from his mind.

It's a perfect summer day. Phillip sits on the back porch with his buddy Steve, drinking a beer, shooting the breeze, the sun warm on their shoulders. Melody is down in the yard lying on a blanket, talking to some dolls in a singsong voice.

Steve is talking about his angst. "And then she says to me, you're too pushy and I'm thinking what? What? What did I do? I mean, Christ, Phillip…"

Aggie screams from inside. "You get in here right this

minute!”

Melody looks up, towards the door, then down at the dolls. Aggie escalates her voice. “Damn it, I said get in here!” Melody limply rises from the sun-soaked blanket, walks towards the stairs, glances at Phillip, who flashes a tight, comradely smile, and then goes to her mother. Aggie’s voice goes on, and on, rising and falling, gearing up into one of her full on rants, escalating into an out and out scream. If Melody says anything, it isn’t audible. Then silence. Melody comes out, picks up the blankets and the dolls and slinks back inside, not looking at anyone.

Aggie comes out on the porch and throws her hands in the air. “Kids!” she says. She spins around, back inside, the door clanging behind her.

Steve and Phillip eyeball each other. Steve shakes his head. “Geez – and I thought I had problems.”

“Yah. Aggie used to drink a lot,” says Tom, the caretaker. He’s heavy and slow, walks with a limp, has a face that droops to one side. “Then she found Jesus.” He shakes his head sadly. “Still mean as sin – to the kid, anyway. But at least I don’t find her passed out in the yard no more. She’s got other kids, you know. Three of them. Social services took ‘em away. Permanent.”

As they are talking, Aggie’s back door opens up, and she saunters outside, whistling tunelessly, obviously in one of her good moods. Melody is right behind, wearing a little half smile. They wave at Tom and Phillip as if everything is carefree.

Phillip on his hard kitchen chair, playing scales up and down the neck of his guitar, thinking about the upcoming gig, thinking about making the rent. Through the wall he can hear the cadences of Aggie’s voice, scolding. “You little shit,” she’s saying, and then her voice takes off in a string of

accusations. Phillip wishes he still smoked.

Out on the back porch, Phillip lets Melody play his old guitar. He shows her C, D and G, and helps her pick out the pattern form Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. She learns quickly and laughs, surprised at herself. Her voice is wavery, but good he thinks, rich.

“You could be a singer,” he says. “I really mean it.”

She laughs some more and starts to sing off key, on purpose. But her strumming gets more confident. Phillip picks up his good guitar and throws in a melody line, jazzing it up. Tom the caretaker is puttering around the yard. He wiggles his butt and pretends to dance.

“Sing, Tom,” Melody calls out.

Tom laughs. “What? You want all the flowers to die?”

“What I mean, Phillip,” says Steve, leaning against the wall, in the smokey little pub a few blocks up the street, “is you’re getting too involved with the kid. Don’t get me wrong – I think it’s great that you care about her, it’s probably good for her, and obviously you are getting something out of it, who whoah – think about what you’re doing dude – you’re messing with somebody’s life.”

Phillip is listening, sort of, but his jaw is getting all tight. He’s thinking Steve has had maybe one beer too many. And he’s thinking that maybe it’s none of Steve’s business, but they’ve always had this thing of blurting out what they think, and he usually values what Steve has to say.

“It’s not that big a deal,” he says. “So she sleeps over once in awhile. Man, Steve, when we were kids we didn’t have to deal with this kind of shit. I mean, my mom was always there. Christ, my parents are still together. Who knows why, exactly, but you know, I was, like, stable. Melody gets left

alone. Alone. Every goddamn weekday night, and half of the time on the weekend. Mind you, I think it's actually worse when Aggie's there."

"She's the mother from hell, all right," Steve concedes. He lights a smoke, takes a drag. "I don't know. Sometimes I just feel like you want to take care of the whole friggin' world…"

Phillip is trying to catch a little nap on the back lawn, but Melody keeps running up to him and tickling him under the arm. He's got his shirt off, feet bare, his worn jeans all loose and comfortable. Everytime he relaxes a bit, Mel gets him again. She pulls his ponytail loose, running off with the elastic. She steals his shirt and throws it up on the stairs. Finally, he waits for her to come, waits, waits, and then springs up suddenly and catches her, pinning her arms. She's laughing her head off, trying to get loose, to tickle some more.

Aggie enters the back yard, stands there, staring. At first Phillip doesn't feel her cold presence. He keeps tickling Melody, until he notices that she has stopped reacting, has gone rigid in his arms. He turns to look. Aggie makes a clucking sound. "Little whore," she mutters, almost inaudible. Phillip drops his hands. Melody goes limp and slumps down on the grass, pulling at the strands. Aggie walks by, glances disdainfully towards her daughter, and continues on to her back door.

"Mel?" Phillip whispers. She won't look at him.

"She wrecks everything," Mel says, real quiet, real dead.

"Kids?" Cynthia is looking at Phillip curiously, through her mascara "well, in theory, sure, but realistically, c'mon Phillip… I mean, I'm on the road half the time, and working nights, and sure I think about it sometimes but I'm in no hurry. No hurry at all. Why do you ask?"

Phillip can't say exactly. He fell for Cynthia the first time he saw her sing. She was fronting a jazz band, wrapping her soft mouth around mournful sounds, scanning the bar with mischievous eyes.

Phillip's life gets busy. His acoustic delta blues band gets some good press and suddenly there are opportunities – gigs, rehearsals, a TV appearance, someone offering to record them. He's not home until two or three, and half of the time he sleeps at Cynthia's. The affair is heating up, and she prefers it at her place.

He finds his new motorcycle gloves on the back porch. He must have left them outside. The fingers have all been slashed off with scissors. Fifty bucks worth.

He shows the gloves to Tom the caretaker. Tom cocks his head towards Aggie's place. "I don't like to say – the kid's been moping around her like crazy. Where you been, anyway?"

"Working."

"Yah? Well, the kid misses you."

Sunday morning Phillip wakes up to noises on the back landing. It sounds like someone with lead feet is dancing back there. He peers through the curtains. Melody is skipping back and forth, just outside his window. "You awake, Phillip?" she calls cheerfully. He's absolutely hungover and exhausted and really needs to sleep for the entire day, but he drags himself up, pulls on some pants and goes outside, his hair sticking up all over. He sits on the steps, head throbbing, everything slightly unreal. Melody is turning cartwheels on the grass. "Hey, hey, Phillip, look at me!"

"Whoah, Mel, you're making me dizzy."

She laughs crazily, turns more cartwheels, then somersaults back to the steps. "You wanna play guitar, Phillip? I still remember the song."

It's evening. Phillip hears the outside door slam, Aggie's front door creaking open and then a scream that pierces him to the core. Aggie's shrill voice is raised to new heights, Melody starts crying hysterically and there's a new sound, like a whip driving home. Something crashes to the floor next door. Phillip starts pacing, the noise increases and then he can't stand it. He tears out the back door and over to Aggie's. Through the window he can see Aggie, her face contorted whacking Melody with a skipping rope, again and again. Melody has welts on her face and is raising her hands, ineffectively trying to protect herself, screaming, "don't, don't, don't.

Phillip pounds on the back door, screaming through the glass. "Stop it! Stop it! You can't do that!"

Aggie yells, "fuck you!" and takes another whack at Melody.

Phillip pulls frantically on the locked door. "You can't do that. It's illegal, I'm calling the police.

Aggie hesitates for a moment, turns her back and cracks the rope again, this time across Melody's back. "She stayed out all night… I didn't know where she was… gonna turn into a whore like her cousin… she disobeyed me, she's got to learn."

Phillip screams back. "You can't hit her, Aggie. It's against the law. There's a law about that. You stop right now. I'm calling the police."

He feels helpless, it's all a muddle, Aggie isn't stopping. He runs back to his own apartment, dials 911, there is a hush from next door, he chokes back tears but manages to talk to someone. "Beating up her kid, next door…"

Two women officers arrive at his door shortly afterward. The first thing Phillip thinks is that these women are too impossibly small to be police officers. Aggie probably weighs

as much as both of them put together. But they've got the uniforms and the revolvers, and the radio and the car. They take a brief statement from Phillip. Their faces show frowning concern and one of them takes notes. Then they go next door.

Phillip paces in his living room for what seems like forever. There is a low hum of voices from next door. Then Aggie weeping. Weeping. "My baby," he's sobbing, "don't take my baby."

One of the officers returns to fill Phillip in. "We're taking the girl, at least for the weekend," she says. "It will be up to the court what happens next. Are you prepared to testify?"

Phillip mumbles yeah, yeah, sure, whatever. Aggie's door opens and the other officer steps out with Melody. Aggie is wailing away in the background. Melody, dry eyed, scared, looks up at him.

"I'm sorry, Mel," he says, "I didn't know what else to do. I just didn't want her to hurt you anymore." Melody shrugs, looks down at the floor, looks back up at him, gives him a little smile. He doesn't know how to read it.

Phillip stands on the sidewalk watching the police cruiser pull away. A boy with a shaved head and an oversized sweatshirt pulls up on his bicycle, staring – as if Melody is a criminal. A woman across the street sticks her head out the window and Phillip wants to yell at all of them to go away.

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A Minor Accident

RUTH IS talking and laughing with her Tai Chi buddies on the way to class, but still she notes nervously that Mary is driving a little too fast for the rain-slicked city streets. A taxi pulls into their path. Mary slams on the brakes and Ruth realizes they are going to collide.

“Oh shit!” she cries. She sees her head smashing through the windshield, reaches for the seatbelt to make sure it’s really there, and then the little Datsun collides nose first into the side of the taxi with a sickening crunch. Ruth expects searing pain and the bright white light of the other side, but Mary steers the car out of its tailspin and guides it safely to the side of the road. Shaken, the three women climb out to assess the damage. The taxi pulls over behind them. All four people gather around the slightly dented front of the Datsun and everyone agrees: it’s a minor accident.

The taxi driver apologizes profusely, admits full blame and apologizes again. After a civilized exchange of addresses and phone numbers, the friends get back in Mary’s car and continue on.

They arrive at Tai-chi class late and at first Master Yu frowns at them.

“Sorry we’re late, but we had a little car accident on the way here,” Mary explains.

Yu smiles and nods. The other students shuffle over to make space and enfold the latecomers. Soon everyone is engaged in doing the Long Form, Yang style.

But as Ruth is performing the slow, graceful moves of the form, she finds images disrupting her outward calm. It’s that moment just before impact – that terrible instant when she knew they were going to crash, and realized she couldn’t do

a thing about it.

“We were lucky,” Mary says, as she drops Ruth off that night.

“I’m glad we kept going,” Ruth says, wondering if she means it. “A little accident like that shouldn’t be allowed to disrupt your life.”

Ruth wakes up the next morning stiff all over her body, like an old woman. She kisses her husband good-bye and as usual, takes the bus to her job teaching at an elementary school. She feels safe behind the huge chrome wall of the bus, and looks down with pity on the puny, crushable cars. As she is setting out art supplies for the Grade Two’s, it seems like they are especially rambunctious, out of control.

“You should get yourself checked out,” her husband suggests that evening, looking up from his newspaper. Ruth is moving stiffly around the kitchen trying to prepare a simple pasta.

“I guess so,” she agrees absently, rubbing her neck, staring off into the distance, feeling the crash of metal on metal and her body jerking forwards and backwards.

In the morning, Ruth’s husband offers her a ride to work. They are halfway down the block when a car emerges from the alley towards them. Ruth gasps, clutches her seat and then sighs deeply when nothing happens. Her palms are sweating.

Her husband looks over, questioning.

“That car!” she explains.

“Nothing to get excited about,” he says, turning back to the road, shaking his head disapprovingly.

Ruth looks down at her hands, helpless in the face of this sudden fear. As a teenager, she feared nothing. She remembers driving around in cars with a pile of kids all

laughing and talking, and no one paying much attention. She remembers taking a highway trip where the driver kept turning his head right around to talk to the people in the back seat, daring them, daring the road, and all of them drinking lemon gin from the bottle.

“I’ve been thinking,” says her husband, “we should go away. Maybe down to Oregon. A nice little weekend trip. We could pack up on a Thursday night, I could get you after work on Friday and we could fly out of here.”

As he says this, it hits her – what the real fear is, the worst case scenario playing havoc in her gut. She thinks this minor accident was only the warm-up. The real one, the bone-crusher, the brain stopper, is out there somewhere waiting for her. And any one of those other cars that seem to be driving too fast or too recklessly or pulling into intersections without due care and attention – any one of them could be the catalyst for that inevitable event.

“I’m really busy at school right now, ” she says.

“I could clear up the time in three, maybe four weeks,” he goes on. “Man, do I need a break.”

Ruth knows that in the past these little trips have been nourishment, food for the bond between them. Once, she thought, a weekend getaway had saved him from having an affair. He hadn’t told her directly, but she’d seen signs, storm clouds gathering over his head, little ways he was avoiding her. Out on the highway, he’d loosened up, come out of himself, talked for hours about work, and his mother, and his fears. They’d returned home Sunday, holding hands in the car, a close knit unit, ready again for day-to-day life.

“All right,” she says, her body tightening all over.

Ruth, reviewing the carelessness of her youth. She remembers flying down a road at night clinging to the back

of a youth who was flooring his motorcycle. She peeked over his shoulder and watched the speedometer climb - 100, 110, 120 miles per hour – way, way over the speed limit for that patch of mountain highway. And still living in the world of dreams, was too young to understand that she was truly made of flesh and blood. She was part fairy dust, as ethereal as a butterfly, forever like air, whizzing past the spring scents of flowers, the budding trees, the newly green hills.

On the getaway weekend, they are two blocks from the school Ruth teaches at when a car approaching from a side street throws her into a panic. Her husband turns around at the sudden sharp intake of breath. What? What is it?

“That car,” she says, but the red station wagon is pulling around the corner, driving with due care and attention, heading south.

“What car?” he demands. “What’s happening?”

After they cross the border, approximately ten panic reactions later, Ruth’s husband pulls into a gas station/ restaurant.

“Let’s eat,” he says. He doesn’t look in her eyes and although they know a much nicer place just a few miles up the road, Ruth knows not to mention it. He gets out of the car and walks away from her, into the restaurant, and Ruth can tell he is very annoyed.

Over his bowl of French pea soup, he gets to the point.

“What the hell is the matter with you? All this gasping and moaning… I keep thinking something bad is about to happen and I look and it’s nothing. You’re really making me jumpy!”

He sits across from her, his gray eyes gone cold.

“I just keep thinking it’s going to happen again,” she says, “you know – a car crash.”

“The accident was four months ago,” he says, “for gods sakes, snap out of it! Your chiropractor fixed you up, didn’t he?”

She has to say yes, her back is healed, she moves without pain, but it’s the scars on her psyche she can’t seem to erase and no, she doesn’t know why this thing has got her wrapped up like a sprung wire in a box.

“Get over it, okay?” He turns back to the soup. It’s canned soup. The crackers are stale. The other place is much better. Ruth picks at her limp salad. It is a broodful supper after that. His accusing eyes, her mournful sorrow. He doesn’t understand me, she is thinking.

The weekend is off to a bad start. Instead of driving through to Oregon, they stop in Seattle. He says he can’t bear it any longer. He pulls into the parking lot of a very urban hotel, waves his hand at the high-rises and the traffic as if she personally created them.

“I just wanted to go somewhere out of town,” he says, “somewhere relaxing. But with you gasping everytime another car shows up, man, I just don’t need this kind of aggravation. I’ve had a hard week. I’ve had a hard year.”

There seems to be nothing to do in Seattle that doesn’t involve spending money, and they end up spending more of it than they meant to, maybe just to shut out their alienation, put a box around the fact that they are not really talking to each other.

They head home after breakfast on Sunday and upon arriving dive for the safety of their own space. He goes downstairs and turns on a hockey game. She goes up to her sewing room and calls Jane on the extension. “I’ve just had the worst weekend,” she says.

In her dreams that night, a big brown bear has taken over

the drivers seat and she is catapulting down a winding mountain road, rattling loosely in the back seat of a vehicle that probably has no brakes. She wakes up thinking I've got to slow that bear down. It becomes her theme for the week.

Slow the bear down, she thinks as Master Yu puts his sure hands on her shoulders.

"Too much excite," he says, and then demonstrates an exaggerated version of her jumpy movements. The class laughs softly. Ruth tries again. She takes a deep breath, aims for that relaxed fluidity that Yu achieves so effortlessly. He nods approvingly. "Is better."

Slow the bear down, she thinks. Ruth's husband gets home from work one day. She leaves a casserole in the oven, gives him a tight little smile, heads out to the car. She has her sturdiest walking shoes on, a change of underwear in her purse and a wallet full of credit cards. Ruth glides into the drivers' seat, takes the wheel, turns the engine over. As she pulls out onto the street she can see herself flying down the freeway, heading towards the green space.

Once, Ruth went sky-diving. It was a present from a group of friends. She'd been saying she wanted to do it, and her friends took her up on it, the certificate daring her to prove she was as brave as she claimed. So, heart thumping, she went up in the plane. There was a minute when she looked out the open door to the ground far, far below and thought she couldn't do it. But the instructor smiled at her, patted her shoulder encouragingly and she took the impossible step into the air, heart still pumping, hand on the cord. And for a moment she was falling freely, sliding through the air, a slippery jelly fish escaping time, all fairy dust and dreams. She pulled the cord, felt the tug and her beautiful wings ballooned out above her. Ruth, floating, drifting towards the ground, relaxing into the sensation, looking around with

wonder at the hills, the mountains in the distance and finally the ground coming into focus below her feet. Ruth falling to earth with an angelic smile on her face.

At a gas station, Ruth stops for coffee. For this next journey, she wants to be wide awake. She drinks it standing up, leaning against the car, watching her fingers tremble and drinking in the smell of gas and engines and from somewhere a teasing waft of blossoms. On the freeway cars are whizzing by at alarming speeds. Someone honks, someone curses out a window. An airplane passes overhead, streaking into infinity.

She stares at the grounds in the bottom of the styrofoam cup, and then crushes it, watching the white walls implode. A little bead of sweat trickles down her forehead as she discards the container. Ruth gets back in the car, sitting for a moment with the door open and one leg dangling out. Then she draws herself inside, shuts the door, buckles up, stares at herself in the mirror and with her hands tightly gripping the wheel, puts the beast in motion.

She sits for what seems like a long time at the exit from the gas station, getting up the nerve. The car behind her starts to honk. She looks back, sees the tension and anger in the drivers' face and nudges forward a bit. There is a break in the traffic and she plunges in, pressing the accelerator, twisting the wheel, closing her eyes. The driver behind her quickly transfers to the fast lane and whizzes past.

Ruth reminds herself to breathe, switches on the radio and gets an oldies station. "Crimson and clo oh ver…" croons the singer. She's forgotten the name of the group but she can smell Brut – the cologne that all the junior high boys used to slap on before those dances in the gymnasium.

She remembers the feel of slow-dancing with a boy she liked, bodies pressed together, swaying, a tickly, dangerous sensation rising up between her legs.

She presses the accelerator, urges the car to go 10 kilometres faster, then 20. Ruth is over the speed limit, her hands still trembling, her eyes fixed on the road, and secretly proud of herself. She thinks about the possibility of losing control of the wheel and crashing into the bank. She pulls into the fast lane and overtakes the blue Chevrolet in front of her, all the while thinking about what would happen if she miscalculated her re-entry into the slow lane and the Chevrolet hit her from behind. The next vehicle she passes is a huge transport truck and as she is inching the car past it, she wonders how often these truck drivers lose control and just swerve into the wrong lane. She knows long-distance truck drivers take pills to stay awake. What if they go crazy from the drugs? What if they lose the ability to judge distance? Does anyone know the long-term effects of such things? And aren't those giant wheels always falling off, into the path of little cars? She heard once about a terrible accident, where a truck lost its load of metal pipes right onto the side of a school bus carrying children to some sporting event. The lucky kids were the ones who died instantly.

If she lost the use of her legs for any reason, would she be able to do her job from a wheelchair? What would it be like having sex with the bottom half of your body numb? Wouldn't her husband leave her?

Ruth thinks about her husband leaving her, imagines him packing a bag, patting her on the head, walking out into the night. She is helpless on the bed – she needs him to get her into the wheelchair. No, that's not right, she still has her arms, she can drag herself along the floor.

It occurs to her that she has no idea where she is going. But

there's an exit up ahead, and she decides to take it. She has to slow the car down to 50 kilometres before the off-ramp, and for a moment she regrets the decision. She was doing so well, going so fast. The exit leads her to a pleasant, tree-lined street. Maple Ridge, the sign announces. There's an intersection up ahead, controlled only by a stop sign. Ruth looks left and right and seeing no one, proceeds. She drives along, at the speed limit, glancing at the houses lining the road, wondering who lives in them when she turns her eyes and sees, incredibly, an old Studebaker bearing down on her. All that's visible of the other driver is white hair and glasses, she swerves to get out of the way, hits the ditch with a crunch and is jolted by an impact from the rear. Ruth's head jerks against the dashboard, blood pours from a cut in her lip and her body is shaking all over. She starts to cry, crying and crying and she sits there, waiting for someone to let her out of the wheelchair.

"Are you okay?" the speaker is an earnest teen-ager. Ruth manages to roll the window down. His hair falls over his eyes and he stands nervously outside Ruth's door. "My mom called the police on her cell-phone. Can I help you out?"

Ruth looks behind and sees a woman, about her own age, opening the door of the other car. A tiny, white-haired woman takes the arm offered to her and limps out. She is wearing a flower-print skirt and a white crocheted sweater and she waves a wrinkled finger in Ruth's direction. Her escort obligingly takes her over to Ruth's window. Ruth dries her tears on her sleeve and meets the old woman's eyes.

They both immediately begin to sob. The older woman leans into the car and touches Ruth's arm. "I was so scared…" she whispers.

"Helen." the older woman says, as she pours Ruth a cup of tea. "Or Hell-on wheels as my nephew calls me. I think he's

right. I'm going to have to give up driving."

Ruth smiles. There is a plate of assorted cakes in front of her, and her lip has been bandaged. Helen's kitchen is pleasantly wood-lined, with an assortment of framed photographs decorating the walls.

"From the glory days," Helen tells her. "I used to race cars. Hard to believe, eh? Now I can't even make it to the corner store without running into somebody. The problem with this neighbourhood is that everything is so damn far away. I might have to move."

"Won't you miss it here?" Ruth looks around at years of memories.

"Sure. But I've got an old friend living down in Florida who's been bugging me for years to come and live with her. Retirement paradise, you know. Time to rest on my butt, get a rocking chair, tell my stories ad nauseum to anyone who'll listen."

"Is that what your friend does?"

"Ginny? Nah. She's taken up weight-lifting, joined some kind of choir. Always hopping, that one. She'll go out in mid-stride, I'm sure. Me, I'd like to die on a boat in the middle of the ocean. 'Today's the day, take me out!'"

"I just don't want to die in my car."

Helen looks sadly at her. "Sorry, dear. I hope I don't get a place in your nightmares. Are you okay to drive home? Want me to call my nephew? He could be over here in a jiffy."

Ruth takes the old highway home, where the road dallies and the cars are not in such a hurry. She practices what she is going to say to her husband. "We should take a break, dear." or "Things are not going so well lately. Maybe a counsellor can help you work on your hostility."

He is standing in the doorway with a worried expression when she pulls up. The summer evening has turned dark, and there's a chill in the air. She wishes she was back in Helen's kitchen.

"I called the hospitals," he says, when she climbs the front steps.

"Oh?" She always forgets this part of him, the part that conjures up disaster. She doesn't want to tell him about the accident, the second one, but there are dents in the car. He is bound to notice. He's going to ask.

"You didn't tell me where you were going." He lets the accusation hang between them. He often mentions this, her carelessness, her lack of attention to his mental well being. "I thought you were just going to the store. I dished you out supper… and then…" It works, she can see him pacing around, confused. She gets that guilty feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"I went for a ride," she says, "trying to get over my fear…" She hopes he will see this as a perfectly sensible thing to do, but his quick look tells her that it was frivolous, irresponsible.

"You might have told me," he says.

Once Ruth tried wind surfing. Out on the ocean with only a wet-suit to protect her, her arms aching from the unaccustomed strain of holding the sail into the breeze, wind brushing her face, shoreline rushing past and just for a moment, the glorious sensation of flying.

Modern Love

“What’s love got to do, got to do with it? What’s love but a second hand e-MO-tion. . .” That song stuck with me all summer. I’d be up in the studio, the windows wide open, breathing carbon monoxide from the tourist cars below and I’d be like, singing at the top of my lungs. It was Tina Turner’s big hit and for me it said it all.

I was working on this enormous canvas. Somedays I thought it was my best work ever. On bad days I thought it was a big waste of time. I spent a week labouring on the hands alone. Every bit of me was draining into that painting.

The fact was, I was hurting. My thing with Bill (one floor up) was over. He’d taken up with someone else. It was the ‘real thing’ he said. Three years I spent with that man. Three years of our open relationship, our no strings companionship, our religiously organized non-monogamy. And then the bastard fell in love. She was a secretary. A real secretary, not just someone who worked as a secretary to support her art habit. There wasn’t a creative bone in her body, he told me proudly. He met her in a nightclub and didn’t bother telling her about me. He said she wouldn’t understand.

I figured it would last a week, maybe two. Three months later, it was still going strong.

“It’s the AIDS crisis” Marlene expounded. She was balanced on my sawhorse (one of my major pieces of furniture) watching me work. Marlene was a sculptor. She was going through a creative block and hanging around my place a lot. She’d make the coffee and we’d talk.

“What do you mean?” I put my paint brush down and stared at her.

“Seriously,” she said, “I’ve been thinking about it.” She took a sip of coffee from my cracked pink cup. “It’s all that stuff in the news these days. There’s this whole trip about how sex is dangerous. . . you know – you have to get the guy’s total history and then wrap yourself in latex before you can get it on. The way I see it, we’re being sent back into a time warp.” She was quiet for a moment. “I wonder if they do it. . .” she mused.

“Oh come on” I sputtered, “Bill? Mr. Twice-a-night?”

“You can’t underestimate the power of the media,” Marlene said in her dead serious voice.

“Bill doesn’t even read the papers,” I pointed out, but she was deep into her rap.

“You know what’s going on in California these days? They’re all getting married. In churches. It’s fashionable again. Everyone’s so scared of disease that chastity is going to be the next big fad.”

I told her Mother had been trying for years to convince me that abstinence was the way to go. Marlene proposed a toast to Mother finally being right. I wished I had some beer or something.

What really bugged me was I was still being nice to Bill’s girlfriend when she showed up at the warehouse. She thought I was just another one of those colourful people who lived in Bill’s colourful artistic building. Bill was playing the artisté to the hilt, and she seemed very impressed.

We were interrupted just then by Clive Evans, who had the only phone on the floor. Mother was on the line, calling to remind me to sign up for that computer course she’d been bugging me to take. Mother was paying, of course. She was concerned about my ability to “make it” on the job market.

When I visited her West End apartment, she'd fuss over the holes in my jeans and say things like "You need something to fall back on." Mother is a professional woman – an insurance agent. She's proud of her figure, wears tailored suits and smells of perfume. She goes to motivational breakfast meetings and dresses in red a lot, which she says is a power colour. Apparently I take after my father, although I've never met the man. He's a jazz musician, a saxophone player. She won't tell me where he is. She doesn't want us to get together. Once she said he was dead, but I didn't believe her.

Aunt Emily told me Mother was madly in love with Charlie, my dad, but he hit the road when she got

pregnant.

"Your mother has had a hard life," Emily told me, more than once. "But she's made it through. And she's never been on welfare." That was a hint. Mother was pissed off at me for getting by on social assistance. But I needed time free for my art.

It was a slim living, though, and the landlord was threatening to raise the rents. There was loose talk around the warehouse about a rent strike, but I wasn't optimistic. Things like that seemed like a great idea about 3 a.m. if a bunch of us were up on the roof full of red wine courage. By morning, all the big talk would dissolve like stale cigarette smoke. For one thing, it was illegal to live in our studios. It contravened some city ordinance about number of toilets per square feet of human being.

I got on the line to Mother and made a snap decision to give in about the course.

"You won't regret it," she assured me.

The first day of my computer course I arrived at the

community college royally hung over from Clive Evan's homemade wine. There were hundreds of people milling about. I was thinking Clive was probably trying to get it on with me, but I could see we had no future. For example, we totally disagreed about art. I was into surrealism in a big way. Clive's idea of art was constructing these giant green paper maché creatures that looked half human and half fish. He had dozens of them hanging from the ceiling. Clive figured he was going to make it big with these flipper guys. I didn't have the heart to tell him.

I felt approximately like dog doo, but I'd dressed up for the occasion – army surplus pants, black cowboy boots, black t-shirt with a silver skull and cross bones and that lovely velvet lounging jacket I found at a junk store. I wore feather earrings that hung down nearly to my shoulders. My eyes were blackened with kohl. Everyone seemed to be going in the other direction. There were hundreds of these incredibly young and clean cut students coming at me. They wore things like sneakers, neat little preppie sweaters and rugby pants or skirts.

Where were all the mature students?, I wondered.

Despite all the preppies staring at me, I managed to find the number of my classroom on this enormous computer printout in the lobby. Then I stared blankly at the directional map and finally found the room by stopping a half dozen different people for directions.

The name of the course was Computers for the Illiterate. It was written right on the door. They meant computer illiterate, of course. I mean, I did know how to read.

Most of the people in the course looked to be over 20. There was a grey haired woman probably trying to re- enter the work force, a young couple who had gone into business

together, a high school teacher, myself, a couple of the preppies and Rajiv Gill.

That first day he put himself in a chair that directly faced the door. I came wandering into the room, shocked to have actually found it and ran smack into these deep dark pools which were later introduced to me as Rajiv's eyes. Like, I almost fell over.

He was sitting very straight – regal – his hands folded neatly on the desk. He looked curious but polite. Mother would have approved of the way he dressed – absolutely immaculate, in a button down shirt, and a sleeveless sweater vest. He looked like he had never been dirty in his life.

An Indian prince.

"How do you do?" he said, enunciating carefully. The class hadn't started yet. Rajiv seemed pleased with himself.

I suddenly got self conscious about my green hair. "Um – hi" I said, slipping into the nearest empty seat. He smiled again, looked at my hair, and then at the

fedora. He smiled some more. I felt like one of those insect specimens. "You in a computer course! What a riot!" Marlene slapped her leg and smirked. "What's it like?"

I knew I was going to take a lot of ribbing on this one. Of everyone in our crowd, I was the one who ranted the most about the evils of technology. I once spent a full seven months painting a series about computers and video screens doing violence to human beings. It was a metaphor for the inner deadness of modern society. I was beginning to wish Marlene would get over her creative block.

"It's okay." I said. "I met a guy."

Marlene was perched on my sawhorse with my wool blanket wrapped around her thin shoulders and a cup of Five Star

whiskey in her hand. It was raining outside, but I had the window wide open because I'd been using cleaner fluid. I changed my mind about a whole section of the painting and was trying to wash it off.

"A guy, eh?" she said. "Good looking?"

Rajiv's brown face came instantly into my mind. He had to be about the most perfect looking dude I ever saw in my life. "Oh yeah." I was trying to be non-chalant.

"Good. Maybe it'll take your mind off Bill."

I dismissed her. "Forget it Marlene. It would be one hell of a hopeless romance. And he's really not my type." That's when I knew I was hooked.

My resistance to technology sure got in the way during those classes. I told the teacher several times that the damn machine wasn't working, but he sent me back to the manual and told me it was the operator who wasn't working.

"Goddamn fucking machine!" I yelled. Then I covered my mouth with my hand.

Rajiv looked amused. He always looked amused. Superior and amused. "This word – fucking – you use it so much. What is this word 'fucking'?"

"Swear word, Rajiv," I mumbled, resolving to clean up my language. "What does it mean?" he pressed.

"Um – " Now I was really blushing. "It's slang, you know. It means – you know – um – relations – um – intercourse – um"

Rajiv was still smiling. "It means sex. Like – you know – just forget it, okay, Rajiv."

"Oh Jesus," Marlene laughed, almost choking on her tea. "Of

course he knows what it means. Those are the first words they learn. Listen – I used to teach English as a second language. Believe me, he knows what it means. He's just putting you on. Maybe he's putting the make on you. Have you considered that?"

I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure about anything to do with Rajiv. Except that he was starting to occupy too much space in my head. Like, this was turning into a major, galloping, out of control crush. I had this fantasy about how one day he would turn to me in class and suddenly realize the immense passion that surged between us. I lay awake sometimes thinking about his slender brown fingers and how they would feel lingering across my shoulder or my thigh. Once he tapped me on the shoulder and this shiver went right through me. I figured when we finally got together, it would be this great cultural synthesis. We would have so much to talk about! He could tell me about the dusty roads of India and I could point out how similar they were to the cobblestones of Gastown where I lived. Mother, of course, would be shocked and a little afraid at first, but when I brought Rajiv over, she would be totally won over. And she'd love his clothes, of course.

Eventually, we'd have to fly back to India. To meet his family. I was really looking forward to that part. My future with Rajiv was clearly packaged in my mind. The only ingredient missing was his participation. Just to hurry things along, I was growing the green out. I mean, letting my hair go back to its natural colour, which was a kind of mousy brown.

"Just tired of the routine. It's a lot of work dyeing it," I told Marlene, hardly defensive at all. "It's just another dumb fashion."

I stopped by the Bay after school one day and stared at the window display. There were all these lovely pastel coloured sweaters, pink and light blue and mauve. The models

wore white pants and little pumps with delicate toes. They had these soft flowing hair-dos and they looked nice. That seemed to be the image for the season. “Nice.”

My reflection in the window stared back at me – hair gelled to stand nearly straight out from the roots, and I was wearing my false eye lashes, which suddenly looked gaudy, not cool. I got instantly depressed. What did it all mean? What was life really worth? What did art have to do with anything? Would Rajiv prefer pastel? I stopped by Marlene’s place and told her I was feeling down. “Do you ever think about getting married?” I asked her.

She stared at me like I was crazy. “Are you depressed or something? What’s eating you?” “Pastel,” I said, getting melodramatic, “pastel is eating my heart away.”

“Could you be a little more vague?” She still had that expression on her face. I could see a large lump of clay on the wooden bench in the middle of her studio.

I decided to change the subject. “You making something?”

Her face lit up, and she made me come over to examine the clay. It looked like a rock, but Marlene started waving her hands around and talking about what it was going to be. It would have the head of a computer terminal and the body of a washer woman. “You know – thick waist, sturdy hips – the kind of legs that are solidly rooted in working class reality. But the head – well you see, it’s way off in the future. I got the idea from your computer course.”

I left Marlene’s place even more depressed. I didn’t feel like painting at all. I found myself eyeing my studio very critically. In the back corner, there was a sleeping loft built by the previous tenant. I’d covered it with a foam mattress from the Army & Navy and some blankets and sheets that Mother gave me. Next to that was the table, one of those ugly grey

metal and arborite affairs, and a couple of matching chairs. I cooked on a hot plate which was usually on the floor somewhere near the table. Oh yeah, and I had an electric kettle which I paid $5. for at a pawnshop on Hastings Street. That was my domestic section.

Most of the room was devoted to rolls of paper, cardboard, paints, crayons, pencils, crepe paper, tofu crates, bits of fabric, broken gizmos that I was sure would be useful someday, old picture frames, a radio I planned to fix. My full length mirror (which I found in an alley) was up against one wall. It had this gilty gold coloured frame and only a couple of cracks. There was a large wooden crate, which I dumped everything into when I cleaned up, and my sawhorse in the middle of the floor. My masterpiece occupied an entire corner of the room.

I had a hard time imagining Rajiv in my place. I'd probably have to move.

The next day I went down to the Sally Ann and found a pink pastel skirt that stopped just above my knees. It cost me $1.49 and had only one hole, fortunately in a place where it didn't show. I washed my hair carefully and let it dry without any gel. I wanted to comb it into one of those soft, flowing yet feminine styles, but it kept getting in my eyes, so I tied it back with a piece of string. I searched all through my rack for something like a white chiffon blouse to wear, but all I found were black things.

I settled on my leather jacket. I hoped I was beginning to look ordinary. And that was the day Rajiv finally asked me for a date. Well, sort of a date. He wanted to meet the next day

after class and study the computer manual. Together. There was a big exam coming up. THE big exam, actually, and then the course would be over. Of course, you could elect to go on to the next course, which Mother was pushing me to do. She'd done her research, and knew about programs like

“Pagemaker” and “Illustrator”.

“Why, with your creativity –” is how she’d begin her pitches. But I knew where that kind of thing leads you – straight into advertising. I hadn’t made any decisions.

But anyway, Rajiv had asked me out, and if it wasn’t exactly a date, it was at least an opportunity. I was flying. I couldn’t wait to tell Marlene.

She wasn’t interested. I stood there watching the lump of clay taking shape in her hands and I could tell from the glazed look in her eyes that she was in the middle of it. The fever. The thing that takes over when the work is no longer what you are doing – the work is doing you.

“Hunh? Who?” she said.

“Oh come on, Marlene. Rajiv. You know –” I was frustrated. I wanted someone to share my happiness. Artists are so unreliable.

“‘Hey, there might be a rent strike – ” she called out to me, as I turned on my heel and prepared to trudge up the stairs.

“Yeah, sure,” I mumbled. I knew there’d been some meetings. I passed Bill on the way upstairs. He wasn’t with what’s her name and he greeted me with a big phoney smile.

“Angie! How’s it going?” “Fine. Just fine,” I said smugly. “Wanna come up – for coffee or something?”

I pushed passed him and tossed off a “Sorry, Bill, I’m busy.” ‘Coffee’ was our old code for you-know-what. The nerve of that guy! I clutched a brown paper bag to my chest – I had finally found a white chiffon blouse at the Sally Ann and couldn’t wait to try it on.

I spent the whole evening fussing with myself in front of the mirror. I tried the blouse tucked in, then hanging out, and decided on tucked in as the more formal approach. I brushed

my hair all over to one side, then tried it on the other side and finally parted it down the middle. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the masterpiece staring at me accusingly. I turned the mirror around until I couldn't see the reflection anymore and went on with my preening.

Around midnight I went down to Marlene's room to show off my efforts. She wasn't thrilled with the interruption.

"Yeah, yeah, it looks fine," she said, barely looking at me.

I stood awkwardly in the doorway, realizing with a guilty pang that it had been three days since I touched the masterpiece. "You want me to make coffee or anything?" I ventured.

I walked into class the next day with my new get-up and took my usual seat beside Rajiv. He swivelled right around in his chair to stare at me. I thought I'd finally really caught his attention, but he looked quite puzzled. "Hmmm." It came out like a sigh, and then he turned to face the front.

After class, we took our books down to the cafeteria and spread them out on a table. We had to clear off several coffee cups full of cigarette butts and a plate of left-over fries.

I decided it was time to get to know him, so I asked about his family.

"Well, let's see," he said, smiling pleasantly and holding up his fingers. "There's my grandmother – " he put one finger down, "on my father's side. The others have passed on. My father, mother, one older brother – Jagjheet. A younger sister – Harbujunkhar, her husband Alix – he's British, their child, Jasbir – she's 3 now, and oh yes, my wife, Jaswinder."

"Your wife?" I said, assuming I'd heard wrong.

"Yes, we have been married since January 12th, last year, just before I came here. She waits for me in India. Our parents arranged this match."

“But that’s terrible!” I sputtered. Maybe I could rescue him from this bondage.

“No. It’s our way.” He didn’t seem like he needed rescuing. He smiled, leaning forward across the table. “You don’t think your parents are wise in these matters?”

“Gawd no!” I was remembering the junior real estate agent Mother tried to fix me up with.

Marlene had this theory that her most creative times always followed on the tail of her worst depressions. I could see that this theory got her through some real rough times, but it wasn’t helping me much that day. Rajiv was married. Married. It seemed so final. I didn’t know anyone who was married. I closed my book and put my head down and Rajiv must have sensed my mood.

“You don’t want to study anymore, Angie?”

I said maybe tomorrow would be better and he nodded.

“Tomorrow.” he said, closing the book.

I walked home like there was cement on my feet. It was busy on my street. Three police cars whizzed by me with lights flashing. People seemed to be rushing along, as if there was something to look at.

I saw the police blockades at the same time as I saw my building. A uniformed cop was directing traffic around a TV crew. A white sheet with stencilled letters reading “OCCUPATION” hung from the third floor. Someone had suspended my masterpiece outside my window with ropes. The painting seemed to be talking to the crowd gathered below, I mean really talking. In a flash, I knew it was my best work ever.

But I knew what it was missing. I had to get to it. I had to work.

As if in a daze, I kept walking and found myself on the sidewalk beside the building. A cop tried to nudge me out of the way. “Better get out of here, mam,” he said. I figured he was talking to somebody else at first, then I remembered the chiffon blouse. I waited until his back was turned and slipped into the alley behind the building. It was deserted. I found a wooden crate and set it up underneath the fire escape, thereby gaining enough height to grab the bottom rung and pull myself up. I started climbing, which is difficult in a skirt.

I started to feel elated and everything seemed clear to me.

Art, it’s art that matters. I wanted to yell it out loud. Not guys, Art. Joni Mitchell has a line about that and I was trying to remember it. Something like “I feel like I live with this guy called Art.” Then I remembered that she went and got married a while ago. Oh well.

I found an open window on the fourth floor, which turned out to be Clive’s room. He wasn’t home and I walked right into one of this flipper men. Slapped me in the face. Ordinarily, this would completely gross me out, but I was in a hurry.

I raced down the hallway to my studio, tore off my silly clothes and pulled on a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans. There was noise coming from the roof, and I decided to head up there.

I climbed up the stairs and found the hatch wide open. Marlene was up there, and Bill too and just about everybody else who lived in the building. Marlene was holding a gigantic white flag, which I recognized as my bedsheet and everybody was laughing and waving to the spectators on the sidewalk below.

“Angie!” Marlene called to me.

“What’s going on?” I yelled back.

“It’s the strike! Where have you been? Isn’t it great?”

She was really into it, I could tell. Somebody arrived with a handful of leaflets, probably printed on Lisa Martin's gestetner machine, and people started throwing them over the roof. A couple of dudes from the second floor were dragging a sound system up to the roof.

It was great, of course it was great. I hoped Mother wasn't watching the news that night. I went looking for someone to help me haul the masterpiece up. Maybe I'd finish it on the roof.

* * * * * *

Spring Thaw

WHEN I LEFT my husband, my sister warned me I'd be sorry. "It's a shame, Shirley," Edna said, "a good man like that…"

Taylor wasn't cruel or anything. He wasn't energetic enough to be cruel. He just faded away – night after night slouched silently in front of the TV set until I thought he would recede right into the screen. Taylor could go for a week and not say more than "Hello," "Good-bye," and "When's supper?" It got so I could hardly see him, and then I left.

Edna tells me he mopes a lot now. I said she was welcome to move in with him if she really felt that bad. I got a little room near the restaurant where I work. It's got a pull-out bed, an old arm-chair, a hotplate and a gas heater. I had to tape plastic on the windows, but I got through the winter okay.

Edna tells me I should have got the house or some furniture at least.

"Fifty percent," she says, "you deserve fifty percent." At sixty-two and fifty-eight, Edna still wants seniority. Her old man died of a heart attack five years ago, which leaves her plenty of time to be thinking about how I should be running my life. She's always turning up unannounced – checking up on me.

One time I found her on the doorstep. She said she was just passing by. I had some takeout from the restaurant in a bag. She sniffed.

"You should be making proper meals," she said, "not eating this junk. It's all full of monosodium glutamate and disphosphate tryaxamine…" She went on like that – using unpronounceable word, talking doom and gloom.

“You want some?” I said. I opened the door and she sat down at my little table like I was going to wait on her. “You’re too thin,” she said, “You have bags under your eyes – probably not sleeping enough, which is hardly surprising, what with the pub downstairs and all manner of drunken idiots coming and going at all hours of the day and night.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said, putting some plates down. I like to hear people talking loud, making fools of themselves. I cut the burger in half, set the takeout container between us and sat down.

“Help yourself…”

“I’m telling you, Shirley – this is no place for a woman alone.”

I told her it was no world for a woman alone and asked when she was moving in with Taylor.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, poking at the lukewarm French fries. Edna picked one up with a fork and took a delicate little bite. She always eats like that – dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a napkin between each tiny nip. Edna was always the one who could keep her dress clean.

“You’re not speaking, Shirley,” she said after awhile.

“I’m thinking,” I said. I wanted to eat – not risk a lecture on talking with my mouth full. I was thinking about my day.

“Well, tell me about work,” she said, brightly.

“What’s to tell – I mean – really – what is there to say about Jack’s Café? People come in, they eat, they leave.”

“Well, how was it today?” she pressed.

“It was slow – real slow. First I wiped all the tables and chairs and filled up the salt and peppers and was working my way through the sugar containers and then we got a customer.

“Who?”

“Are you really bored or something, Edna? Maybe you should get a hobby. There’s probably some committee you could be involved with down at the church.”

The thing is, Edna’s whole life was her husband, Harry. They met in high school. She worked in the dime store until he “came to his senses,” as she puts it. Then they got married. She had a baby right away, and kept on having them. Four in all. Harry had a bunch of different jobs – grease monkey, tin man, car sales. He was always looking for a new angle, for a better pay cheque. She was always looking for a better recipe, and a new way to please him. When he died he left her well cared for. The kids were all gone to the city by then and only came around once or twice a year. I guess she gets tired of dusting her china figurines and knitting sweaters for the grandchildren.

To say that my husband Taylor lacked ambition is putting it mildly. He had the same job all his life – as a desk clerk down at the hotel. He thought it was real swish because he went to work in a shirt and tie, but the truth is, the money was always bad. I think I had about a half hour of maternity leave in my life. As soon as I could stand up after the first one, I started leaving her with my neighbour and working the supper hour at Jack’s.

Even with the two of us working, we barely had enough to get by. We ate a lot of macaroni and beans. And of course, there were always hand-me-downs from Edna’s kids.

Edna’s Harry did okay, money-wise. They’d have us over from time to time, and it would always be real nice – Edna’s special chicken, a roast of lamb done just so. My kids were happy to eat at Edna’s.

But there she was in my little room, nibbling restaurant leavings and begging me for some hand-me-down stories.

“Who was it?” she said. “Who came in?”

“You really want to know? Okay – it was that blonde girl who works down at social services. You know – little button nose – cute, not pretty. I’m telling you, Edna, she was on her way to work, and she was dressed in blue jeans. They’re so casual these days, you can hardly tell the workers from the clients. But this girl had quite a load on her mind. You could see it in her face.”

It started to seem like a real story, with Edna listening so raptly. That girl chose the table in the back – usually the last to fill up. I offered her a menu. First she said no, and then yes, and then she asked for a coffee. When I brought it over, she was fingering the menu, not really looking at it. She said she was expecting someone.

Then the other girl came in. I think she’s a schoolteacher. She’s new in town – long hair, neatly brushed, held back with barrettes – usually wears a big blue parka.

Anyway – she spots this other girl and then stands still, like she’s thinking about something, or collecting herself. When she goes over, they shake hands and introduce themselves.

“Sandra,” says the dark-haired one.

“Becky,” says the blonde. Sandra takes off her parka, hangs it carefully over the back of her chair and sits down. I glide over with another menu, and they’re discussing how they don’t feel like eating.

“These things always get me in the gut,” is what Sandra says.

Then Becky mentions that the French fries are good, and after a little back and forth and discussion of grease and so on, they decide to get some to share – gravy on half the plate. Sandra asks for a large milkshake.

When I come back with their order, Sandra is in tears and Becky is tearing napkins out of the dispenser and handing

them to her. A little pile of wadded-up napkins is in the centre of the table.

Sandra manages to smile and thank me and as I walk away, I hear Becky mutter, “That bastard – that lousy bastard. Don’t you just feel like killing him?”

Sam from Forestry showed up just then for his blueberry pie and black coffee. I served him and then decided to finish filling the sugar shakers in the back.

Those girls were leaning towards each other across the table, talking in low, confidential tones. Sam called out for a refill, and by the time I got back, they were talking in these deep voices and saying things like, “Hey – foxy lady of the woods,” and what was the other one – oh yeah – “My grand passion – my pearl of the wilderness.”

They’re putting on fake French accents and starting to laugh. And talking about veal ptarmigan and white wine and something about a lacy table cloth. They’re getting all giddy.

“Who else does stuff like that out here…” they’re saying.

Edna got up and put water on for tea. I stared at the blackness out the window. She sat down again.

“It’s Eric they’re talking about – right?”

“Who?”

“Eric Foley – Beatrice’s boy. The redhead – you know – he works down at the mill.”

“Edna – everybody works down at the mill…”

“Just like his father,” she said, “that man had an eye for everything in skirts.”

And suddenly I could see him, this Eric, with his bedroom eyes and his compact body and his head always ready to

turn. A guy like that has to have a little touch – a bandanna around his neck, or a shirt he swears is all the rage in Paris, even though he's never been there. He looks at you and he's so, so sincere and says the most outrageous flattering things and you're far too young and you want to believe him. And some other part of you is stirring – you're in a heat you never knew could happen and your head is filled up with the craziest notions and it's like you're not even standing on the ground.

A guy like that will leave you flat. One minute he's taking you to the movies, and the next minute he's off with Louanne or Betty or Irene and you're watching them all over town and wondering if it's her pretty legs or little upturned nose and every time you look in the mirror you seem so damned ugly when only last week you were beautiful. And you can't get the heat of his hands off your body. Then somebody like Taylor walks into your life and you start thinking about safety.

A week later Edna surprised me at my door with a casserole dish full of her beef stroganoff. She seems to know my schedule to the minute. What if I decided to wander around the mini-mart checking out the tomatoes some night after work?

She got me all settled in and comfortable eating and then let out a big sigh.

"I saw Taylor today," she said.

"Oh? Where?"

"At your place – I mean at his place."

"Really? Why? Did you move your stuff in?"

"Will you stop that! He's just lonely. I went to visit. He asked me. I'm thinking of you. You don't have to sleep alone, you know. He'll still take you back."

I put my fork down.

“I mean,” she continued, “don’t you miss it – you know – being with a man…”

“I gave up on that years ago, Edna,” I said. “Years ago.”

The next day he’s sitting there – Taylor – looking thin, nursing a cup of coffee.

“What do you want?” I snapped. He looked up at me with his mooney eyes. “Taylor, it won’t work,” I said. I wouldn’t even look at him. “You can learn how to cook. Laundry is real easy. Just read the soap box.”

“I miss you – you’re my wife,” he whispered. I was screaming inside. You don’t kick a man when he’s down, and he was so like a wounded child, but I held firm.

“You’ll get over it, Taylor,” I said. “Maybe you’ll find someone else.” I heard him choke.

“You want more coffee?” I avoided his miserable face. From the corner of my eye I saw him nod. Taylor is the kind who always mumbles. You have to get real close to figure out what he wants. When I came back with the coffee, I set it down harder than I meant to, and some of it spilled.

“Sorry,” I said, but I didn’t go for a cloth. There were napkins on his table, after all. I wished a Greyhound would pull up.

The door opened and Sam from Forestry arrived. I brought him apple pie because we were out of blueberry. He looked over at Taylor. I felt my face flush.

“Isn’t that – ?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s my ex-husband.” It wasn’t technically true – I didn’t have the papers.

When I left Taylor, I didn’t want the damn house. All those

years of memories. My daughter called me from the city to make sure I hadn't gone off my rocker.

"Won't you get lonely?" she said. I laughed. Miss the ghost man? I've had better conversations with the window sill. Virgil, my son, seemed to understand.

"You all right, Ma?" is all he said.

"Just fine," I said, and he seemed to believe me.

I got busy wiping down counters, wishing Taylor would go away. I was thinking about this thing I read about cells. The cells in your body are dividing all the time – replacing themselves. Every eight years they are completely replaced. In the twenty-five years I spent with Taylor, I grew three new bodies. They say that old couples begin to look alike – from mimicking the other's facial expression or eating the same food or something. I began to imagine my cells dividing at a relentless pace – growing away from him.

The girls came in – Sandra and Becky. They meet on their lunch break now. I told them this thing about cells, and they got it right away and began calculating how long it would be before no cell of their bodies had been touched by Eric. Then we were all giggling like schoolchildren, and I heard the door open and close. Taylor was gone.

"Shirley," Becky said, "Bring out the champagne. I feel happy today."

"Gee whiz, we're all out," I said, playing along.

"I guess I'll settle for coffee, then," she said cheerfully.

"Make mine a strawberry shake – no chocolate," Sandra said.

"I heard what they did," Edna told me later. She said the girls went down to the pet store, bought a garter snake and let it

loose in Eric's bedroom. They broke in when he was at work.

"I think the best part," I said, "is that guy has to see them together all over town. Those girls are inseparable."

Edna and I had a good laugh at Eric's expense. She told me about a lady's sewing circle she's joined up with. They make quilts and things for people in need.

The weather was warming up and the spring thaw setting in. I sloshed through mud to get to work. Then it started to dry up, and the bugs came out on the trees. Jack put me on nights for a while. A change is good, he figures.

I was walking home and there was something restless in the wind. The bushes were swaying and the sky was clear and bright with stars. The moon was just rising and pine needles crunched under my feet. I wanted to call my sister Edna and say let's run around in the woods and pretend to be fairies.

Something caught my ear, a sound, like a sigh. I saw movement in the trees and heard laughter tinkling. Becky was out there, a little flashlight in her hand. She had her arm around Sandra, and they were talking fast, heading down the path towards the lake.

Spring Thaw was first published in Room of One's Own

Gravely Street

Once my neighbour leaned out the upstairs window and told two Japanese businessmen to go back to China. She was native Indian and her people owned the whole damn country, she said.

The men stood beside their freshly parked car in their impeccable three-piece suits, briefcases in hand while Evelyn harangued them. For a moment, I thought they were going to get back in their car and drive away. Instead, one unleashed a stream of Japanese curses, and with a dismissive hand gesture, they walked up the street.

It was a hot summer afternoon and I was struggling to write a stirring handbill for the Coalition for Free Speech. It was too noisy – dammit – it was always too noisy. It someone cleared their throat in the next suite, I could hear it. When anyone had sex, the whole building vibrated.

“You should swim back – nobody wants you here!” Evelyn yelled.

I grabbed the broom from behind the water heater and banged on the ceiling. Evelyn stomped the floor but she stopped yelling.

Evelyn never told me to go somewhere else – even though I’m white and my grandfather came over on a boat from Edinburgh.

She had a few other things to say, however.

That evening she barged through my open back door, reeking of whiskey, and accused me of mistreating my cat. I sat with my feet on the wobbly kitchen table, a notebook on my lap. The page in front of me was covered in elaborate doodles. I was not making progress on my flyer. I was

dumbfounded at this intrusion.

“He’s so upset – he’s so upset,” she said. “Can’t you see how upset he is?”

I lived with Boxer, a grey short-haired alley cat, all muscle and scars. He followed me home one day, dashed in the door as soon as I opened it and occupied my favourite chair. Charmed by his audacity, I went out, bought cans of Miss Mew and Puss n’ Boots and began leaving a window open so he could come and go.

“The other cats – they all get inside through that window. I see them in there dancing around – all over everything.” The cat parties she described explained why my floor was always so dirty, but I didn’t know what she was getting at.

“You should stay home,” Evelyn said, “then you could let him in and out. You’re always away.” Her eyes misted over and she told me in detail how Boxer often took refuge from the cat debaucheries in my apartment by running upstairs to hers. She closed her eyes and clutched her arms to her breast to explain how she cuddled and comforted him.

I was busy with the Committee for International Political Prisoners, the El Salvador support group, Women Against Rape, the fledging SNAG (Sunday Night Action Group) and my part-time job typesetting for the Neighbourhood News.

I told Evelyn the truth – that I would not quit everything to devote my life to my cat. This upset her greatly. She stood in the centre of my kitchen floor and began sobbing.

I wanted her out. “Please, Evelyn, go home to Rudy. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You don’t understand, you don’t understand,” she repeated.

Rudy was Evelyn’s long-suffering mate. He looked like the walking dead – a tall, gaunt man with sunken eyes and a

permanently tired expression. He had devoted the better part of his life to hauling baggage at the train station.

Evelyn ignored me. I had to stand up, push gently and close the door on her. She stood outside, sniffling. Boxer, the poor thing, watched curiously from his perch on top of the refrigerator.

The summer was not going well. I was over-committed – up to my eyeballs in meetings, community forums, picket lines and demonstrations. I was broke, as usual.

And I was sleeping alone. Terence, my beloved, had recently informed me that our seven-year affair was over. He had linked up with a matronly woman who wore pink lipstick and reminded me of his mother. Terry swore she was the love of his life. They were going to have children together.

Terry's main complaint was that I was never available. I wanted badly to change the world and fought hard with him for the right to keep dragging my tired carcass around in the service of my causes. I was angry at him for his lack of commitment. He wanted to go to the movies, the theatre, art shows. I wanted him to help me picket the U.S. consulate and distribute flyers about the shocking treatment of dissidents in El Salvador. We rarely saw each other before 10 pm.

We'd been taunting each other with the notion of breaking up, but I hadn't expected him to act on it.

I needed some sustenance. I glanced at the clock radio – 15 minutes to 11. Just enough time to hop on my bicycle, pedal madly over to the liquor store on Hastings Street and pick up a five dollar bottle of wine. If I had the cash. A search of my pockets produced $2.36. There was a jar of coins on the portable TV and I dumped it into my hand, quickly separating out quarters and dimes from the pennies and nickels.

The worst part of it was, the other woman had money. She lived on the west side and drove a BMW. Apparently, she got rich by divorcing some doctor. She didn't have to work – the settlement paid for everything. As I was cycling down Commercial Drive dodging blue-jeaned teenagers and parked cars, Terry was probably making love to her on a polar bear rug in her tastefully appointed condominium. It was too warm for a fire, but there would be a bottle of pricey French wine poured out in cut-glass goblets. I hoped he set the glass on the floor and kicked it over in the throes of passion – a blood-like stain spreading over the fur.

Terry himself was an entrepreneur. He made a bunch of money selling Amway and bought a Kitsilano hardware franchise. That was how they met – she came into his store for a shower curtain and they got to talking. She should have ordered it from a catalogue.

The BMW lady was, no doubt, free every evening.

I arrived at the liquor store at three minutes to 11. There were several other people making the last minute dash – mostly grubby types in dirty clothes and worn-out shoes. I had just enough time to race to the Italian section, grab the litre bottle of Donini Red and haul it up to the checkout. The cashier shot me a dirty look as I counted out my pile of change. She was weary – she wanted to go home.

I chose side streets for the ride back, cycling leisurely with the wine rattling around in the wicker basket attached to the front of my bicycle. I decided my apartment was depressing me. The rent was cheap, but the linoleum was cracked, my oven didn't work, the toilet always ran, the landlord wouldn't fix anything and the neighbours were driving me crazy.

As I locked my bicycle in the stairwell, I could hear Evelyn's voice rising above the hum of the TV. She had started in on Rudy. Her voice was too slurred to understand much,

except when she yelled “bastard” and “lousy bastard.” As usual, Rudy did not reply. I imagined he was trying to watch television.

The regret of Evelyn’s life, she told me once, was that she was unable to have children. She needed badly to love small things, so she lavished her attention on cats. She and Rudy didn’t do much except watch the tube and drink. Inside, I flicked on the black and white, whacked it twice to adjust the horizontal hold, cracked open the Donini and called for Boxer to grace my lap.

The wine was two-thirds empty by the time I set it on the floor and dozed off in the chair. I had a rule about never finishing a bottle in one sitting.

I woke in the morning stripped down and on top of my bedcovers. Boxer was nestled near my feet. I heard Rudy’s slow shuffle outside the window – probably on the way to tend the tomatoes. He had a small patch of garden around back that he’d been working on for years. It was his major talent – coaxing seeds into fat, juicy fruit.

I didn’t feel so well. The clock said 8 a.m. It was time to get up and hustle down to the Neighbourhood News office. I threw on a pair of army surplus shorts and a t-shirt that read “No Apartheid Anywhere” and headed out to the kitchen. In the living room, I picked up the Donini bottle and stashed it in the closet where I kept the empties. Some day I was going to have to clean out that cupboard.

The air was stifling. I opened the back door, hoping for a breeze. Rudy sat on the step staring into space.

“Morning Rudy,” I called. He nodded. “Tomatoes sure look great.”

“Yup” He stood up. “Going to work,” he announced, and he shuffled across the back yard towards the gate.

The morning was frustrating. The Editwriter 7500 – a good machine in its day – was refusing to print. I would load in copy, press all the appropriate keys, and the machine would hum and rattle and flash lights inside the cylinder as if great things were transpiring. When I developed the paper, there would be nothing – absolutely nothing.

Ed Martle – the owner – and I spent an hour on our hands and knees with an assortment of screwdrivers and wrenches, trying to coax it back to work. Neighbourhood News is a family business – and not a lucrative one. I was paid $6.50 an hour. Mrs. Martle – Edith – did the accounts, answered the phone and wrote the "About Town" column. Ed wrote the news stories and tried to keep the machines running. Bryan Lipin, a skinny, pasty-faced guy who dressed habitually in black and wore a gold ring through his nose, came in during production time. For two mad days twice a month we all did paste-up. Bryan spent the rest of his life painting dark, surrealistic visions on canvas.

All the little Martles – Suzy, John-John and Ed Junior worked for the paper while growing up. None of them stayed in the business.

Edith glided into the production room calling "Vivianne, darling, the phone's for you."

It was my friend Amanda, who lived up the valley. She wanted me to come for the weekend. I started listing all the reasons I couldn't. I had a report to write for Women Against Rape, there was still that flyer for Free Speech, SNAG was planning a little action – and then there was Boxer.

"Doesn't that woman who lives above you usually take care of him?" Amanda's voice was tense and insistent.

"Well, yes, but…"

"Vivianne," she whispered, "Janet's left – " I could hear her

crying softly. “It’s my fault,” she said, “I shouldn’t – “

“I’ll come, Amanda, I’ll come,” I promised.

“Eureka!” Ed Martle’s triumphant cry rang out from the other room. He rushed into the front office, his face flushed boyishly. “It’s working Viv! We’re in business!” He thrust a piece of developed phototypesetting paper into my hand. It read “THIS IS A TEST” in 70 point Helvetica bold italic, 24-point Times Roman, 36-point Cheltenham book and 10-point Palatino regular.

Ed liked nothing more than tricking the old machinery into working. Nothing depressed him more than paying service people.

I decided to go ask Claire and George to feed Boxer while I was away. They lived in the corner suite, right beside Evelyn and Rudy. George was stiff with arthritis and couldn’t go out to work. He acted as the building caretaker – mostly puttering around and occasionally fixing a leaking faucet or broken window. Claire was a nurse. With Miss Mew in hand (turkey delight, salmon surprise, and meaty menu) I climbed the back stairs and knocked on their door.

There didn’t seem to be anyone home, but Evelyn emerged from her apartment and noticed the cans.

“Going away honey?” she said, reaching for the cat food. “When are you back? You’ll leave the window open?” She padded on to the back landing in her knitted slippers and flower print dress, a white apron tied around her plump waist.

Amanda greeted me at the bus station in her usual way – with a warm hug, then a long look into my eyes. Terence used to look at me that way – silent, eyeball to eyeball for a long searching moment. Then he’d tell me what he saw. “You look tired.” “Whew – you’re intense tonight.” “What’s the sadness about?”

On our first date he said “I just want us to be real.”

And we were – even when it was painful, even when the truth became a weapon.

I could barely stop him from giving me a blow-by-blow description of his first night with the new lady. He wanted us all to be friends. I gave him a map of the city with a red line slashed across Main Street and told him not to cross it.

Amanda held up a cotton shopping bag inscribed with the Greenpeace logo. “I bought some espresso for you. And this Spanish wine – Sangra del Torro. Have you tried it?”

Her blue eyes were red and swollen.

“I took the day off work,” she said softly, “I just couldn’t – “

“We’re quite a pair, aren’t we?” I said, “the lovelorn sisters.”

Arm in arm we walked to her vintage Volvo. During the short drive to her little house, she filled me in. They were supposed to go up to Harrison Lake on the weekend. Instead, Janet phoned and said there was this other woman. Janet and Amanada had been ‘together’ for nearly nine years – if you disregarded all the times Janet was off on some sexual adventure. Amanda always took her back. All Janet had to do was show up, bat her eyelashes, and the affair was on again.

“Don’t say it, Viv,” She raised her hand off the steering wheel. “Look, I’m an expert, I know all about this crap – a woman who loves too much – I’m addicted. I counsel women about it all the time.” A tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it aside.

Amanda worked as a counselor at a women’s centre. She had always had jobs like that.

The Volvo rattled over the gravel driveway up to Amanda's tidy little country home. First I had to see her garden. She was particularly proud of the red chili peppers growing in pots around the little brick patio.

The wine disappeared at the kitchen table. We reminisced – we discussed their failings – we put our feelings under a microscope. We dismissed the possibility of ever loving again and toasted our friendship. Amanada pulled a bottle of dry sherry from a cupboard and we moved to the living room.

"This stuff is going to make me sick, I'm sure of it," she said. "But I don't care. I'm just so miserable."

A few drinks later, we were laughing. I got the idea to practice some phone dropping exercises. "We need to be firm," I said, "Next time they call – this is what to do." I took the telephone off the shelf, put the receiver to my ear, said "Terence?" and with a look of absolute horror dropped it back on the base.

"Let me try that." She stood up, wavering a bit, held the telephone primly. "Dingaling. Oh hello? Janet?" She dropped the receiver like it was scalding.

Boxer welcomed me home Sunday night with wild abandon. He rubbed my leg, jumped in my lap and carefully licked my face. Dusty cat prints decorated my kitchen table. I felt refreshed.

I had written the free speech pamphlet on the bus back. The Women Against Rape report formulated in my mind, I went to bed with a paperback. Boxer curled against my feet. I set the alarm for early, planning to work first thing.

I was sipping coffee when the first little girl came down the stairs. Her dark hair was neatly combed. The frilly white dress accentuated her brown skin. She walked carefully, placing each patent leather shoe on the worn stairs with

great delicacy. An older girl followed, dressed identically. The man behind them looked like he had put on pounds since the last time he wore that green suit. A woman in high heels, nylons and a blue and white polka dotted dress was next. Coffee cup in hand, I stuck my head out the door and saw Evelyn at the top of the stairs, in her best dress.

“Is there a party?” I asked. “Where are you all going?”

She spoke with great dignity. “We’re going to Rudy’s funeral,” she said. “Heart attack.” She walked carefully downstairs, clutching a shiny purse and disappeared around the corner with the others.

The phone rang. Terence. I put the receiver back in its cradle, pulled the phone jack out of the wall and began to cry.

Gravely Street was first published in This Magazine, the 25th Anniversary edition, December 1991 / February 1992

Transitions

My husband slips out of his body and starts up his happy dance on the ceiling. Two months I waited by his side for this exact moment so I could grab him by the ethereal ankles and pull him back into the gaunt and misshapen body now lying still on the bed.

But he caught me looking the other way.

I have the Red Cross First Aid certificate, so I begin CPR while appealing to his spirit.

“You can’t leave me like this!” I’m wailing, “I’m too young to be a widow. I’m going to cry endlessly. It will be horrible …”

From above, he watches with that sly expression. “You do know you’re wasting your time. You could go check your email – maybe somebody left you an important message… you could already be a weiner…”

He’s often right about these things.

“You gonna be here when I get back?”

“Nah,” he says, “got a date with God…” and he disappears.

I decide to brush the teeth. He was having one of those chocolate food supplements not an hour before he passed. I don’t want people to see him with chocolate all over his mouth. Then I cross his arms across his chest because it seems appropriate. I consider straightening out his legs but decide to just draw the blanket up over him. I kiss him on the forehead and sit down at the end of the bed, my hands on his feet. Only, he’s not playing footsy with me now.

It looks exactly like him, it just doesn’t move.

I figure I should notify someone official, so I text my oldest daughter.

She catches a cab and arrives in her pajamas. “When did it happen?” she says “why didn’t you call me right away?” I can’t explain, really. I needed to wander in and out of the living room, and kiss him on the forehead endlessly, and stroke his hair like he could feel it.

After he couldn’t walk anymore, we set the room up around the hospital bed facing the window so he could see the crows and the sunset and the seagulls. And the “white guys.”

When they first came he panicked and told me to take the sign down – kick them out. Then he settled into debating with them. He said they claimed there were no sick people in their world. As if! And he saw himself at the foot of the bed, playing the blue Stratocaster. Sometimes I caught him making the bed go up and down for no particular reason – it was the only thing he could control.

I prayed for the miracle, I really did, but I kept looking at his fingers. Cachexia – that’s the thing that cancer does to your flesh. Melts it all away. His fingers were so finely tuned, so skillful and when he couldn’t even hold a plastic cup without spilling it all over himself, I guess I knew. But who wants to know that?

In the afternoon I am sitting with my cadre of close women, and he pops back in. They have supplied me with a box of deluxe Kleenex, we have lit some vanilla scented candles and everyone else is saying a prayer over his body.

As the new widow, it’s understood I am too choked up to utter the words.

Never the spirit was born.

The spirit shall cease to be never.

Never was the time it was not.

End and beginning are dreams

Birthless and deathless and changeless

Remains the spirit forever.

Death has not touched it at all.

Dead though the house of it seems.

I get that he thinks someone is being too serious, because he's floating in the air behind my older sister, making donkey ears. I suppress a giggle. He wags his finger at me and disappears again.

"Are you okay?' the woman to my left squeezes my hand. I bury my face in a deluxe Kleenex.

"I don't know," I say, "I'm kinda new to this…

He always warned me he'd die before me, but I didn't think he meant NOW, this year, this month, this day. I thought he meant when we were old and wrinkled and they were about to cart us off to the old folks home. So here I am stuck with a huge gaping swath of years ahead of me with the love of my life NOT by my side. It's enough to make me double over and cry so hard that my stomach hurts.

Except he sneaks up behind me and whispers into my ear.

"So dramatic…" He makes himself small and hops onto my left shoulder. "See, I'm right here," he gives me a miniature kiss then turns into an electric current and sends tingles down my side.

"But I miss your body!" I wail.

"Oh that old thing? I don't miss it at all. Watch this!" He races from one corner of the room to the other, performs cartwheels, stands on his ethereal head, does the splits,

“When’s the last time you saw me do that?”

“Never, actually,” I say.

“Well, there you go. It’s an ill wind that blows no good.” He goes back into his happy dance, something I recognize, but I swear he’s getting taller, and browner. And fainter.

They say I must accept what is happening, what HAS happened. I keep walking by the bed, and saying to his inert form “okay, joke’s over, get up now!” I don’t know, really, if my friends are laughing WITH me. I am crying, and walking in circles, from the living room to the kitchen, to the bathroom.

My older sister announces that she could take us all out for breakfast. I look at her like she is demented. Be in public? Everyone gets it and goes mmmm maybe not.

Someone is taking moldy things out of the fridge, someone is on the phone calling the cremation people, my older sister is calling our relatives in Alberta, and I keep going back to his bedside, where I have been, relentlessly, except for those 20 minute breaks to walk the dog. I am thinking he might need something, hoping really. I’m sitting there, stroking his hair, staring absently. My cousin is on the phone with the cremation people,

“When should they come?” she asks. I turn away.

”Never” is what I’m thinking. I would like to wrap him in a sheet and take him back to the Okanagan, to the riverside, where we spent that summer. I’d turn the heat off in the van, keep the dog up front. We could find a place. But I’ve already googled it. This would be illegal. I could be charged with “improper disposal of human remains.”

I go back to playing with his feet, listening to everyone talking, closing my eyes, tuning out the words. My oldest daughter approaches me gingerly. She whispers in my ear.

“Mom”, she says, “it would be good if they took him tonight. It gets problematic after more than 24 hours.” I know she means decay, unpleasant smells. I get it.

“Okay, hon, make it happen,”

In the dream, we are in salt water, swimming towards the lights of the other side.

”It’s so far away!” I say.

“Closer than you think” he tells me.

Transitions was written in 2011