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University of Alberta

Clean Secrets

by

Vivian Alba Zenari 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a collection of five short stories, each of which addresses in some way the idea of a secret. The stories are not mystery or detective tales; rather, they are concerned with the psychological impact of secrets on families. In some stories the whole family shares in a secret, while in others only one person or a few members of the family know the secret.

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Clean Secrets submitted by Vivian Alba Zenari in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Greg Hollingshead

Dr. Susan Hamilton

Dr. Henry Klumpenhouwer

September 14, 2000

For my husband

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1. EDEN'S APPLIANCE STORE

Eden's Appliance Store occupies part of a strip mall on a road that connects the town to larger metropolises to the south. It shares the strip mall with a grocery, a gaming and comic book shop, and a cheque-cashing outlet. Weathered white siding covers the outside of the building, and the flat roof overhangs the façade just enough to provide approaching customers with protection against rain. A rectangular sign advertises "Eden's Appliance Store, Sales and Service" in red square letters above the door. A plate-glass window stretches across the storefront; a dense security grate screens the window's lower half.

The door opens and closes with the tinkle of a bell. A narrow, rectangular room lies to the right. Three strides directly ahead is an order desk made of dark wood paneling. A cash register sits on the left side of the order desk, and on the wall next to the cash register hangs a rack of car air fresheners. Along the rest of this wall between the desk and the door, wooden shelves bear dozens of glass coffee pots. A hand-lettered sign above the shelves reads "Used Coffee Pots." Most of the coffee pots are for use with automatic drip coffee makers, but one shelf displays rotund glass percolators of the kind that found currency in

the fifties. Far on the opposite wall of the room, vacuum cleaner bags hang from long hooks. A dusty sign above the vacuum cleaner bags reads "On Sale Now!" in bright orange letters. On the wall opposite the storefront window hang hand-brooms, rolls of electrical tape, extension cords, and a few kitchen gadgets. Except for the kitchen gadgets, nothing on this wall is packaged. Glass and brass shelves take up the floor space between the walls. On these shelves rest drip coffee machines (some with pots), bread-makers, meat grinders, electric shavers, toasters, and mixers.

To the right of the order desk, an open threshold leads to a room, illuminated in custard-coloured fluorescent light, that houses rows of shelving. The shelves contain loose wires, mixing bowls, hand beaters, power supplies, and dozens of plastics baskets, which themselves hold watch batteries, screws, electric shaver heads, and other small parts. Each shelf is labelled with a piece of masking tape with the appropriate category written in green marker. The storage room occupies three times the space of the storefront room.

A stocky old man stands in front of the order desk, a plastic shopping bag in one hand. A younger man stands behind the desk. He wears a pair of worn jeans and a

leather vest over a gray T-shirt. His small moustache matches the dark, wavy hair on his head. A plastic name tag pinned on his shirt proclaims, "Hi I'm Abe."

"Someone's coming right out with your shaver," Abe says to the man.

Inside the storage room, a seven-year-old girl peers from around a bank of shelves and studies the customer through the open threshold. Dark hair curls at the back of her neck and around her ears. Her skin is sallow, and her small eyes are almost black. She wears blue jeans and a yellow sweatshirt with a white cartoon puppy on it. She is holding a doll with golden hair and long-lashed blue eyes. The doll is dressed in a calico pinafore with matching slippers. Its cheeks blush with perfect rosy circles, and its pink lips curve up in a pert smile.

A young woman steps out from between two ranges of shelves. The woman is carrying an electric razor, its cord wrapped carefully around the shaft of the appliance. As she walks by, she swats the girl on the head.

"Don't stand there, Jessie, or someone'll squash you."

The girl shrinks back and lets the woman by. The woman wears a long-sleeved denim shirt and a pair of black jeans. A name tag similar to Abe's announces, "Hi I'm Faeleen."

Her hair is teased out and held in place by a shiny coat of hair spray. Her skin shows the same yellowish cast as the girl's, and her eyes, which are dark blue, are accentuated with tan eyeshadow and blue mascara.

Faeleen crosses the threshold and halts behind the order desk next to Abe.

"You got 'er, eh?" the man says. He speaks with a German accent.

Faeleen lays the electric razor on the counter and plugs the cord into an outlet behind the desk. The three disks of the razor whir to life. "Better than ever," she says and turns the razor off.

"Oh, that's great." The man places his plastic bag on the desk. "I got something else. My wife'll kill me if I forget it, and I almost did." He removes a curling iron from the bag and puts it in front of Abe. "She must be shorted."

"I'll check it out," Abe says.

"Can you do it right away? I'm out by Calling Lake. I just come in town today to do some things."

"No problem," Abe says. "I do eight shorts a day. I'll be right back."

Abe takes the curling iron off the desk and briskly enters the storage room. The girl moves out of his path before he has to slow down, but he pauses.

"Hey, is that a new doll, Jess?"

"Yup. My mommy bought it for me."

Jessie follows him to a wooden workbench along one of the walls. Carefully Abe disassembles the shaft of the curling iron. After taking the iron to pieces he says, "Finally. Your other dolly looked like it'd been dragged behind a car and trampled by horses."

"Well, my mommy bought me a new one, so stop making fun of the other one."

Abe smiles, but his expression is touched with grimness. When he takes out his pliers the girl turns to the threshold that leads to the storefront. She leans against a shelf and watches the old man and Faeleen work out a bill of sale.

"I know what it'll be for the curling iron," Faeleen says, "if it's a short."

She leaves the desk and walks into the storage room, past the girl, to the bench where Abe works. "Is it a short?" she asks Abe.

Abe looks up at her. "I don't know. I just sat down here to figure it out."

Faeleen says, "Okay, fine," under her breath, and whips past the girl to the front desk. She asks the man to wait a few more minutes.

Faeleen begins to collate some receipts near the cash register, and the man studies the collection of air fresheners on the wall. Jessie watches them from the threshold. The man picks up one cellophane packet and brings it to his nose. He inhales deeply. He replaces the air freshener on the rack and wanders past the display into the main part of the store, where the girl can no longer see him.

Jessie sits on a footstool near the threshold and strokes her doll's hair. "Well, Bea," she says. She speaks in a bare whisper. "It sure is nice to have you here. What do you want to do this morning?"

A middle-aged woman with a pile of packages in her arms stands in front of the store and tries to open the door. Faeleen rushes from the desk and holds the door open for the woman to enter. The woman has brown permed hair, cut close to her skull and in considerable disarray. Her face is pale and wrinkled, and tinted eyeglasses hide her

eyes. She wears a blue winter coat with blue polyester pants and thick-soled shoes.

"Hi, Faeleen," the woman says.

"Hi, Eden," Faeleen answers. Faeleen flashes a glance in Jessie's direction. The woman sees the girl and hesitates before continuing through the store. Jessie ducks back further into the storage room.

Eden enters the back room, passes Jessie, and goes to a table piled with boxes, bins and twisted wires. She deposits the boxes on the table and advances to the workbench, where Abe is still tinkering with the curling iron.

"Hi, Abe," she says. "How's it going?"

"Good, Eden. It's hopping this morning."

"Friday's always busy," Eden says.

"The guy I'm doing this for needs to get back to his farm this afternoon. But it's just a short. I'll be done in no time."

"That's excellent, Abe, thanks."

The woman picks up the boxes and carries them one by one to the shelves. She places a small rattling box on a shelf labelled "Screws" and a plain cardboard box on a shelf labelled "Done."

Abe polishes the metal shaft of the now-assembled curling iron with a white cloth until it shines. He brings the curling iron into the store and hands it to the old man, who is waiting by the shelf of coffee pots. Jessie watches the customer as he pays Abe and leaves the store.

After the door swings shut behind the customer, Eden leaves the storage room with a boxed toaster and puts it next to another toaster on one of the central shelving units.

As she arranges the toasters, Eden says, "Is your mother not able to look after Jessie today, Faeleen?"

"Yeah, she wasn't feeling too good this morning. She called me and asked if I could keep Jessie until after lunch, when she'd be feeling better."

"Your mother's under the weather, is she," Eden says dryly.

Faeleen clears her throat. "Yeah."

Eden eyes the younger women sternly but with some pity. She makes no further comment. She re-enters the back room and moves to a small desk with a computer on it. An array of bookshelves is suspended on the wall above the monitor and along one side of the desk. She sits on the chair in front of the desk and waits for the computer to

start up. When the computer has finished booting, she opens a spreadsheet program and begins to work on a ledger.

From her place on the stool, the girl cocks her head toward the threshold. Jessie edges her stool back until she is hidden between two rows of shelving.

Behind the order desk, Abe and Faeleen are talking.

"I see you finally got her a new doll," Abe says.

"What about it?"

"It was looking like hell, that other one."

Faeleen's body stiffens. "If you didn't like the look of that doll maybe you should have ponied up for one."

"I pony up more than enough," Abe says. "I just wonder where it goes sometimes."

Faeleen sneers at him and turns away. She enters the storage room and strides past Jessie without seeing her. Faeleen goes to a smaller workbench beside the large one and sits down. She props her elbows on the table and lowers her face into her hands. Then she raises her head and grabs a wire basket from a shelf above the workbench. The end of one of the wires has detached itself from the top rim and sticks straight in the air. Faeleen retrieves a soldering iron from a drawer and plugs it in.

The girl wiggles out from between the shelves. She sits at a small table in a dark corner of the storage room and works in her colouring book. She colours a picture of a horse, which she has begun to make red with a black mane and tail.

After a few minutes on the computer, Eden stares at Faeleen's back as she solders the loose wire of the basket. Finally she rises and strides to the workbench.

Eden says, "Can I have a word with you?"

"Sure," Faeleen says. Her mouth twitches.

Eden goes to the front desk. She says to Abe, "Could you mind the shop here, Abe? We're just going to be out back."

His eyes are questioning, but he says simply, "Sure thing, Eden."

Jessie observes from her table as Faeleen and Eden trudge past her to a door marked "Exit." As soon as the door swings shut behind the two women, Jessie scurries into the front room.

"I'm going to the candy store, okay, Abe?"

Abe looks down at the girl. "Why, you got some money?"

"Yup," Jessie says. She reaches into the pocket of her jeans and produces four quarters.

"Where'd you get that loot, Jess? You win the jackpot at bingo?"

"No, silly. My grandma gave it to me."

"What for?"

Jessie says, "For being good."

"For being good for nothin'?"

"For being good! For helping Grandma!"

"I don't know, Jess. I know your grandma, and she doesn't need or want anyone's help. She must be giving you money so you don't get in her way."

Jessie smacks Abe on the leg. "Oh!" Abe pushes her away, laughing. He extracts some coins from his back pocket and holds them out to the girl in the flat of his hand. She takes the money with a smile.

"Now you get out of my way and get your candy and stop buggin' me," he says.

Jessie lopes out the door, her doll tucked under her arm. As she passes the storefront she glances over her shoulder. She continues past the grocery store and around the side of the mall. Behind the back corner of the building stands a large green garbage bin. Jessie stops and peeks around the corner through the wide space between the mall and the garbage bin. She sees Faeleen and Eden

standing at the back door. They are leaning against a burgundy Ford Tempo in the staff parking lot. Both women are smoking cigarettes and have their backs to her. Jessie slithers behind the garbage bin and flattens against it.

Eden says, "Is it possible that Jessie might be taking the money, then?"

Faeleen yanks the cigarette out of her mouth and explodes out the smoke in a half-cough.

"Well, could she have?" Eden asks.

"For crying out loud, Eden." Faeleen stands six inches shorter than the other woman, but by drawing herself up she seems to grow taller. "Jessie is hardly ever here. She doesn't even know how to open the till."

"I've got to ask, Faeleen. Money goes missing, and I've got to ask my employees what's up."

"Well," Faeleen says. Her voice bristles. "I didn't take nothing, and Jessie didn't take nothing."

"Okay, Faeleen."

"And I'd appreciate it if you didn't go around telling people stories like that, Eden."

"Why would I do that?"

Faeleen glowers, drops the cigarette on the pavement. "The last thing I need is for people thinking I'm stealing

things from my workplace." She reaches for her package of cigarettes and pulls one out. "I just don't need this right now." She lights the cigarette.

"Well, okay then, Faeleen. I'm sorry." As she moves toward the back door, Eden casts a stiff gaze at the younger woman. "You just finish that cigarette and hurry in. I need you and Abe taking care of things up front because I'm doing the books."

Jessie waits until she hears the back door bang shut before she jumps quickly from behind the garbage bin to the side of the mall. She runs back around to the front and enters the grocery. She buys four sour soothers.

When Jessie returns to the appliance store, Eden and Abe both are busy with customers, one a young woman in a sari and the other an elderly Chinese man. All the adults ignore Jessie. She winds her way into the storage room and sits down with her doll on the stool by the threshold. She waits there until Faeleen comes inside from the back exit. On the way to the storefront Faeleen gives her daughter a brief glance.

From her position by the doorway, the girl watches the three adults help the customers, who now number four. At intervals Abe and Eden come into the storage room to

retrieve appliances for customers. Eventually Jessie goes to her small table and resumes colouring.

When the customers are gone, the three adults come back into the room and begin to work. Eden fills out the ledger on the computer, Abe fixes a toaster at the large workbench, and Faeleen orders items from a parts catalogue at the small workbench. Everyone labours in silence.

The bell at the front door rings three times in succession, and Faeleen and Abe walk rapidly to the front desk to serve the newly arrived customers.

Jessie looks up from her colouring to the other side of the room. Eden is still working on the computer. Jessie rises, taking her doll with her, and walks to Eden's desk.

Eden finishes typing a line and turns to the girl. "What's up?"

The girl says, "I saw the old man stoled things. He stoled things."

"Which old man?"

"The one who was here."

"What did he steal?"

"One of those smelly things for the car."

"An air freshener?" Eden examines the girl closely. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Faeleen enters the room. She sees Eden and says, "Eden, do you know if Osbourne's Electronics services those computer daytimers?"

"Yes, he does--Wait, Faeleen. Jessie says she saw someone steal something."

"What?"

"Come back here after you're done with the customer."

A minute later Faeleen returns to the storage room. She says to Eden, "Who stole something?"

"The one who talked funny," Jessie says to her mother. "He stoled one of those smelly things for the car."

"How do you know?" Faeleen asks.

"I saw." The girl takes a deep breath. "And so maybe he stoled other things, too."

Faeleen asks, "What other things?"

"Maybe he stoled other things. Just maybe."

"Well," Eden says. She rubs her eyes with her hands and sighs. "We can't prove it, can we?" She now is speaking only to Faeleen.

Faeleen says to her daughter, "If you see something like that again, come and tell me right away, okay, Jessie?"

"Okay, Mommy," the girl says.

Faeleen runs her fingers through her hair and turns slowly to the front room. Eden goes back to work without another look at the girl. Jessie returns to her table. She strokes the doll's hair before picking up a red crayon. She applies wide, dense strokes of red to the page.

Half an hour later Faeleen gets up from her desk. She shrugs on her coat and approaches Eden, who is still working on the ledger. "I'm going to take Jessie to my mother's now," Faeleen says.

Eden doesn't look away from the computer. "Be sure you're here in time for the lunch rush."

Faeleen says, "Thanks for letting me keep her here this morning."

Eden nods. "No problem, Faeleen."

Faeleen brings Jessie her jacket and helps the girl into it. Then she herds the girl out the back door.

After the door swings shut, Eden notices Abe standing against the wall near the large workbench. He is looking at the door.

Eden says, "What's going on with Faeleen?"

At first Abe does not seem to hear her. Finally his eyes swing over to his employer. "How should I know?" he says.

"She's not gambling again, is she?"

"How should I know?" Abe says. Slowly he turns and walks back to the order desk.

Outside the mall, mother and daughter get into the Tempo. Faeleen starts the car on the second attempt. As the car revs up, Faeleen says to Jessie, "How'd you see that man steal an air freshener?"

"I can see from the back room," Jessie says. "I can see all the things people are doing in the store, and they can't see me, cuz I'm small."

"See what kinds of things?"

"What people do," Jessie says. "Like what people do behind the desk."

Faeleen inhales sharply. "What do people do behind the desk?"

Jessie shrugs. "Just working behind there." The girl turns her attention to her doll. She gathers her doll's hair into a ponytail, using her fingers as a ring to keep the hair in place. "Like when you work behind there at the cash register," the girl says.

Faeleen stares out at the windshield. The line of her jaw tightens. She looks at her daughter: Jessie is trying to tie her doll's hair into a knot, but her small hands fumble with the long strands.

"Don't tell Grandma about what you said about the old man stealing, okay?" Faeleen reaches into her coat pocket and takes out a tissue. She wipes her nose and puts the tissue back in her pocket. When her attention reverts to Jessie, the girl is watching her. Faeleen glares until the girl turns away.

"Don't you be letting her give you money so you tell her things," Faeleen adds. "It's none of her business."

"Okay, Mommy."

"I got you that doll, so don't you be trying anything."

The girl's head bows deep to her chest.

Faeleen squints over her shoulder for traffic. "And don't you tell Abe." She shifts the car into reverse and backs the car out of the stall. "Just don't say anything about it at all."

The girl keeps her eyes lowered. "Okay, Mommy."

"Or you'll be in big trouble." Faeleen jerks the car into drive. "You'll end up in a foster home."

The vehicle lurches forward and accelerates past the parked cars.

Jessie gazes at the doll in her lap. Her eyes are moist. "We're going to Grandma's, Bea," she says softly. She pets the doll's hair. "You've never been to Grandma's before, have you?" she asks, as the car turns out of the parking lot.

2. SITUATION COMEDY

For her assignment on what she did on her summer vacation, Maggie Brooks submitted the following report:

> This summer I did not do a lot, but I sure did learn a lot. I learned that my sister Jeannie is not my sister and my mom is not my mom, but that my sister is really my mom and my mom is really my grandma. And so that means that my grandma and grandpa and my nanny and poppy are really my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers. Plus my big brother Bill is really my uncle, and my real dad is someone I don't even know, because the person I thought was my dad is actually my granddad (he's dead, though). When my mom (I mean my grandma) told me, things sure got crazy. Jeannie ran to her room and cried and cried. It was all a big surprise to her. Not about being my mom. She knew that part. But she did not know my grandma (used to be my mom) was going to tell me. What really made her mad was because her boyfriend Corey was there too and they were supposed to get married. My real grandma wanted Corey and everyone to know because he was getting married to Jeannie but Jeannie would not tell him about me. My grandma thought he should know before

they got married. I do not think they are anymore. Jeannie ran away to Banff for a while but then she came back. Because of all this I did not go to Didsbury on Labour Day for Jeannie's wedding like I thought I was. Instead I went to stay with my (great)nanny and (great)poppy in Alder Flats. I still went to Klondike Days. It was a weird summer.

The day after Mrs. Miller, Maggie's homeroom teacher, read the report, she asked Maggie to stay indoors at morning recess. When Mrs. Miller asked Maggie about the report, Maggie said that everything she wrote was true. At lunchtime Mrs. Miller telephoned Mrs. Brooks at Geary and Associates, where she worked as the office manager. Mrs. Miller told Mrs. Brooks what Maggie had written in her report.

After a long silence on the other end of the phone line, Mrs. Brooks said, "Yes, it's all true. I'm actually her grandmother. I raised Maggie like my daughter because Jeannie was so young and the father wanted nothing to do with her."

"My goodness," Mrs. Miller said.

"Well," Mrs. Brooks said with a sigh. "This doesn't change much for you. She's the same student, and you're the same teacher."

"But that poor child!" Mrs. Miller exclaimed.

Mrs. Brooks chuckled. "Who, Maggie? Don't worry about her. She's loving every minute of it."

#

As soon as Maggie had learned that Jeannie was her mother, she told all her friends. She called an emergency meeting of the Summer Sunshine Club. In the privacy of Katie-Anne Cournoyer's treehouse, with the curtains drawn across the windows, six ten- and eleven-year-old girls sat cross-legged in shorts and T-shirts and sipped orange Kool-Aid from twisty straws as Maggie described her life-defining moment.

After Maggie finished her story, Karen Smith asked, "What does Bill think?"

"Bill's nice about it," Maggie said, "probably because he knew. He took me out for a root-beer float and Baby Burger at A&W. Bill's the least of my problems."

The girls mulled in silence, each imagining what such problems might be. Finally Noreen Sanderson peered out from behind her long bangs and asked, "Like what problems?"

"Jeannie is so cranky," Maggie said. "It's like she's having her period all the time." She sucked contemplatively on her straw. "And then I've got to figure a way to get Corey and Jeannie married, because I don't think they're going to, and it's my fault."

"How are you going to do that?" Katie-Anne asked.

"I don't know. I need a plan."

"We can help you!" the girls shouted at once.

"We're good at making plans," Katie-Anne said. "We planned the treehouse last summer."

"And the lemonade stand," Karen said.

"I can be leader of the plan!" Sue Drawer exclaimed.

"No!" Betsy Niedermeyer said. "Maggie should be. It's her problem."

Maggie looked around at the beaming circle of girls. "That's sure nice of everybody." Her back straightened. "But we've got to hurry." Her voice dropped. "Jeannie's already twenty-four, and if she doesn't marry Corey . . . ."

An awe-struck stillness fell over the girls. The possibility that every young girl feared for herself--growing up to be an "old maid"--was being acted out before their eyes. Maggie had entrusted them with the

responsibility of saving someone who lived on their block from a fate worse than death.

"Oh, this is so neat!" Katie-Anne whispered.

#

Various factors interrupted the planning. Four girls were waylaid by church camp in August, and three girls had Girl Guide summer jamborees. Maggie was sent to stay with her (great)nanny and (great)poppy in Alder Flats for two weeks. The Summer Sunshine Club had only one other regular meeting before Labour Day, and since school commenced immediately thereafter, they had less time than they had expected to scheme a reconciliation between Jeannie and her former fiancé.

But a week after school started, and three days after Mrs. Miller kept her in at morning recess, Maggie paid Corey Duggan a visit. He worked as a mechanic at Al and Pete's Gas Bar and Auto Body. Al and Pete's happened to be across the street from Mother Hubbard's Grocery Store, a favourite noontime haunt for children attending St. Kevin's Elementary and Junior High School. Maggie walked to Mother Hubbard's with Sue, Karen, Katie-Anne, and Betsy. They bought some candy, and Maggie crossed the street to Al and

Pete's. The other girls stood outside Mother Hubbard's and watched Maggie's progress while they ate their Smarties.

The counter clerk at Al and Pete's knew who Maggie was and allowed her to walk past him into the garage. At one of the repair bays Corey had his head under the hood of a Buick. No one else was in the garage. When Maggie called his name, he stared at her for a moment, and then turned his attention to the engine.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I was in the neighbourhood."

Corey wiped his brow with a grease-blackened hand, leaving a dark streak on his face.

"Want a Smartie?" Maggie held out a sticky handful of candy.

He reached into the car and tightened a bolt. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"It's lunchtime," she said. "Don't you have lunchtime here?"

"I don't each lunch," he muttered.

"I can bring one for you tomorrow if you want to eat a lunch."

He looked up. "No, thanks." He slipped out from under the hood and straightened. His tanned biceps bulged out

from the cap sleeves of his T-shirt. Maggie could see all the veins in his arms, right down to his wrists. Other veins were bursting out from his neck.

"You should probably get out," he said.

"Don't you want to know how Jeannie's doing?"

"No."

"She got a promotion at work," Maggie said. "She's the secretary to the new assistant manager. She got picked over everyone else." Maggie paused, waited for some kind of reaction from Corey, which he didn't provide, and continued. "I guess the assistant manager's real nice. He just moved here from Regina, all by himself. He's real young and friendly. She likes working for him."

Corey lowered the hood of the car and wiped his hands on his overalls. He turned and walked to the back exit of the garage.

"Hey, where are you going?" Maggie shouted after him.

"I'm going for a smoke," he growled. "Now go back to school."

When Maggie returned to Mother Hubbard's, her friends, their stomachs full of candy, peppered her with questions.

"I think it went well," Maggie concluded. "He pretended he didn't care, but he did."

"How you do know?" Betsy asked.

Maggie smiled. "Just a hunch."

#

Two weeks later, Jeannie was sitting in the kitchen, drumming her fingers on the table. She was still dressed in her work clothes, a suit jacket, skirt, and strapped high-heel shoes. Maggie came downstairs from her bedroom where she had been painting her fingernails and headed to the fridge.

Jeannie jumped up and blocked Maggie's path. "Just what are you up to?" Jeannie asked.

"I'm trying to get something to eat."

Jeannie reached into the pocket of her jacket and held a sheet of paper in front of Maggie's face. "What's this?"

Maggie looked at the paper cross-eyed. "I don't know."

Jeannie snatched the paper back. "'Dear Jeannie,'" she read, her voice lifted in sarcasm. "'I sure wish I had not done what I did. Can we get back together? Please call me. Love, Cory.'"

"Oh, Corey sent you a letter."

"Corey doesn't have the handwriting of a ten-year-old girl," Jeannie said. "Secondly, Corey spells his name with an 'e'."

"Someone should teach him how to spell it, then."

Jeannie pushed her face close to Maggie's. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but stop trying to pull it."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, really?" Jeannie's face turned pink. "All you've done is ruin my life!" She stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs to her room.

Mrs. Brooks came into the kitchen from the den, a crossword puzzle book in one hand and blue curlers in her hair. "What's going on here?"

"Jeannie's having another temper tantrum." Maggie opened the fridge and removed a leg of fried chicken.

"I told you to stop bothering her."

Maggie bit off a piece of the chicken leg and spoke between chews. "I don't see why she's so mad at me. I didn't get asked to be born."

"I told you before, Maggie," Mrs. Brooks said, "Jeannie's having a hard time. We have to be patient."

"But why do you and me have to suffer?"

Mrs. Brooks put the crossword puzzle on the kitchen table and guided Maggie to a chair, next to which she pulled up another. "Having people know that she's your

mother has made a big change in her life," she said. "It's like having a death in the family. Her old life has died. Now Jeannie has to go through the stages of mourning."

"What?"

"The five stages of mourning. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. I went through the same thing when your father--I mean your grandfather--died. I think Jeannie's still in the anger stage."

"Anger stage? I was born ten years ago. Shouldn't she be used to the whole thing by now?"

"Well, I'm afraid she's spent all those years in the denial stage. It's partly my fault. I should have been more open about it. But I was still thinking like the fifties back in Alder Flats. We moved to the city to hide the truth, but when we got here, I started to see things a little differently. Now I've started to think like people in the sixties do. Like we ought to."

"It's 1970, Grandma," Maggie commented.

"Oh, sure," Mrs. Brooks said. "Seventies."

Later that evening Maggie went into the basement to fetch a bottle of Dr. Pepper and saw Bill sitting on the old sofa with his electric guitar. A fake book was open on

the music stand in front of him, and he was tentatively picking out chords.

"Bill," Maggie said, "Do you remember Jeannie when she was in her denial stage?"

"Denial stage?"

"Grandma said Jeannie's in mourning and she's still in the anger stage. I want to know what she was like in denial."

"She sure was in denial when she pretended she wasn't pregnant. But that fell to pieces in a few months. She got as big as a whale." He turned back to his music.

"But since she's your sister," Maggie said, "I thought you might have a better idea about if she'll ever get to the other stages." She added, "Or even what the stages mean."

Bill muttered, "Mom's sure getting heavy about psychology." He tucked his long hair behind his ears and patted a spot on the sofa for Maggie to sit on. "I wouldn't worry about all that stuff about stages, Mags. Basically what Mom means is that Jeannie's got to deal with her problems her own way."

"But what do I do in the meantime?"

"Nothing," Bill said. "Just go with the groove. Do you feel differently about anyone now from what you did before, or treat them differently?"

"No," Maggie said. "But shouldn't I?"

"All these biological relationships are meaningless," Bill said. "They're theoretical. It's the old nature versus nurture argument. It's like your dad. He was born into a family of losers, and even after he found out he was a dad, he still acted like a loser, instead of like a dad. He couldn't help it. In the same way, you were brought up to be Jeannie's sister, not her daughter. So that's how you act and how she acts. So nothing's really changed."

"But something has changed. Corey and Jeannie aren't getting married anymore."

"That's true. But that could just be Corey's problem."

"Are you saying they would have broken up anyway?"

Bill strummed his guitar absently. "Maybe." He sounded doubtful.

"Well, can you help me get them back together?"

"How do you propose to do that?"

"I don't know. Me and my friends have tried to come up with some plans, but none of them have worked so far."

"Maybe you should leave well enough alone, Mags. You can't change people." He picked a quiet, mysterious tune with the tips of his fingers. "You know, I sure would have done things differently than what Mom and Jeannie did." He sighed. "But I was only twelve when it happened."

"Well, I'm only ten, Bill," Maggie said. She slumped on the sofa.

Bill played louder, so that something like a melody came through. "You know, I never thought of that," he said. He stopped playing. "It must be pretty hard."

"Yes, it is hard," Maggie said sullenly. "Very hard."

He resumed his strumming, and the melody was more meditative. "Do you want to get a float?"

"No," Maggie said. "Stupid as it sounds." She stared at her feet. "I've got to think of something."

#

The next Saturday, Maggie crept into Katie-Anne Cournoyer's backyard. Katie-Anne's treehouse was not built in the tree but rather was constructed against the tree and held up by a support tower. Because of this architectural decision, the tree's branches could not be pruned, and they branched out magnificently at a great height over the Kentucky Blue turf. Maggie clambered up the treehouse

ladder, climbed up onto the tree itself, and shimmied up to a branch just sturdy enough to hold her weight.

After Maggie spent one hour in the tree unnoticed, Katie-Anne's mother happened to come outside. Maggie informed her that she would stay in the tree until Corey and Jeannie reconciled.

Shortly thereafter a crowd gathered around the base of the tree, consisting of most members of the Sunshine Summer Club, several neighbourhood parents and children, and Bill and Mrs. Brooks. Everyone begged Maggie to come down.

"Okay, Mags," Bill finally called up. "I hate to do this to you, but I'm coming up after you."

"If you do, I'll jump," Maggie called back.

A gasp rose up from the crowd.

"Life's not that bad," Sue Drawer sobbed. "Don't jump, don't jump!" The other children joined in the chant. Four boys at the back of the crowd shouted, "Jump! Jump!" in counterpoint. Some adults chased the boys out of the yard. Only Noreen Sanderson, who looked up wistfully at her friend through her long bangs, remained silent.

A small group of teenaged males dragged the Cournoyer trampoline under the tree and stood around the trampoline's perimeter, silently wishing the girl would fall and make

them heroes. Then a fire truck pulled up in front of house. The teenagers watched with undisguised hostility as the yellow-suited crew filed into the backyard.

A short time later Jeannie Brooks arrived on her bicycle. She wore a pink tennis outfit, and a tennis racket was tied to the handlebars. The crowd, which now filled half the backyard, parted for her as she walked to the base of the tree. Whispers rose and fell.

"Will you get down from that tree?" Jeannie shouted. "You're embarrassing me!"

"Not until you and Corey get back together."

Bill and Mrs. Brooks moved alongside Jeannie. Mrs. Brooks murmured to her, "She said she'd jump if someone tried to go up after her."

"Well, let her jump, then, if that's what she wants."

A fireman yelled, "Come on down, Maggie. If something's bothering you, it'd be a lot better for everyone if you came down and talked about it."

"It's not me with the problem."

"You're scaring your mother and brother and sister," the fireman said. "You don't want to hurt your mother, do you, Maggie?"

"My mother just said I should jump."

The fireman and the terrestrial Brookses gathered in a conference. The fireman became speechless after the first minute of conversation. After a few more minutes, the fireman called over the other firemen and gave a command.

"Okay," the lead fireman hollered. "Everyone out of the backyard except for family."

The crowd dragged itself out of the backyard. Three children tried to convince the firemen that they were Maggie's cousins, but they were promptly herded out. Mrs. Brooks, Jeannie, Bill, and the firefighters remained.

Katie-Anne's mother exited the back door of the house and whispered to the fireman.

"Okay," the fireman announced to Maggie. "Corey's coming."

From her vantage point high above the yard, Maggie watched the fire truck drive around the block and stop at the mouth of the alley behind the house. She could also see two police cars cruise into view. By now the sun was directly above the tree, and the heat of it warmed her arms. Not far away hung an old acorn, still stubbornly attached to the tree from a past season. She looked up through the leaves at the halo of the sun that filtered through the green like a bath of molten butter.

Corey finally arrived. He wore blue jeans and a white T-shirt. He stood at the edge of the yard, staring up at the tree, and then at Jeannie. Reluctantly he advanced to the group. The adults sidled away from the tree to meet him. Jeannie and Corey did not make eye contact for most of the ensuing conversation. At a certain point, however, their eyes locked, and then each of them in turn nodded at what was being discussed.

Corey and Jeannie approached the tree.

"Okay, Maggie," Corey called. "Okay. Me and Jeannie are going to go out again."

"We're going out on Wednesday," Jeannie said.

Maggie didn't answer. She looked down at them steadily.

"We're going to the A&W for a date, and then a movie," Corey elaborated. "Like we used to."

Behind the fence that surrounded the Cournoyer house, the crowd stared up at the tree with glazed expressions. In the back and front yards of the other neighbourhood homes, other people in groups of twos and threes kept their vigil. Maggie knew all the spectators in the crowd and in the yards. She returned her gaze to the people at the foot of the tree.

"You did always go to a lot of movies, didn't you?" Maggie said finally.

"And we're going again," Corey said.

"So are you coming down now, Maggie?" Mrs. Brooks asked.

"No."

Jeannie shouted, "Maggie, please come down!"

Maggie studied the young woman at the base of the tree. Jeannie's pale pink body reminded Maggie of one of the pink female pegs from the Game of Life board game. She imagined Jeannie inserted into one of the game's car pieces--the white one--and moving across the winding roads and bridges of the game board. She saw Jeannie stop at the "Get Married!" square and a blue male peg inserted next to her in the car. With another few spins of the game dial she landed on the "Buy a House!" square, then on the "Baby Girl!" square, where another pink peg could be inserted in the back seat of the car.

From the ground, Jeannie cried out, "What else can I do, Maggie? What else can I do? I don't know what else I can do!" She buried her face in her hands.

Mrs. Brooks put her hands on Jeannie's shoulders. Bill looked down at the lawn and shuffled his feet.

"Nothing, I guess," Maggie said to Jeannie. "It's all happened already."

No one answered. In the back alley, the fire truck inched its way toward the rear of the house.

"I'll come down," Maggie said finally, "but not until tomorrow."

"Why?" Mrs. Brooks asked.

"I want to stay up here tonight."

"It's too dangerous," Mrs. Brooks called. "You'll fall out."

Jeannie raised her head. "You'll get cold."

"How do we know you won't jump?" Mrs. Brooks asked.

"I won't," Maggie said. "I want to stay in the tree for a while. I've been in the treehouse, but I've never been in a tree like this before. I want to stay in it for a while more."

"Oh, for crying out loud," Mrs. Brooks said.

Corey, who had been standing with his hands in his pockets with a distracted expression, suddenly came to life. His face brightened, and he took a step forward towards Mrs. Brooks. "We can leave the trampoline here under the tree, so that if she jumps she won't get hurt."

Maggie overheard. She said loudly to him, "For that to work you'll need about three more trampolines to put around the tree."

Bill laughed out loud. Mrs. Brooks scowled at him until he stopped. Jeannie looked at Corey and shook her head in disgust. Corey's face grew pale, then red, and he kicked at the ground angrily.

"I can come up and stay with you, Maggie," Bill said.

"No," Maggie said. "I want to be by myself."

The adults gathered into another conference. The fireman went into the house, and a few minutes later the fire truck drove past the house, picked up the fireman and drove away. The adults gravitated toward the front gate, with Jeannie lingering.

"Don't jump, Maggie," Jeannie said.

"I won't," Maggie said.

Jeannie slowly walked away, her hands clasped behind her back and her head tilted down in thought. Corey walked ahead of Jeannie and didn't stop to look or talk to her before he entered his convertible and rumbled off. After another half-hour the Brooks family and the crowd moved away, except for a few boys, who stood at the fence and tried to incite Maggie to jump. Maggie reminded one of the

boys that in grade three he had peed his pants in fear while watching 20,000 Leagues under the Sea in the school gym, and she threatened to tell everyone. Thus chastened, the boys departed.

#

At dusk, Bill came into the backyard and threw a sweater up into the tree. It snagged on one of the lower branches. "Go down and get the sweater if you get cold."

"Thanks, Bill."

He hung a bag of food on a lower branch. "Are you hungry, Mags?"

"No."

"If you are, here's some food. Fried chicken."

"Thanks, Bill."

"And if you get tired of lying on that branch, go into the treehouse."

"Okay, Bill." She added, "There's a walkie-talkie in the treehouse, so I can radio Katie-Anne whenever I want."

Bill fell silent. He watched the sun dip until it disappeared past the roofs of the neighbourhood in a flash of gold.

"Mom sent me here to get you out of the tree," he said finally. "I was supposed to drag you out, even if you were

kicking and screaming. But I don't think you're going to jump."

"Of course I'm not. Kill myself because of Jeannie? I'm not that desperate."

Bill laughed softly. "But I'm not sure why you went to all that trouble and fuss, and then gave up. Because, you know, Jeannie and Corey aren't going to get back together."

"I know that." Maggie swung her leg as she thought and spoke. "But I thought I would try. Plus I started to wonder what it might be like to look down on everyone from the very top of the tree. So I climbed up. It's so neat even where I am. You're closer to the sun, you know?"

"Yes," Bill said.

"Then I looked down and saw everyone, and they looked so small. And seeing them so small, I decided Corey and Jeannie could do whatever they wanted. But I still want to be in the tree a bit longer, because I'll never get this chance again."

Bill stared up at Maggie and then at a spot on the tree trunk. He stood under the tree for another half-hour. When the sky turned blue-black, he made a motion as though to leave.

"Bye, Bill," Maggie called.

"Tomorrow I'll take you out for a burger," Bill said. "I'll bet you'll be hungry enough to eat a whole Teen Burger."

"And a float," Maggie said.

With a shake of the head and a slow wave, Bill walked out of the yard.

As the stars came out, Maggie could see the Cournoyer family through the window of their den, sitting on a sofa and watching My Three Sons. Something funny had happened on the show, and they were all laughing. Maggie removed a box of Smarties from her pocket and popped a few into her mouth, crunching them with satisfaction. After the TV program appeared to be over and the family dispersed, Maggie looked up at the sky and counted the stars. She grew drowsy; she climbed down into the treehouse, stretched out on the clubhouse sleeping bag, folded her arms under her head, and waited for morning.

3. CLEAN SECRETS

At quarter to seven Damek left his office and walked towards Stables Street in the dusk. The wind gusted in the narrow breaches between the skyscrapers, and he turned up his coat collar to protect himself from the sand and shreds of paper that blew around his head. Several times he dug into his coat pocket for the package of cigarettes into which he had tucked Mitch's note, and checked the map Mitch had drawn to verify he was going in the right direction. Damek had worked at Beace Hartley Barristers and Solicitors for eight years but he had never ventured into this district before. As he moved out of downtown into the flatter industrial sector, the sand and paper settled into the gutters in the stiller air. A few blocks away the freeway blared with late rush-hour traffic, but by the time he turned onto Stables Street only one or two cars drove past him under the gray light of the streetlamps. The neighbourhood was perfect. It was tidy, it was unpopulated, and no one but he and Mitch would care about it after six o'clock.

Soon he reached Number 244, a mid-sized brown brick building. An illuminated white awning displayed in thin blue letters the names of the businesses it housed, a

flashlight retailer and a manufacturer of water-softening equipment. Damek obeyed the instructions on the note and went to the rear of the building. An unmarked rectangular threshold opened in the middle of the back wall. The threshold led to a short corridor that turned left and led to a door barely visible in the gloom. Because the door was inside the corridor, it was invisible to anyone walking casually around the building.

Mitch was leaning against the door at the end of the corridor. His black trenchcoat was already unbuttoned; the ends of his coat belt swung nearly to the ground.

Damek approached and held Mitch's head gently between his hands.

"This is great," Damek said.

"No nightwatchman to bother us this time, either." Mitch smiled. "No unexpected interruptions."

"Have I ever said you were a genius?" Damek murmured.

"Yes," Mitch said.

They grappled with each other's clothing, slipped their hands into the warm spaces between thigh and groin, their tongues into the angles of neck and jawline. Damek couldn't help thinking this was the most perfect of all the perfect places Mitch had found for them. At first Damek had

taken Mitch to hotels, but he began to worry about the unaccountable money he was spending and feared being spotted by clients or friends, even though he took the precaution of meeting Mitch in suburban neighbourhoods where he knew no one. It was Mitch who came up with the idea of meeting in public venues: abandoned warehouses, blind alleys, hidden doorways, unused stairwells in nearly vacated apartment buildings. There had been many rendezvous points, because Damek always panicked over being discovered, and after a month at one location he would make Mitch find another. Damek had selected the last site, but he hadn't been as thorough a researcher as Mitch, hadn't known about the security guard who patrolled the grounds. Mitch was much better at finding places where no one would notice them arriving or departing, or notice what they did once they got there. Sometimes Damek felt that the entire universe benefited from these evenings--that the sun shone more brightly, the fields flourished, the oceans teemed, the poor became wealthy, the weak stronger. It seemed to Damek that ever since that night he and Mitch had first made love, Damek's senior partner had grown kinder; his daughter's grades had risen, and his wife was more content. And in those moments when Mitch came in him, or, as would

happen this time, he came in Mitch, he was sure that Mitch had experienced similar improvements, although Damek had never asked outright. But he was certain it must be so, because despite how much the boy's life had changed since they first met, despite his transition from high-school pupil to university student, Mitch had never turned Damek down.

They collapsed together on the ground. Mitch's head rested against the wall, partly hidden in shadow. Damek saw in the half-moon of the boy's visible features, in the curve of his parted lips and the slack eyelids, in the unblemished skin, a purity that offered the solution to the world's cynicism and deceit. To his own cynicism and deceit.

And Damek had Raziah to thank for this. He had to thank his own child, thank her for the small stumblings in her young life a year ago, because they'd led to his own rescue from a life of vice he'd taken for virtue.

#

"To be honest, Mrs. Gully," Damek had said to the school counsellor, "I don't understand why my daughter wants to be a secretary."

Damek, his wife Adiella, and their daughter Raziah were squeezed around Mrs. Gully's desk in her cramped, square office. The office door was closed, but the noise of junior-high students filing through the school corridors filtered into the room. Raziah had moved her chair around the corner of the desk so that she was closer to the counsellor than to her parents. She was slouched low in her seat, and her long hair fell across her face and obscured her expression. Intermittently she bounced the toe of her right sneaker against the leg of the desk.

Mrs. Gully said, "Well, Raziah did very well in the job shadowing exercise this month for her Life Skills class. Her workplace mentor wrote a glowing evaluation."

"Her grades aren't so glowing, though," Damek said. "And isn't that what counts nowadays?"

"Being a secretary is a respectable career," Adiella said. "Mrs. Gully says she is doing good at it."

"Being a secretary is not a career," Damek said.

"But she is interested," Adiella said.

"Look," Damek said to Mrs. Gully. "Her mother's a tech in a genetics lab. She came to this country with nothing, barely speaking the language, and she built a life for herself. I had it easier than Adiella, mind you, in terms

of my upbringing, but still, my parents weren't rolling in dough. I had to put myself through law school. I work hard for what we have. You'd think all of this was enough of a role model for her. I don't know where she got this secretary thing."

Mrs. Gully said, "if you feel that Raziah could be challenged more . . . ."

"That's an understatement," Damek said.

Raziah kicked the leg of the counsellor's desk with an audible thud. Damek said, "Stop fidgeting, Raziah." Raziah's leg froze halfway toward the desk leg and then eased back on the floor.

Adiella said to Mrs. Gully, "We think she can do better. I think this is what my husband means. She can do better at school. She is a smart girl."

Mrs. Gully said, "I think I understand your concerns, Mr. and Mrs. Jablon." She turned to Raziah. "Do you understand why your parents are so upset?"

Raziah raised her head and looked at her mother. Thick eyeliner rimmed the girl's dark eyes, making them seem overly large in her small white face. "I don't want to make them upset."

"I know you don't," Mrs. Gully said. She beamed at the girl until Raziah responded with a half-hearted smiled.

"I have been thinking of something we can do," Mrs. Gully said. "We have a mentoring partnership with Maurice Corneille High School. So far the program has had good results. We can assign a high school student from Corneille to be Raziah's tutor for one or two school subjects. We try to match the interests of the younger student with that of the mentor, so that they have other things they can talk about besides school."

"As long as it's not about skipping class." Damek stared hard at his daughter. "Or stealing basketballs from the gym." Raziah gave him a harsh look.

The counsellor took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. She said, "We screen the students from Corneille for that sort of thing."

Damek and Adiella agreed to the proposal, and the adults took Raziah's quick nod as her sign of assent.

Mrs. Gully asked the girl to leave the room while her parents completed the paperwork for the program. When Damek and Adiella left the office, Raziah was leaning against the wall opposite the room. Silently the family walked together down the hall. They had to dodge students who were hauling

books and coats out of their lockers and dashing through the building to go home.

When they were out of earshot of the counsellor's office, Raziah said, "Dad, you were so bad!"

"I was bad? Who just got herself a three-day suspension for stealing basketballs?"

"I didn't steal the basketballs."

"Right, it was your friends. You're the innocent one."

"I didn't!"

"Then who did it?"

Her eyes narrowed.

Damek said, "You don't want to be a snitch, is that it? You'd take a fall for these losers?"

"Damek!" Adiella said. "That is enough."

They exited the front doors and stood in front of the snow-covered parking lot. The spruce trees surrounding the school were rimed with thick frost. Students trudged through fresh snowdrifts on their way home, breathing icy plumes. Damek paused to light a cigarette, and his family stopped with him. He inhaled slowly, allowing the smoke to heat his lungs. When he blew out the smoke it mingled with the breath from his nostrils to form a thick cloud above his head.

He said to Raziah, "You think I'm too hard on you, I bet."

Raziah shrugged and studied her sneakers.

"Someone's got to be hard on you, don't you think? If your kid was skipping school and stealing things, wouldn't you be a little hard on her?"

"I don't know."

"You're just like your mother. You think all you have to do is pull your doe-eyed look, like you did with the counsellor in there, and you'll get anything you want." Damek smiled grimly. "The sad thing is that it works."

He held out an unlit cigarette to his daughter.

"You think I don't know you smoke?" Damek asked when she gave him a mute look of incomprehension. "Who else could be stealing my cigarettes?"

He offered the cigarette to her again, and when she didn't take it, he stuck it between her lips. She took a step back in surprise, but she did not let the cigarette drop. Damek lit it for her, and after a few seconds, she drew deeply on the cigarette and expelled the smoke with expertise. They stood side by side, smoking together, while Adiella walked in a little circle apart from them, her eyebrows drawn.

Raziah finished her cigarette first. Damek took out his car keys and tossed them to Raziah. "Heads up." She caught the keys in her cupped hands. "Since you're the speed smoker around here, go warm up the car. Old people like us need to keep warm. We can't go around in sneakers in the middle of winter like you do."

Raziah struggled to force back a smile. "Okay, Dad."

Damek and Adiella watched as their daughter ran to Damek's Acura. "I don't think I'm too hard on her," Damek said.

No," Adiella said. "You are too soft."

He chuckled. "You're the only person who'd accuse me of that." He dropped his cigarette stub and crushed it under his heel. "I know what it's like being a teenager in this country. If I give her a hard time on the little stuff, she'll be too uptight to deal with the big stuff. Like what she's going to do with the rest of her life."

"Little stuff to you," Adiella said. "Compared with what you did when you were fourteen."

Adiella walked to the car and left Damek standing alone in the middle of the parking lot. He lit another cigarette and watched the small dark figure of his wife

disappear inside the Acura. He took his time with his smoking, examined his surroundings, his eyes focused on the car, then on the teenagers plunging through the snowdrifts around him. He didn't move toward the car until he finished his cigarette and buried its burning orange tip in the gray slush.

#

Three weeks later Damek came home from work at eight-thirty as usual and went into the kitchen to scout for leftovers. He pulled up short. Adiella was pouring popcorn into a large bowl, and a teenaged boy was sitting at the kitchen table with Raziah. A stack of math and social studies books were piled around them on the table.

"Hi, Dad," Raziah said.

"Hi, yourself," he said. "Who's this guy?"

Adiella carried the bowl of steaming popcorn to the table. "This is Mitch Fisher."

Raziah said, "He's my mentor, Dad. You remember the mentor thing?"

The boy stood up and shook hands with Damek. "Hello, Mr. Jablon." He was slight but above average in height, with sand-coloured hair.

"Mitch is teaching me math and social. He's like a brain at Corneille. Plus he plays basketball and snowboards."

Damek noticed that his daughter's lips glistened with dark purple lipstick, and her eyes were heavily outlined in black to give her a vaguely Egyptian appearance. "I see," he said. He looked sideways at the boy. "He's some kind of superhero, is he?"

"Complete with x-ray vision," Mitch said.

Raziah laughed. Damek made sure he only raised an eyebrow at the remark.

"Mitch takes a bus to school," Adiella said. "He'll need a ride back home. Can you take him?"

She was smiling, and Damek had the feeling that he had missed something while he was at work, a secret world shared between his wife and his daughter, and that only with the introduction of this new variable, Mitch Fisher, was he able to notice it. Damek looked at the table to verify that some schoolwork had actually occurred. Everywhere lay filaments of used eraser and scraps of paper with scribbled diagrams and algebraic equations, some in his daughter's broad, curly writing, the others in a spidery yet sophisticated hand he took to be the boy's.

Damek felt alienated from the entire scene and didn't want to remain. He piled leftover cutlets and dumplings from the fridge onto a plate and went into the TV room. He watched a football game with desultory interest; he found himself flipping through the channels whenever the game play stopped.

Some time later Adiella came into the room. "Can you take Mitch home now?"

Damek put down his empty plate and examined her closely. "Are you wearing fresh make-up, too? You and your daughter are cut from the same mold."

"For your information, I'm wearing the same make-up I put on this morning."

He ignored her response. "So what's this boy like, besides sending all the women in the house into a frenzy?"

"Hush! He'll hear you."

"I hope you and Raziah learn to like him better. I don't think you two have warmed up to him yet."

Adiella said, "He's a good boy. His mother's a nurse, he's a top student."

"Great."

"But," she said, "you should talk to him in the car. Just to be sure."

"Should I?" Damek slowly rose from the sofa. "I guess you're right. Boys can't be trusted, can they?" he murmured, half to himself, but with an eye on Adiella.

The address Mitch gave him was twenty minutes away. In the car Damek peppered the teenager with as many questions as he could. After a few minutes he'd exhausted all possibilities and learned nothing that set off any serious alarm bells. His parents were divorced and his father lived in northern Ontario in the country, but otherwise Damek could find nothing obviously suspicious or disreputable.

"So, did I pass, Mr. Jablon?" the boy said after a moment.

"What?"

"Do I check out? Or are you going to make Raziah wear a chastity belt while I'm tutoring her?"

Damek turned sharply to the boy. Mitch was looking at him solemnly, but he had a strange light in his eyes, as though he were in the midst of playing a practical joke and could barely conceal his glee. Damek couldn't help it. He burst out laughing. Mitch joined in.

"So you aren't planning on using your x-ray vision on her then."

"No, sir," Mitch said. "Not me."

"You better be careful, though," Damek said. "Did you see all the make-up she was wearing?"

"She's a typical kid," Mitch said. "It's not a big deal."

"Yeah, I guess she is a typical kid." He paused. "Though she can be trouble. You know about her troubles, I guess."

Mitch said, "Sure. But it's nothing major. She skips classes, she stole a few things. I've seen a lot worse in kids her age. I mean, what were you doing at her age?"

"God," Damek said. "I don't think I should even answer that question."

He signalled and drove past the park that opened into Mitch's district. He continued, "We're in general agreement here, I think. Her mother is overreacting, unfortunately."

"Maybe she's just a little old-fashioned," Mitch said. "My mom's like that. But that's okay. Different strokes for different folks."

Damek didn't answer, and they drove in silence for several minutes. Mitch began examining the CD rack built into the console.

"You've got quite the collection," the boy said. "I don't know anyone who's got a Bronski Beat CD."

"I have the vinyl too," Damek said.

Mitch laughed. He leaned forward to take a better look. "ABC. Human League. Thomas Dolby. New Order. A Flock of Seagulls. You sure are big into the eighties."

"That was my time."

Mitch looked at him. "So you're not that old, after all."

"No," Damek said. "I'm not. At least, I don't think I am."

"You don't look old," Mitch said.

"Why, thank you."

Mitch said, "Were you into the punk scene?"

"No. I was more into new wave."

Mitch laughed. "Good, because I couldn't imagine you as a punk rocker, Mr. Jablon. I was getting this mental picture of you with a mohawk."

Damek smiled.

Mitch said, "Can I play one?"

"Sure."

Mitch put in the Flock of Seagulls CD. They drove to Mitch's house to the strains of "I Ran" and "Space Age Love Song."

Mitch asked, "Do you like Culture Club?"

"Sure."

"Cyndi Lauper?"

"Not a chance," Damek said.

"How about Wham!?"

The car stopped at a red light. "Sort of."

Damek looked at Mitch and tried to interpret the boy's expression. The headlights of the cars moving across their path flashed across Mitch's face like a strobe light, and he wondered if the series of lights provided the source of what he was seeing--mischief, or simply inquisitiveness, he wasn't sure.

"Hey," Mitch said. "The light's green."

"Oh."

They didn't speak further until they reached Mitch's home. The house was a small duplex with white siding. No lights were on.

"Is anyone home?"

"Yes," Mitch said. "My mom's working a weird shift right now. She's already asleep."

"Oh."

"The guy from Bronski Beat is still around," Mitch said. "Did you know that?"

"Which guy? Jimmy Somerville?"

"Yeah. I got one of his CDs."

"You do, do you," Damek said.

"Yeah. It came out in '95. If you want to listen to it, I can bring it the next time I'm over."

"I'd be interested in that, sure."

Mitch opened the car door and pulled his knapsack out of the back seat.

"Then I'll be back over next Monday, Mr. Jablon," he said.

As he drove home, Damek kept glancing at the CDs, thinking for some reason that the boy had stolen one. He didn't believe the boy would steal anything. But something about him set Damek on edge. It was like something he had forgotten to check, like driving away from the house in the morning and not knowing if he had turned off the iron.

#

A month after her tutoring began, Raziah found out that Mitch stayed after school for basketball and came directly to her house without eating supper. From then on, every Monday Mitch ate supper with the Jablons, and after supper he tutored Raziah. In February Damek was able to come home for supper more often. He helped Adiella clear the kitchen table and load the dishwasher so that Mitch and

Raziah could start their lesson right away. Raziah had an important mathematics exam at the end of the month.

Two nights before the exam, Raziah was in good spirits. Mitch came over two days in a row to help prepare, and she had received an above-average grade on a social studies quiz the day before. As Damek waited for Mitch to get his coat on at the front door, Raziah leaned into the hallway from the kitchen and waved at her tutor.

"How do you feel about the math exam?" Mitch asked.

"Really good," she said. "Great!"

"Then you go get 'em on Wednesday," Mitch said.

"I will!"

In the car, Damek watched Mitch out of the corner of his eye as he drove through the streets. It was cold, and he had turned up the heat and put on the interior defroster. The roads were slippery with a new snowfall, and he drove more slowly than usual.

Damek said, "Listen, Mitch, you're doing a great job with Raziah. She's doing so well."

"Thanks, Mr. Jablon."

"I really appreciate all the work you've done."

Damek wondered if he had put on the heat too high; he felt overly warm. He reached for the temperature controls,

but he noticed Mitch shiver, and he withdrew his hand without changing the settings.

"I brought that Jimmy Somerville CD," Mitch said.

"I don't believe it," Damek said. "Finally the brain gets a memory."

"I wasn't sure if you wanted to listen to it or not," Mitch said.

"Of course I do," Damek said. "That's why I kept reminding you to bring it. Go ahead, put it in."

The music was round and electronic with a strong backbeat, the sort of music that Damek imagined clubs played now. He could only guess at this, since he stopped going to clubs fifteen years ago, when Adiella got pregnant and they were married. Despite the passage of time, he could not mistake Jimmy Somerville's voice. It was the same warm falsetto that had made Damek feel light-headed when he was a teenager, and was making him feel light-headed now. At some point Damek became so lost in the music that he stopped paying attention to what was happening around him. Then he realized he had driven most of the way to Mitch's house and was pulling into Mitch's district.

Mitch said, "Did you know that Jimmy Somerville sang in the soundtrack to Orlando?"

"What's Orlando?" Damek said.

"A movie. It's about a man who lives for hundreds of years and then all of a sudden turns into a woman."

"Is it good?"

"It's pretty good."

They were in front of Mitch's house. Damek steered the car in front of the duplex and stopped. The house lights were off. Damek looked over at Mitch: the boy's eyes were narrowed, and Damek thought he was breathing fast.

Damek glanced at the dark house. "Is your mother asleep?"

"No. She's working nights this week."

Mitch had his knapsack on his knees and was looking out the passenger window at the house. His hands were working the strap of his knapsack. Damek felt thirsty. The car heater was fully warmed up, and out of the vents at Damek's feet and head the dry, hot air blew with a loud, empty hum.

#

Four weeks later, Damek came home at six o'clock to a strangely empty house. Adiella was the only one home. Mitch

had an after-school basketball game, and Raziah had stayed after school to watch the game. Her junior high was on the same block as Maurice Corneille; she only had to cross a field to get there.

For supper Adiella made pork chops and mashed potatoes with broccoli. Damek ate a few pieces of broccoli and two chops, with a scoop of potatoes and a slice of bread fresh from the bread machine.

Adiella noticed the neglected broccoli on his plate. "I forgot you don't like broccoli very much."

"It's not my favourite, but I should eat it. It's healthy, and I don't order in broccoli when I stay at the office."

His wife nodded and looked at her own plate, on which remained only half a pork chop. Damek said, "And I guess you aren't a big pork chop fan."

"No," she said. "But Raziah likes them. I kind of forgot she wasn't going to be here for supper. I knew, but I also forgot."

Both of them picked at their food. Finally Adiella said, "Are you going to get Raziah now?"

"Yes," he said, and looked at his watch. "It's time, isn't it?"

"Mitch will probably need a ride home," Adiella said.

"Doesn't his mother go to his games?"

"Apparently not. She works at night a lot."

"No problem," Damek said. "I'll take Raziah home and then take him home."

"You might as well take him home first," Adiella said. "There is no sense, is there, in coming home twice."

"I guess you're right. I thought she had to study, and she'll have less time to do that if I take her all the way to Mitch's before coming home."

"She said she didn't have much school work to do."

"Okay, then," Damek rose from the table. "I'll be home in an hour or so."

Damek was about to leave the kitchen when Adiella said, "How long has it been since we ate supper alone like this?"

He stopped and looked at her. She sat with her hands clasped together next to her plate on the table.

"I don't know," he said. "Years, probably."

"I think you're right," she said. "Years."

She stopped speaking, and nothing in her body language or expression indicated any expectation that their

conversation would continue. Damek went to the front door to get his coat.

When he arrived at Maurice Corneille High School, the basketball game was not quite finished. He came into the gymnasium but stood near the door instead of moving to the bleachers. The bleachers were full of teenagers in sneakers, jeans and sweatshirts. He spotted Raziah among them, near the back of the bleacher farthest from him. With only five minutes left, and Corneille leading by ten points, the home fans were confident of victory but not overly aggressive about cheering for their team. Mitch was playing defense; he was a tall boy, but not the tallest boy on the team by far. Near the end of the game, an opposing player tried to break through to the basket, but Mitch swooped in and stole the ball. He passed the ball to a teammate at centre, and the teammate was able to get a shot at the net, although he didn't score. Nevertheless the fans yelled their approval, and a few players came around to Mitch when play stopped and patted him on the shoulder. He nodded at them in acknowledgment, then he bent forward a bit, his hands on his thighs, as though to stretch his back or to rest. When he stood up straight, he caught Damek's

eye, and smiled quickly, before rejoining his team in the game.

The game ended with a good-natured roar from the spectators. Damek walked over to the bleachers and met up with Raziah.

She said, "Did you get to see any of the game, Dad?"

"No, I came in just before it ended."

"It was so great. Did you see Mitch? He made a really good play at the end."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. We have to take him home. Is that okay?"

Damek said, "As long as he doesn't take forever to get changed."

"No, he won't. I'll go tell him."

Damek watched her walk across the gym to the team bench, where the players were beginning to drift off to the locker room, and stand in front of Mitch, who was in conversation with two boys on his team. When Raziah had finished speaking with him and was returning, the two boys turned to Mitch and, laughing, said something. Mitch rolled his eyes at them, as though in disgust, and shook his head, which made the other boys laugh once more. Raziah continued walking towards Damek, oblivious to the boys behind her.

They waited for Mitch in front of the school. In fifteen minutes, Mitch came out, pink-cheeked from exertion. He had his team jacket unbuttoned, despite the below-zero weather. He obviously had just washed his hair, for it was darker in colour than normal, and plastered to his head.

"Great game, Mitch," Raziah said.

"Congratulations," Damek said.

"Thanks."

Raziah asked, "Does this mean you'll get to go to the playoffs?"

"Maybe," Mitch said. "We haven't been playing so well lately. It's good to win once in a while, though."

"The car's parked on the street," Damek said.

Mitch said, "You know, I've got to go to the can first. Is that all right?"

"I'm not going to stop a man from doing that," Damek said. "Since you're going, I'll tag along. You'll be okay, Raziah?"

"Yeah," she said.

"You can sneak a smoke while you wait," Damek said.

"I don't smoke anymore, thank you. I quit."

Damek said, "Since when?"

"Since a while ago. And you should quit, too."

"That's why my cigarettes seem to last longer nowadays. Here," Damek said, "take the keys and stay in the car instead."

Adiella went to the car and started it. She turned the heater on full throttle and sat with her head against the headrest, listening to the radio. The crowd of players and fans outside the school building began to thin out. When Damek and Mitch returned to the car twenty minutes later, the school grounds were deserted.

"Sorry," Mitch said when he slid into the back seat. "My fault."

Damek came in through the driver's door, and Raziah shifted to the passenger's side. "Next time," he said, "I better bring some string with me so I can find my way out of the school myself."

Mitch said, "I told you I had to go."

Raziah groaned. "You guys, this kind of information should be handed out on a strictly need-to-know basis, and I don't need to know."

"I'm sorry, Raziah," Mitch said. "I had no idea you were so sensitive. I didn't know you were such a delicate little flower."

She turned around and stuck out her tongue.

"Nice comeback," Mitch said.

"All right, all right," Damek said. "We have to get along just until we get Mitch home. Do you think we can do that?"

Damek slipped an Icehouse CD into the player. The music rose up loudly around them. As he pulled the car away from the curb, Damek turned down the volume of the CD player so that he could hear Mitch and Raziah's banter.

#

A year later Raziah was studying for her Grade Ten math final exam. She came downstairs from her room to look for her father, and she found her mother in the kitchen. Adiella was kneeling in front of the lazy Susan. The double-hinged door was folded open, and Adiella was holding a half-empty package of shredded coconut. On the counter above her head was a collection of partially full bags of cooking ingredients--raisins, chocolate chips, walnuts.

"Where's Dad?"

"Why?"

"I need help on a math problem."

"He's in bed," Adiella said. "And he'll be up early tomorrow."

"He's already in bed?"

"He said he has to work late tomorrow, and he wants to get some sleep tonight."

"Oh, he's doing that again."

Adiella turned back to the lazy Susan without replying.

"What are you doing, Mum?"

"I was thinking of baking something."

"You're going to bake at ten o'clock at night?"

"Just for something to put in your father's lunch. I don't have anything for dessert."

"Dad can buy his own dessert, Mum."

"It's never the same when it's not home-made." Adiella tucked a stray hair from her bun behind her ear. "Anyway, I should tidy up in here. It's a mess."

"You're crazy, Mum."

"I know," she said. "I must be." She bowed her head into the lazy Susan and prodded at the jars and bags inside.

Raziah left the kitchen and stood in the hallway until the strange butterflies in her stomach calmed down. She looked over her shoulder at her mother. She was still sitting in front of the open cupboard. Her hands had

dropped to her sides and she was staring at the shelves. Her head was bowed forward, and the dark knot of her bun lay motionless against the back of her white neck.

Raziah felt the need for a cigarette. She hadn't smoked since she quit the year before, but now she craved one. She crept into the front hall and riffled through the pockets of her father's coat. She found what she was looking for, a package of cigarettes. When she slid the package open she found a note written on a square of ruled paper torn from a larger sheet. The words were written in a thin, elaborate hand.

"I found a new place. It's perfect. Can you meet me at 244 Stables Street at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday. It's a brick building. I'll be at the back entrance. Mitch." Below was a sketch of streets in the same hand. A star marked a point on the road labelled Stables Street.

Raziah felt something in her twist, as though someone had gripped a part of her body and yanked it in the wrong direction. She walked unsteadily to the front door and stumbled outside. She retreated to the side of the house into the space between the house and the hedge, back far enough so that she was concealed from the streetlamps. It was a cool spring night, and she shivered. She lit a match

and held the small orange flame to her face. A tendril of smoke curled up in a thin, milky line past her eyes. The match's heat fell on the groove in the centre of her lips like a finger.

#

Damek entered the kitchen in the early morning and put on a pot of coffee. While the coffee drizzled into the pot, he looked out the window at the dark sky. It was five o'clock, and the sun would not rise for another three hours.

He turned at the sound of footsteps and saw Raziah standing in the kitchen threshold, illuminated from behind by the hall light.

"What are you doing up?" he asked.

"I need your help with a math question." Her face and voice were stiff with sleepiness, and her hair lay confusedly around her face. Damek noticed she was wearing the pair of red flannel pajamas he had bought her for Christmas.

"Okay, let me get my coffee first." He added, "Do you want one?"

Raziah yawned.

"Coming right up," he said.

He fixed up two mugs of coffee and sat with Raziah at the kitchen table with her books and his notepad. Her question was on a problem about compound interest; in twenty minutes he helped her solve it, and she said she could now do the rest on her own.

"Are you making yourself lunch?" Raziah asked.

"Uh, maybe. Why?"

"Mom made some banana bread for you," Raziah said.

"She did?"

"It's in the breadbox."

When he looked in the breadbox a thick slice was already missing.

"Is it good?" Damek asked, and smiled.

"Yeah," she said.

"Maybe you should go back to bed."

"I can't sleep."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Worried about your exam?"

"Maybe."

"You shouldn't worry. You're doing pretty well in math now, aren't you?"

"I still have to study."

"I don't remember studying as hard as you when I was in high school. You're doing better than I did, though." He added, "You're doing it the right way. I had to go back another year for upgrading. A waste of a year."

"You were married by then, right?" Raziah said.

"There was you, too, by then. It was hard, let me tell you. It's no example for you to follow. I'm glad you aren't."

She asked, "What did you do in high school, then, if you didn't study?"

"Goofed off, I guess. Partied."

Raziah said, "What do you mean, partied?"

He went to pour himself a cup of coffee. When he turned back to the table, he saw that Raziah had shaken off her sleep. She stood erect in her seat, leaned forward in concentration.

He said, "It's not important anymore."

"It is to me. I want to know what you did. Because maybe it is important still."

"Use your imagination," Damek said roughly, and walked out of the kitchen.

He returned five minutes later. Raziah was still at the kitchen table. She had a fresh mug of coffee and was

staring into its contents. She looked up when he entered, and her eyes were hollow-out in the dark. He sat down across from her.

"Look, I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did. That's all."

"What are you trying to hide?"

He sat back in his chair slowly. "Nothing."

"Maybe you don't regret it," she said. "Maybe that's why you aren't telling me."

He opened his mouth to speak, but he let it close without making a sound. Her face was stern, and her expression resembled, in ways he had not noticed before, her mother's--during those times, when she was not much older than Raziah, she had phrased for him nearly the same questions.

Damek said, "Raziah, I will tell you everything I think you need to know."

The coffeepot hissed on the countertop. Raziah looked over at it, her expression cold.

"Okay?" Damek said.

She nodded.

"I've got to go," Damek said, and kissed her on the crown of her head.

As he walked out of the kitchen, she said, "What are you doing tonight?"

"Working late."

"I'm going to a movie."

"Good," he said. "You need the break."

"See you later, Dad."

When he went outside, he stood by the garage and smoked two cigarettes before he left.

#

When Mitch had come out of his mother's kitchen with the glass of water for Damek, it was pitch dark, except for a small square of light from the window on the front door. Later Mitch wondered if, because of the darkness, he had stepped too close to Damek, so that when Damek took the glass he brushed Mitch's arm, and if that accidental proximity had begun it all. Mitch remembered only that Damek drank the water, and handed the glass back to Mitch. When Mitch took the glass back, he put it in the path of the light from the door. The glass suddenly flared, as though the water magnified the light. It burned into his eyes, so that when Damek pushed him against the wall, all Mitch could see was the light's red ghost. It reminded him of when he went to the lake with his father when he was a

small boy, and his father would set Mitch up in a pup tent outdoors while his father stayed inside the cabin. And almost every night someone would walk past his tent with a lantern, and the light would flash into his tent, gradually fade, and disappear when the person went into the cabin. A hollow sound brought Mitch to the present, the sound of a zipper, of something tearing, and Damek said, "You are absolutely perfect, do you know that? Has anyone ever told you that?" No one had ever told Mitch that. Damek seemed to want Mitch to understand how he felt. He wanted Mitch to feel, to feel good. Every time Damek shifted his lips from one part of Mitch's body to another, Mitch was reminded of the fact that he now could identify the sounds he'd heard coming from his father's cabin those years ago, when they went to the lake together, because Mitch had since made them himself, and was making them now.

Afterwards Damek found a blanket from Mitch's bedroom and covered him where he lay on the living room floor, and Damek prepared a bath for him. He helped Mitch into the bathtub, and stroked Mitch's hair, and rubbed him with a bar of soap. Mitch could not remember the last time someone had washed him. Once when he was very young his mother tried to wash chewing gum out of his hair, but she wasn't

able to get it out, and shaved his head instead. His father had just moved out and taken the electric razor, and therefore she had to use a razor blade. When she was done, his head was covered in cuts. All his hair had lain curled in soft piles at his feet, and she had said, What a funny-shaped head you have. What Damek did was so different. Damek washed him, and said, "I don't normally do this kind of thing. But I can tell you that I want to do it again."

After Damek left the house, Mitch threw the towels in the bottom of the garbage cans outside, dried the water from the bathtub, and removed every shard of broken glass from the front entrance, where Mitch had dropped the glass. Damek was sloppy about these kinds of detail, and Mitch always had to watch out for the both of them. Mitch thought that unconsciously Damek wanted people to find out, but Mitch knew that Damek would probably end it if someone did. For this reason Mitch had found a solution for Damek's fears about meeting in hotels. So that on the night after the basketball game a month after their affair began, when Damek followed him into the school, Mitch did not even make a pretense of going to the bathroom but instead led Damek through the building and out the door that faced the field. Damek had said, "Where are you going?" and Mitch hadn't

replied, didn't have to, because Damek followed him right across the field to the junior high school, where Mitch knew the custodial staff would be long-gone, to a section where the old portables formed a U-shape, where there were no lights to reveal them, and there was a door with a shallow porch in one shadowy, convenient corner. And after they had fucked there, and Damek had said, "There is no way in hell I am going to wait another week before I see you again," Mitch knew that something was finally beginning.

#

In the parking lot of 244 Stables Street, Raziah stared at the vestibule behind the brick building. She couldn't see anything beyond the opaque threshold in the wall. Mitch and her father had been making sounds a few minutes before, and now, after a long silence, they were talking. She couldn't always hear what they said because their voices fell and rose in rhythm with their emotions. At times a wind would come, and she would hold her body still so that her teeth wouldn't chatter. She took her hands out of her coat pockets and stared at them under the streetlights. The light was gray on her hands. It made her veins glow blue, as though she was under blacklight.

She heard her name and looked up.

". . . her finals in a couple of weeks. God, I never thought she would be in matriculation."

"She just needed some attention, like I keep saying."

"I'm trying to give it to her. You know, I wouldn't have become a lawyer if it weren't for her. God, what a rat-race.

"Maybe," Damek continued after a pause, "deep down she knows that something isn't right between her mother and me. Kids can sense that. Maybe I didn't hide it as well as I could have."

"And maybe you shouldn't have gotten involved with Adiella. Maybe you should have stayed in the scene, gone to Toronto or San Francisco, or wherever people went then. But what's the point in second-guessing yourself? You did what you thought you had to do."

"I know. It's different nowadays, isn't it? You're lucky."

"We're lucky. And could be luckier, if you let it be that way."

Damek laughed, slightly bitter and nervous.

"You know," he said after a moment, "as much as she complicates things for me, I can't imagine life without that kid."

Mitch said, "You're a good father, Damek."

In the distance an ambulance siren wailed. Raziah said a prayer under her breath. The men must have heard the siren as well, for they stopped talking until the sound died to nothing.

"Although," Damek said, his voice growing sly, "I am having an affair with my daughter's former tutor--"

"And," Mitch said, "you did practically rape me in my mother's house that first night." Mitch laughed low. "Maybe you aren't so wholesome after all."

"No," Damek said slowly, "I guess I'm not. I never have been, have I?"

"I'm your dirty little secret."

"A secret," Damek said. "But not dirty."

"A clean secret," Raziah blurted. She covered her mouth, but the words had already escaped. She heard her father shout, "Shit!" and Mitch say, "What was that?" nearly at the same time, but by then she was running around the building and down the street. She looked behind her to see if she was being followed, but no one was there. She didn't think she would be followed. She imagined that they wouldn't be wearing any clothing, and that they couldn't run after her. Or they had recognized her voice, and were

ashamed, and would not want her to see them naked. She had never seen her father naked. She used to imagine what Mitch looked like without clothing. While she lay in bed at night she used to fantasize about how she could arrange to see him that way. Usually her fantasy involved being at a snowboarding tournament in the Rocky Mountains, and she and Mitch were competing in a match race. The night before the race they would dance together in the hotel nightclub before going to their rooms for an early night. Once she reached the door of her room she would get the urge to wish him luck, and she would turn around and go to his hotel room. His door would be open, and she would walk in, and he would be coming out of the shower, and the room would be filled with steam. She would see him emerging from the white cloud, and he would be naked.

4. DEXTROUS

When I was thirteen I tried to make myself become left-handed. I did this after my parents told me that I was born favouring my left hand, but that they had changed me into a right-hander when I was still a baby. It was a sin in their culture to let a child grow up that way. When I reached out for my rattle with my left, they would veer it away so that I would have to grab it with my right. After I heard this story I tried to restore what my parents had taken from me. I would sit in my room at my desk, a single lamp over my portside shoulder, and practice writing. My handwriting had always been poor, and I could now explain why. As a right-hander I wrote without a consistent slant: each letter in a word leaned in a different direction. But now every consonant and vowel tilted forward at the same angle, in complete unison, as though each letter felt a communion that had been previously absent. At school I began to take notes with my left hand. My pen moved more slowly across the page but I felt good knowing my left hand, not my right hand, was bringing me somewhere. After a few months of practice I could brush my teeth, butter my toast, and open my school locker sinistromanually. Yet my school performance deteriorated. In gym class I began to

miss passes and bean people with balls because I insisted on shooting and throwing like a southpaw. No one wanted me on their team anymore. I couldn't find anyone to pair up with me in science labs because I would spill chemicals, drop thermometers, upset boxes of ball-bearings. I couldn't copy lecture notes fast enough. I couldn't finish my exams on time.

One day I told my parents that they had seriously damaged my brain by switching my handedness. I ranted. They seemed embarrassed. My mother stood up from the kitchen table and started to wash the dishes. My father sat quietly across the table from me, his head bowed. Had he not heard this before, I demanded. He said, no, no one let their children be left-handed in Italy. It just wasn't done. You see, I complained, I wear my watch on my right hand like left-handed people do. It was in my nature to be left-handed. My father said, I thought you wore your watch on your right hand because you played the accordion. He was correct, of course. An accordionist's left wrist is caught up in a strap that allows the player to pull the bellows open and closed and still allow the hand to slide up and down the bass board on the left half of the instrument. A watch on the left hand interferes with the strap and thus

with performance, but it doesn't on the opposite arm, which has no strap. I had forgotten all of this. My father said, Well, maybe you should get back to studying now. I was failing science.

I began to use my right hand again, and things improved. I passed science, passed all my courses. I got into university, became a doctor, a surgeon, specializing in the bones of the hand.

This is not really what happened.

Yes, I started to use my left hand, but I couldn't make it work properly at all. I was a well-trained convert to the dexter. I told my parents that they shouldn't have altered my handedness. They shrugged, said, Well, being left-handed was taboo in their culture, so they fixed me. What harm had it done? I was doing well in school.

I gave up using my left hand after only a few days. I finished high school, went to university, became a doctor, a surgeon. Specializing in the bones of the hand.

No. That's not it, either.

#

Wintertime is perfect for sitting outdoors and watching the birds at the bird feeder. I am very good at maintaining bird feeders. Abigail says she doesn't know

anyone else with the same knack. The day after my father died, I filled the bird feeder in our backyard with sunflower seeds. While his health allowed him, my father worshipped the sun. He would spend all day in his garden, planting, weeding, hoeing, harvesting. In high summer the sun remained in the sky for eighteen hours, and he would stay out there until the late sunset's peach light faded into violet. In celebration of his death and life, I fed the chickadees and sparrows with the seeds of the sun-chasing plant. That day I also took my accordion outside and played "La Cumparsita." I associate that song with my father because he loved to dance to it. He was a man of the tango, as well as of the sun. He should have been born in Argentina. But Italy is pretty close.

Abigail thinks I have handled my father's death well. With my mother it was different. I expected her death. She was always at the doctor for high blood pressure, arthritis, then finally cancer. She would say to me, "You're going to be the death of me one day." I took her word for it. She was my mother. She knew everything. She died when I was sixteen.

My father lived for a good while, but soon after my mother died he became a hunchback. Even as a young man he

was stooped. I have a photograph of him standing in front of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in the 1950s. One year on a long weekend he drove there with his buddies in construction and spent one day in Ottawa before bombing back in time for work. In the photo he stands alone, and his back is bowed a little. As he grew older the hump increased until it debilitated him. Someone had to take care of him. I moved back home.

#

Abigail thinks I could have become a surgeon. She's probably right. I could have used my accordion-playing skills to help mankind. The rapid movement of the hands, the physical strength, the intensity of concentration, the patience, all are congruent with the skills of a surgeon, for reshaping the human body. I could have transformed the monstrous--either those born into it or afflicted later in life through misfortune--into the glorious. It's like what Ravel did with Musorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. Sure, it was a good piece of music the way it was, written for solo piano. But Ravel took it and made it into a blaring symphonic homage to the glories of Russia. I haven't come across an arrangement of Pictures at an Exhibition for the accordion, but there must be one. It would be a natural.

#

My father and I didn't have much in common. I was a high-strung yet geeky teen with either a badminton racket in hand or a remote control in fist. My father, by contrast, liked to work about the house, first as a gardener and assistant to my domestically inclined yet physically declining mother, later as an enfeebled but stalwart putterer, picking up lint from the carpet and polishing my deceased mother's silver. When he became unable to do such things, I tried to assume his role, but it was no use. To polish silver you must dab a white cotton cloth into the polishing liquid and then rub the silver like a desperate Aladdin. I found it difficult to clean around the handles of creamers and in the ridges of candlesticks. After I got fired from my job, my father would come downstairs where I'd established a suite for myself and try to persuade me to polish while watching the Grey Cup quarter finals. I didn't see how I could. The areas around the handles were sure to suffer. Why polish if you couldn't get those little spots all bright and gleaming? Anyway, I couldn't do it. I lacked the finesse. My father went upstairs in his familiar brown slippers

without comment and didn't bring up polishing until quite a while later.

Fortunately my father had saved some money for retirement because it took me a while to find a job. A year, in fact. Abigail says I shouldn't have held out for another job at a sporting goods store. But how can you beat selling high-end footwear to ambitious high-school track stars? I asked Abigail to explain to me how selling mechanical pencils to junior-high students at a stationery store or slicing turkey loaf for a suburban mommy at a big-box food mart could compare. She said she had no idea how, and then she dumped me. I subsequently got a job at a family shoe store downtown, and Abigail agreed to take me back.

Around this time my cousin Randy needed an accordionist for his band because his regular accordionist moved to Vancouver. Luckily I was able to pull in some cash that way. I still do. The band gets a lot of gigs. We shouldn't, because we're terrible. The secret lies in my cousin Randy himself. He's got that great Bobby Vinton hair, along with a vaudevillian greasiness that the parents of unsuspecting brides-to-be and the spouses of retirees from the city sanitation department see as signs of innate

banquet hall talent. Rare was the owner of a mid-sized valve manufacturing firm who, after a meeting with my cousin, could turn down Randy Pelose and His Musi-Tones as <u>après</u>-smorg entertainment. I can't credit myself with our band's success. The truth is, you can't really hear an accordion in a dance band. Drums, sax, and guitars easily drown out even an amplified accordion. I don't actually think Randy and other Musi-Tones can hear me. This means it doesn't matter what I play up there. The band could be performing the third song of a four-number polka set, and I could be on the thirteenth song of my self-arranged, twenty-number, Super-accelerated Really-Short-Beatles-Songs set. The accordion must have some attraction to this crowd, though. It must produce some kind of subsonic hum that lulls the over-eighty crowd into a much sought-after state of relaxation and peace.

I met Abigail during one of these gigs. She was the niece of the vice-president of a commercial sponge distributor, and her aunt had coerced her into going to the office Christmas party as the "date" of her cousin Terrence (and heir apparent of Frapper Sponge Co. Ltd.). She wore these excellent black platforms and a hand-knit peasant dress with brown cat's-eye glasses. She likes a good bash,

and she doesn't lower her standards even for an office party. During a break she introduced herself to me and said she would love to learn how to play the accordion. She was getting into zydeco and thought accordions were just the coolest. I thought she was just the coolest, too. At the time I didn't know what the hell zydeco was, but I told her that I wasn't into it right now but was thinking of getting into it. I volunteered to teach her to play the accordion. It turned out that she wanted to learn how to play one of those Cajun button boxes, which I know nothing about. They strike me as being too complicated. After a month of putting her off I admitted this to her. She was angry, but she eventually forgave me.

After my father became incapacitated, I cooked, cleaned in a general way, dealt with his medical errands, handled the household budget. Abigail looked after the garden, except for the bird feeding and tending, which was my forte. My father didn't like Abigail, but he appreciated the effort she made in being useful and good. I suspect my father thought she was fundamentally flawed, and no matter what she did she was only papering over an irreparable defect. Most likely he thought the same of me. But he never spoke a cruel word to me. He wouldn't harm a fly.

Abigail was the one who finally told me to take my father to the hospital. Dad hadn't gotten out of bed in two days. He said he was too tired. When Abigail came over and I told her how he was doing, she put her hands on her hips and said, "Well, Johnny, don't you think this would be a good time to get him to the hospital?"

"He says he's just tired. Maybe he's got the flu."

"Even if it's just the flu, you should take him. He's an old, sick guy, Johnny."

"He's not an old guy. He's just sixty-two."

"Sixty-two with diabetes. With a heart condition. With depression."

She's a funny girl, Abigail. Why didn't she remember his hunchback? If he's got troubles, it's because of that. She misses the obvious sometimes. But the next day we took him to the emergency room. He was in and out of the hospital from then on. For a while it was looking pretty good, but after two months of clear sailing his lungs filled up with fluid and he couldn't breathe. It was back to the hospital for him. For good.

Abigail says I should go back to school now. But I don't want to. I want to make sure the birds get fed. Who's going to fed them--Abigail? Technically, she's not even my

girlfriend anymore. She doesn't have the physical capability for handling bird feeders anyway. You need big bones and delicate movements, the ability to lift sacks of sunflower seeds bought in bulk at the feedstore, along with the dexterity to pour the little seeds into the trays, or to pack suet into the feeder holes. Abigail is tall but frail, and when she talks, her arms swing wide around her, and when she laughs she laughs so sharply, and so loud, and so often, that she would scare the birds away. She would knock over the bird feeders with her flailing hands. She wears bright red boots, and coats made of fake fur, and huge fuzzy hats. The birds would think she was a bird herself, a chicken hawk, or a bird of paradise, and the little brown sparrows would die of fear, or of envy.

Once when my father was still working and my mom was still alive, I broke my arm playing touch football (the left arm, of course). My doctor thought it was funny that I broke my arm playing touch football. He obviously had never played. You start playing just touch football, no hitting, sure, everyone agrees, but then you accidentally knock against someone as you run up to tag him, and then someone trips over someone else's foot, and pretty soon two linebackers run you down, throw you to the turf, and pound the

heck of you. People start with the best intentions, but if they can't manage right it all goes downhill. The best intentions. The world's full of them. It's like, you think you're going to go to college, go into science, biology, and you know, you think you might try to get into medical school, I mean, why not give it a shot? But then things happen. Life's unpredictable. I bet when my parents were growing up they didn't dream one day they'd be living in a place where they'd have to shovel snow from their driveway for six months, or take their kid to skating lessons, or have the British queen as their head of state. Who would guess that? No one. And Abigail. I bet she didn't figure she'd get hooked up to a guy who played an accordion--and stay with him for nearly five years--before meeting some jazz pianist named Claude and starting a coffee shop with him and then getting engaged to him. I know I sure didn't think that would happen to her. Or you're in your sporting goods store, and the guy who wants to buy hiking boots thinks you're taking too long to bring out boots his size from the storeroom, even though the store's packed, even though the goof has already tried on eight different pairs of boots, and he starts harassing you, saying how you're an ignoramus, but you don't drop the ball until he says how

he's an emergency room doctor and he's got a real job to go to and would I please get my underemployed ass going, and then I jump on him and then I get fired. Not something I'd guess would happen to me.

Abigail has a pretty good coffee shop. For background music she plays quite a bit of zydeco, though she's now leaning more towards jazz. Especially the saxophone. My father played the sax in a dance band. I can remember when I was little he'd work every weekend at night to bring in a few extra bucks. He quit after it looked like Mom wouldn't be able to have more kids, so they didn't need the money. One day Abigail came over to our place, and she saw the sax in a closet she was cleaning, and she made my father take it out. The instrument needed a bit of spiffing up, but my father was able to swing a few tunes out of it before he got too tired. I'm surprised my father played for her. Maybe he was lonely for the sad old wail of the sax. He sure could make it wail. I think Abigail learned to like the sax after that day. I didn't much care for the sax when I was a kid, but when my dad asked if I wanted to take accordion lessons, for some reason I went for it. Of course guys my age didn't think highly of the accordion, and they thought I was a freak. It kind of coloured the social

aspect of my life. But I stuck to it. Maybe I liked the way the accordion has two halves, and each half makes a different sound, and each hand moves on its own, doing its own thing, but making something out of that difference, something in between out of those black-and-white keys.

In his last days in the hospital before he lost consciousness for good, my father said to me, "Are you polishing the silver, Johnny?"

I said, "It's all bright as a penny. Even around the handles."

He smiled and said, "Good boy. I knew you could do it, Johnny. "

Actually I hadn't gotten around to the silver. But I told him what I thought he should know. It was like me telling him I'd flunked out of college and had to come home anyway, so it was okay for me to look after him. I wondered if my parents hoped and prayed that I wouldn't figure out I'd been born left-handed, if they knew they'd made a mistake in doing that to me, and dreaded the day I would realize it. Maybe my father didn't even believe me when I said I'd polished the silver. But it didn't matter, in the end, for example, whether he liked Abigail, because

Abigail's pretty much out of the picture now, and my father is gone, too. I wonder if Mom would have liked Abigail.

Abigail really is a great gal. She says, you might not feel like it now, but maybe you should go back to school. Maybe what happened to your dad and mom was getting you down all this while. Maybe you'd feel better about yourself if you did it. That's good of her to say. But I think I'm handling my life well now. I'm happy at the shoe store. It's a family shoe store, where people come just to outfit themselves for school and church. And playing with the Musi-Tones has me out and about. I get a real kick out of Randy. In any event, maybe I've missed the moment for school. So go with the flow, I say. And the flow's taking me into shoe retail and bird feeders and playing tangos real fast on my accordion while the rest of the band plays the love theme from Doctor Zhivago. I'm not a great player, but when I'm in the right mood the tango seems to come easily to me.

5. TOGETHER

Things haven't always been perfect for my husband Gerry and me. We broke up once while we were dating because he started talking about moving to Vancouver Island to be near his daughter from his first marriage, and I took that to mean he didn't want me. I started to pick fights with him in public. During the baptism reception for his sister Nora's eldest son, I lost my temper in front of Gerry's whole family. Later, during our first year of marriage, Gerry felt he was losing his identity. He became protective of his possessions. He moved his books to one side of our bookshelf and moved mine to the other side. His cat Theo died, and he thought I was happy about it because I don't like cats.

But we've worked things out. Our books are interfiled again. The suitable mourning period for his cat has passed, and we've started to look in the classifieds for free kittens. When we've both had a bad day at work we skip supper and walk to the mall near our apartment for coffee and biscotti. I will order a stronger blend than Gerry will, and my <u>biscotto</u> will be more elaborate--hazelnut chocolate with white chocolate icing, for instance, as opposed to his vanilla without icing.

Other couples probably go out for dinner at such times, or booze it up at the bar. But we are such mild-mannered folk. Besides, we're always broke. Both of us are still paying off student loans, and he's dealing with a significant credit card debt from a long period of post-graduation unemployment. Gerry also has to send child-support cheques to his daughter Kirsten, who lives near Victoria with Gerry's back-to-nature ex-wife. For us, going for coffee at the mall is an insane fling. It's our way of painting the town red.

We don't do this when only one of us has had a bad day. On those occasions we stay home, and the offended party slumps at the kitchen table while the other boils pasta and heats some of the homemade tomato sauce my mother gives us once in a while. During supper the aggrieved spouse berates the weak-minded boss, or the solipsistic customer, or the villainous co-worker, or whatever made the day so rotten, while the other murmurs commiseration and serves up more pasta. If I've had the bad day, Gerry will in addition run out to the corner store and bring home a family-size Kit Kat. I offer him half, and he takes only one strip. I wolf down the rest, we sit in front of the TV and watch whatever's on the Space Channel until ten

o'clock. Then we take in fifteen minutes of the National, have a bath together, get into bed, read a little or have sex (or both), then fall asleep.

Our bad days coincide about once a month. We have similar jobs, which is probably why this happens. We are both technical writers. I work for a company that produces manuals for the components of small military aircraft. Gerry's company makes switching software for long-distance telephone providers. I met Gerry at a meeting of the local chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. He'd been laid off from his job as a newspaper reporter, and he was trying to make contacts at the meeting since he thought technical writing would be a good change from journalism. He was tired of following ambulances into hospitals to interview the families of accident victims. I had been a member of the society for about a year and was thinking about running for the executive. We introduced ourselves while standing around the coffee urn during a break. After we started dating I dropped the idea of running for office. Two months after we met, Gerry got his job, and we married two years later. Our second anniversary passed a few months ago. We celebrated at a real restaurant, a French one that

just opened up by the university. For dessert I had profiterole in the shape of a swan. Gerry had apple pie.

Gerry and I are both English majors. Our companies hire English majors because they say it's easier to teach a writer technical details than it is to teach a programmer or aircraft mechanic how to write. Really, I think it's because programmers and aircraft mechanics make way too much money to even consider working as technical writers. Only after we got engaged did I confess to Gerry that I hated my job. I have absolutely no interest in aircraft, never mind aircraft components. North American aircraft manufacturers have adopted a publishing standard, so that when you flip through one manual you get a numbing sense of déjà-vu. It's like formula fiction, but with much less intrigue. Gerry is in the same boat, but he says he doesn't mind the routine as much as the back-stabbing politics.

"Do you ever regret leaving journalism?" I asked Gerry one night over coffee at the mall. That day I'd told my boss I'd finished my project, but since he hadn't done his staff planning for the month yet, he told me to help out Krystal, the administrative assistant. I ended up filing. While I was filing, I realized that Krystal probably made as much money as I did. On Gerry's part, his project leader

had decided to take another writer on their team on a business trip to Seattle. Gerry thought it was because the project leader and the other guy had started to play pick-up hockey together, and the project leader now thought the other writer was a really great guy.

"No," Gerry said in answer to my question. "Sure, journalism seems more glamorous on the surface. But I'm not a glamorous person. Part of it was, I hated being a fake."

There are worse things in life than being a technical writer, he was saying to me. And I agree with that. I could be working at the coffee shop. Our parents and most of our family still think we are respectable people. My brother and his sisters let us babysit their children. When they come home from their respective nights out they herd me and Gerry into their white kitchens, and we drink the cappuccinos they make for us. The cappuccinos are always good. We talk genially about movies and the education system. They all have children who will be starting school shortly, and they're worried about the way things are headed. They assume Gerry and I are intellectuals, and they like to toss their ideas for educational reform at us for validation.

Things are still a little dicey between Gerry's sister Nora and me, though. I've been hoping to patch things up, but it hasn't happened. I didn't fight with her during the reception for her second son's baptism, so in a sense I have improved. But it's not right between us. I think it has something to do with the way Gerry and I live. Nora must blame me for it. For her it's a question of blame, because she believes that Gerry could have done better. I'll never forget the time we went over for cocktails at her place with a few other couples they knew. This was before they had children, before any of their friends had children, before Gerry and I were married. It was quite a feast. Nora and her husband Fred had set out two rows of liqueurs and wines at one end of their dining room table. The rest of the table was covered with all kinds of hors-d'oeuvres: antipasto, nachos with homemade salsa, a platter of soft French cheeses, hot crab dip. On the stereo they played The Gypsy Kings, Strunz and Farah, and Frank Sinatra. We drank flaming Sambucas.

At some point during the party Nora stood next to me while I was pouring myself a cola on ice. She must have had quite a bit to drink, because she opened up to me about her younger sister Melanie, who'd moved to Surrey with her

husband. Melanie was so homesick, Nora said, and it broke her heart. Melanie wanted to come back home but that would mean her husband would have to change careers because no one here needed a computer animator. "And she's so alone out there, with two toddlers, and he works eighteen hours a day sometimes."

"I hear it can be hard living on the coast," I said. "The cost of living is so much higher."

"We're so lucky," Nora said. "I mean, they can only afford one car, so she can't ever go out, and they'll never be able to own their own house." She poured herself a glass of white wine. "We should be together," she said. "I wish she could come home."

As Gerry and I drove home from the party in our rusted Volkswagen Rabbit, the only vehicle we own, to our rented one-bedroomer in our walk-up apartment, I wondered what Nora had been up to when she'd said those things to me.

By the time it came to her eldest son Tyler's baptism, I'd pretty much figured out where Nora stood on things. That night I found myself standing near the Caesar salad bowl on the buffet table while she and Melanie talked about baby clothes. Melanie had just moved back to town with her family; her husband had found a job selling

pharmaceuticals. Melanie was holding her one-year old, her third child, a boy named Gabriel. He sat alertly in his mother's arms during the conversation, observing everything with the same green eyes as his mother.

"The only place that has baby socks that stay up is The Gap," Melanie was saying. "All the other socks roll right down the baby's leg."

"Isn't that the truth?" Nora said.

"But I don't know if there's a Gap out by where I live," Melanie said.

Melanie had moved fairly close to my neighbourhood. I said, "There's one at Treeborough Mall."

"Oh, really?" Melanie smiled. "Don't tell me you've been shopping at The Gap, Effie."

"Oh, sure," I said. "I use baby socks to make cat toys for Theo." Melanie laughed.

Nora continued to her sister, "You can find good stuff at that store downtown, Pick Me, Pick Me."

Melanie winked at me. "Any socks for cats there?" she asked.

"No," Nora said. "It's just children's wear."

By then I'd filled up my baby-blue paper plate with Caesar salad and wandered off to find Gerry. My path

crossed Nora's again later, in the kitchen. The milk jug by the coffee urn was empty, and I went into the fridge to get a carton of milk. The carton wasn't open, and I was fumbling at the spout with my stubby fingers when Nora walked in.

I said, "I'm just filling the milk jug. Well, trying to."

"Argh," she said. "If you didn't bite your nails."

"It's okay," I said. "I've got it." I pulled at the spout, but the cardboard ripped, and as a result the spout had a jagged lip.

"You could've let me," she said. "It's like a pet peeve of mine, the improperly opened milk carton."

"Sorry," I said.

"Between your nail-biting and Gerry's nail-biting--" She took the carton from me.

"I know," I said. "We take calcium supplements because we can't open milk cartons."

Nora started to fill the milk jug. Since I had wrecked the spout, the milk poured out in two streams. One stream spurted to one side onto the counter and splashed her dress.

"Shit," Nora said.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "It's my fault."

"It's okay, I did it," she said, but she looked aggrieved.

Eventually Nora opened all the baptism presents, and soon afterwards the guests began trickling out. Gerry and I offered to help clean up.

"It's okay," Nora said to me. "We'll do it. But you have to pay the dry-cleaning bill for the dress."

"Oh," I said.

"It's raw silk, after all."

"Sorry."

She laughed. "I'm just kidding, Effie."

"Really, if you want me to, I will."

"No, no." She laughed again and said, "When I spill milk on your dress at your baby's baptism we'll call it even-steven, okay?"

Everything went black, as though all the blood had drained out of my eyes. Then the blood filled back in at a much higher temperature.

I said, "Well, that'll be a long time coming, Nora, if ever, so I better pay for it now."

Nora averted her gaze, as though what I said had nothing to do with what she had said and she was embarrassed for me. "No, forget it, Effie."

I fumbled around in my pocket for my change purse. "No, no, really, it's no trouble at all. And I can buy another carton of milk for you, too."

I could feel Gerry lean into me a little, as though he was preparing to push me out the door. By this time the other people in the room were looking in our direction. This included Melanie and her husband, and Gerry's mother and father, who were all picking wrapping paper off the floor and stuffing baby-blue paper plates into garbage bags.

I opened my change purse. "I think I have just enough to pay for a hypnotist to cure me of my nail-biting, or to get falsies." I looked at her nails. "Where do you get yours, Nora?"

Nora stammered, "I don't--"

Gerry said, "Let's go, Effie. You don't have to pay Nora anything."

"Okay, then when I have my baby, instead of Nora paying for my dry-cleaning bills, she can send me a support payment every so often so I can actually afford the kid."

Melanie wandered over. She was still holding Gabriel. "Don't worry about it, Effie." She bounced the baby in her arms as though he were crying. But he was calm. He looked at me with those green eyes, the same eyes that Melanie and Gerry have. He looked at me as if he understood everything.

As Gerry and I drove home, we didn't say anything for quite a while. Finally Gerry said, "We're not living in the lap of luxury, Effie, but we can get by. If you want a baby, we can have one."

"No, we can't."

"I don't know why you keep saying the problem's money."

"It's true."

"The problem is," Gerry said, "you don't really want one. You're trying to guilt me out over something you don't want but think you should want. Or maybe it's the other way around. Whatever it is, it's totally unfair, and I am sick of it."

We went the rest of the way home in silence, him on the driver's side, me on the passenger's side, as though we were riding a bus and didn't care who else was on with us. That's how it is. You wake up in the morning, and you just want to get on the bus so you can go to the office and get

your day over with, so that you can go home to a hot dinner and to doing dishes to the music you listened to when you were a teenager, to your TV or your book, and put off for as long as possible the sleep that leads to another morning. I don't want to put anyone else on that bus if I can help it. But I can't tell Gerry that. Who wants to be told that's the basis of your spouse's world view? It's like saying it's over. Instead I kept my mouth shut and rode it out. It's like an addictive drug, this suspension of consciousness: once you've decided to make it part of your life, you can't stay without it for long.

Soon we started talking again, and it was all right.

Nora and I next ran into each other at Gerry's parents' place. We circled each other but didn't talk. Since then we've been able to manufacture a sense of getting along, but it's still not healed, and maybe won't ever be. It's not that we were ever good friends. So it's easy to pretend. In a couple of years Nora had Parker; at Parker's baptism I stayed clear of the buffet table whenever Nora was near it, and I avoided milk cartons altogether. Melanie was there. Gabriel was walking by then. He wasn't as jolly as I remembered him being at Tyler's

baptism, but he was still happy enough. He seemed all right.

One night at the mall, as Gerry and I walked past The Gap on the way to the coffee kiosk, I said, "Some things at The Gap don't look half-bad."

"I know. It seems to be good quality stuff. But then you'd have to go shopping at The Gap to get it."

"Ha, ha, very funny."

"You know what the song says," Gerry said. "'You can't have one without the other.'"

I can't help thinking of Nora now when we go out for coffee on our bad work days. She and Fred are getting divorced. I think about that. And about Gabriel's eyes. They are burned into my brain. For weeks after Tyler's baptism they were in my dreams and in my daytime reveries on the bus on the way to work, and in the silent moments at home, when Gerry wasn't talking to me. I still see them.

This sounds so awful. Of course, I like going out with Gerry for coffee, and the other things we do. I don't want to tinker with our relationship now. But no matter how hard I try to stop myself, part of me wants to believe that when we go to that French restaurant again, it'll be because we're celebrating something else besides our anniversary,

something that points to a future we've imagined, not to a past we've survived. To something good that might happen.