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University of Alberta

Dumbsaints

by

Ernst Gerhardt

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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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Dumbsaints* submitted by Ernst Gerhardt in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Prof. Greg Hollingshead

Prof. Harry Klumpenhouwer

Prof. Ian MacLaren

September 25, 2001

For Alice

Abstract

Dumbsaints is a collection of five short stories, each of which depicts characters struggling to deal with the situations and effects of accidental and comic environments. Central to the stories is their treatment of the barriers to communication faced by the characters and the portrayal of the overcoming of these barriers.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Greg Hollingshead for the invaluable insight and advice he provided me while I worked on these stories.

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Any acknowledgement of my family must fall short of my true gratitude to them for their consistent encouragement of, and interest in, my work.

And Alice deserves thanks for everything.

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Logocarp

I can see him through the window. He's standing in a parallelogram of yellow light at the back of the house, in what must be the dining area, and he's talking, Flanagan's always talking, here's one thing you've got to know about Flanagan: he can't go longer than twelve seconds without saying something; he can't stay quiet. He's standing there pointing and talking, it must be to Heather, through the doorway. He doesn't see me, and he goes back through the doorway, probably into the kitchen. Sylvia raps on their door for the third time, and I say, "Maybe there's no one home. We should go."

She knocks again and says, "They're expecting us."

Flanagan backs through the doorway, still talking. He jabs his finger in the air and tosses a dishtowel through the door. He turns and sees me so he waves. He's balding, and his stomach hangs out over his belt, and he wears a pale blue button-up shirt, the top two buttons open. Flanagan hasn't bought a new shirt in years, he's told me this four times, and he considers this a fact that flatters both his physique and his economic sense. And I'll give him this much: the necks and arms of all his shirts still

fit nicely. But the fronts of them are tight, tight, tarped across his Niagara belly, which rolls over his belt. His trousers, too, are years old and faded along the creases. He cinches his belt tightly around his hips and buttocks, and he clips his hair short with shears he asked for, and got, from Heather one Christmas. The thing you've got to watch about Flanagan is his face: it's round and pink like a cherub's, and he uses it to get you off guard. You're never sure if he's sincere or not, and I suppose that causes him problems as a pastor. I don't wave back, there's no sense in that. I turn and join Sylvia at the doorstep.

"You hear?" Sylvia says, triumphantly. Flanagan's stomping through the house. "Someone's home."

Flanagan opens the door.

"Hello, hello," he says. "Come on in. What's this?" He takes the package from Sylvia and holds it to his ear. "A bomb?"

"Ha, ha," I say from behind Sylvia. "You're on to us, Flanagan. Don't shake it."

Sylvia says, "A gift. For your new home."

Flanagan sets the package on the floor behind him and steps back to allow Sylvia inside. He wraps his arms around her, his pink fingers spread against her ribs. "It's been *sooo* long," he sings.

I wait on the doorstep. "Hey, good to see you," I say.

Flanagan peers at me over Sylvia's shoulder and closes his eyes as if he's concentrating so hard on this one hug, as if he's got to communicate something monumental to my wife through his fat belly. After a moment, he lets her go and

moves out of the doorway to let me in. "Andy," he says, extending his hand. I grasp it as firmly as I can and shake it vigorously.

"You're looking fit and trim," I tell him.

He nods, then turns toward the back of the house and barks, "Honey, they're here."

* * *

My boss, it turned out, had known about my chart for months. More than known about it. One morning I came to work, and he was sitting at my desk, typing away at my computer. He rose sheepishly, which is not like Reuben at all.

"This is, ahh," he said, "quite interesting. This chart you've got. Very clever: correlating your long distance phone costs with the duration of your marital disputes."

I set my briefcase on the chair by the door and hung my coat. I had to gauge how I should respond. Reuben, depending on his mood, could harangue me or get therapeutic on me.

"You sure possess a mind for numbers," he said. He chuckled. "Guess that's why I hired you."

I shrugged. There was a silence. Reuben looked thoughtful, as if considering some deep philosophical point. I said nothing. Conversations with Reuben typically went this way: you thought they might be over, but then he'd pick them up again after an average time of one minute and thirty-nine seconds. I'd learned to wait. After two minutes, ten seconds, he glanced around the office, as if he was paranoid. This was a new tic. I looked around, too.

"Andy," he whispered, "I'm not sure that you're entirely aware of the situation here. You're missing the big picture. I blame myself for that. Come into my office. I've got something to show you. I've a confession to make."

Reuben walked over to me and placed his arm around my shoulders, all father-like. "Come on," he said. He squeezed my shoulder and guided me into his office. He led me to the chair in front of his desk, and I sat. He closed the door and, stroking his chin like a wise man, strolled around his desk and flicked the radio on, turning the volume up, just like a spy in a TV special. He rested his hands on his chairback, palms up—he's told me that this gesture signifies, "I'm open, trust me"—and looked hard at me. He was making me nervous.

"As I said," he continued, "I'm concerned that you aren't seeing the big picture. You come to work, you work conscientiously and professionally, you go home, and you live your life with Sylvia. At times you are happy, and other times you are not. At times you two fight, but mostly you two are at peace. Sometimes, though, you are unhappy enough to dwell on your problems, and so you have concocted this statistical scheme that, from a therapeutic perspective, helps you to translate your problems into a realm in which you are quite competent and comfortable."

Reuben put his hands together, as if praying, and put them to his lips. "This is my confession, Andy: this morning is not the first time I've looked at your chart. In fact, I've studied your chart with a great deal of care for some time now."

"Why?"

Reuben stared over my shoulder for a moment. "I don't generally speak of this to people," Reuben began. "But I've had a revelation. Practically religious." He cleared his throat. "Everything, Andy, absolutely everything is connected to everything else. If not directly, then indirectly, through an intermediary. I look for these connections." He paused: twenty-one seconds. "Have you ever heard of Logocarp?"

"No."

Reuben nodded. He said, "These connections are everywhere, Andy, flying around us, thin and fine as spider webs." He waved his hands around his head as if he was swatting flies. "Sometimes you can't see them, can't feel them. You, my dear Andy, and your wife—are you ready for this?—are connected—intimately, I should add—to Logocarp."

I stared at Reuben blankly.

"More specifically, to their stock price."

"Logocarp?"

"A biotech company. Very complicated stuff they're involved in.

"Carp or corp?"

"Look, Andy, it's too complex to get into. Carp. Genetics and whatnot."

"I'm not quite following you."

"Andy, what they do isn't important. Not at all. I'm not even totally sure. It doesn't matter. What matters is this." Reuben pulled my chart from his desk drawer. "Here's the graph you've made up." Reuben spread it on the desk and then laid a transparency showing a different graph over it. The lines matched almost exactly. "It

took me some time to come up with this, but I had some help from my investor's club. They're a smart bunch, those guys. Anyway, this is the stock price of Logocarp." He shook the transparency. "As you can see, whenever your marriage staggers a bit, the stock rises. Actually, Andy, your marriage seems correlated to the entire biotech sector. Not as perfectly as with Logocarp, but I've worked out a co-efficient that functions, for the most part, to correct the difference. Your marriage is what we like to call a 'prime indicator.'"

"My marriage?"

"Well. Yes, but 'marriage' is too baggy a word. Too saggy. The same goes for 'relationship.' What do they *really* signify? We need—but you *know* this, Andy, why am I telling you?—some sign that's tangible, something quantifiable. Like this." He traced the graph with his finger and tapped a specific point on it. "You see? Here's an argument that you two had and that Sylvia did not bother to follow up with a phone call. Logocarp's stock rose only slightly, relative to the length of the argument. But here—you see this?—here Sylvia *did* make a phone call to this Calgary number—it's always the same one, Andy—and Logocarp's price rose substantially. In a matter of hours, just after the market opened. In *one* day, Andy." Reuben was excited now, and he pounded the desk with each syllable. "By a factor related to the product of the durations of your argument and the phone call." Reuben smiled from ear to ear. He was positively gleeful. I stared at him. "And," he continued, practically vibrating with excitement, "the phone call indicator seems to function exponentially across time. The first calls didn't do much to Logocarp's shares, but the latest ones are extremely high value-added indicators."

"And these drops in value?" I asked, stabbing the graph.

"We're not positive yet, but we, umm, think they're correlated to the duration of, how shall I put this? The bedroom activities?"

"And how would you know that?"

Reuben shrugged his shoulders and lifted his hands, palms up. "Andy. We're a resourceful group. And an interested group. A motivated group." He chuckled. "It turns out that we happen to own a lot of shares in Logocarp. An awful lot." Now Reuben laughed, a good belly laugh. "Thank goodness," he said, "you're so, hmm, how can I say this? Impatient?"

* * *

Flanagan's wife is reaching for my coat. "Let me take that for you," she says. I turn my back to her and shrug my coat into her hands. "It's so good to see you," she says. "Leave your bags at the door. Flanagan will bring them in later."

"Thanks," I say. "But they're in the car. Nice to see you, too."

Sylvia is saying to Flanagan, "You look great. Wonderful."

"You too, Sylvia."

"Let me have your coat," Flanagan's wife tells Sylvia.

"Dinner's not quite ready," Flanagan says. "Have a seat in the living room. Heather will get you a drink."

"Orange juice, milk, or water?" Heather asks.

"Water," I say.

"Me too," says Sylvia. We move into the living room. "We brought you a house-warming gift," Sylvia announces.

We bought them a clock at a farmer's market on the way south from Edmonton. Actually, Sylvia bought it. I waited outside. Some old women were talking about fires.

"I told him," one said, "'Your fire's going out.' 'Uh-huh,' he says. 'Aren't you going to stoke it,' I ask. 'Mmmm,' he says. That's it. That's all he says."

The other women were quiet, considering. I moved closer, interested. But they didn't say anything more, so I went and sat in the car.

When Sylvia found me there, she had the clock. It's a mantle-clock, looks like a head and shoulders draped in a cloak, has a yellow face—yellow like age. A round piece of glass is hinged in front of its face, and there's a small hole where you insert a key to wind it.

"Nice," I said.

"Someone's house burned down," Sylvia told me. "They rescued this, somehow."

"How much?"

"Eighty dollars."

I started the car.

"It'll be a nice house-warming gift for them," Sylvia added.

I backed the car out of the stall. When I got to the road, I stomped on the gas, spinning gravel out behind us.

"Don't start," Sylvia warned. "It's only eighty dollars."

"Mmmm."

"What?"

"Do *we* have a clock worth eighty bucks?"

"Don't be cheap," she said. Flanagan's her friend, her old boyfriend from Bible college. We support his ministry with a donation each month, and, in return, Flanagan sends woe-is-me bi-monthly newsletters.

"Can we get a tax receipt for it?"

"Watch the road, Andy." She pulled a book from her bag and began to read.

After a while I said, "Read to me."

"You wouldn't like it. Poetry."

"Oh."

Usually I don't have time for poetry. Sylvia always tells me that you've got to be patient when you read poetry. Don't skim, don't go too fast. Read each word. Say it slowly in your head, as if you're wrapping your tongue around it. Like a cherry stem, like that old trick. Hearing it read aloud helps, Sylvia says.

* * *

We get the tour of the house, Flanagan leading us from room to room, proud as a peacock, his chest thrust out, his belly leading the way, and Heather comments every now and then about their plans for baseboards or wainscoting. Every room, except for the kitchen, the living room, and their bedroom, is empty. "We spent all our money on the house," she says, shrugging. "Nothing left for anything else."

She's very thin, one hundred and twenty-one pounds, five nine and attractive in a way that I can't figure out. Her hair is limp, a lighter colour than I remember it being last time, cut parallel to her jaw, and she's wearing denim overalls and a tight grey T-shirt underneath those. She moves her head like a bird, quick and short

thrusts, and jabs her chin out to emphasize a point. Her fingers are long and bone narrow and end in what seems to me exceedingly long hands with flat palms.

Flanagan says, "What can you do? You can't have everything."

"We're saving, though," Heather adds.

Flanagan points to a door opposite the master bedroom. "That'll be the guest room. It's full of stuff right now. You two'll have to sleep in the living room. There's the couch—not a hide-a-way, sorry. We've got an air mattress that one of you can have."

"Great," I say, opening the door to look inside. The room is full of Amway boxes, piled neatly, almost to the ceiling.

Flanagan grabs the doorknob and pulls the door closed.

"Don't be so nosy, Andy," Sylvia says, slapping my arm.

"It's alright," says Heather.

"Over here," Flanagan announces triumphantly, throwing open another door. "will be the baby's room."

Sylvia gasps. She turns to Heather and asks, "You're pregnant?"

Heather glances at Flanagan, shoots him a remonstrative look. She fiddles with her hands in front of her chest as if she's washing them. She says to Sylvia, "As you probably know, we're trying."

"Oh," I say, "good for you. Keep up the good work, Flanagan."

* * *

"Another thing, Andy," Reuben said. He waited eleven seconds. "We think there's another party interested in you two. An American firm. Based in Montana, we think."

"Oh?"

"Yes. We think they're planning a take-over of Logocarp. The stock price's quite high right now." He nodded his head, raised his eyebrows.

"So?"

"So?" Reuben shouted. "Think a little bit." He lowered his voice. "Sorry, Andy. But use your head. They'll want the price to drop. They're in direct conflict with our interests."

I stared at him. Reuben smiled back at me, tapping his fingertips together in front of his face. He rose from his chair.

"Oh," he said. "One more thing, Andy. This number Sylvia calls: do you know who it is?"

"Yes," I said. "We're visiting him in a couple of weeks."

Reuben smiled and extended his hand across his desk. I reached out and shook it. "Keep me posted," he said.

* * *

For dinner it's undercooked chicken, red sloppy rubber near the bone. Flanagan's talking so much he hasn't touched his yet, he doesn't realize that it's raw. On Heather's plate, she's only got a small piece that she's working on, slicing tiny bits off and forking them delicately into her mouth, so maybe hers is done. She catches me watching her, and she smiles at me. I smile back and then eat some

potatoes. No way am I going to eat that chicken. I push it to the edge of my plate. Sylvia's paying attention to Flanagan so she doesn't see me try to catch her eye, and she keeps dropping tiny pieces of salmonella into her mouth one after the other.

It strikes me that this is just what he would do: serve us poison. Flanagan's so proud: he cooked the chicken himself and had to tell us that three times before we sat down. Right now he's slashing his drumstick in the air like he's a professor chalking a formula on the board, and this is what he's going on about: "'Watch out for it,' I tell them. 'It'll bite you both in the butt.' But do they care? They're in love. Everything's perfect. I see some a year or two later, and, guess what? They're struggling to stay together."

He chomps into that drumstick and chews it thoughtfully, his jaw clacking. Noise noise noise. He thinks he's got the whole world pegged.

"I think you're on to something, Flanagan," I say. "It is the root of all evil, after all."

He looks at me, studies me, nodding. He stops chewing, looks at his drumstick. "This isn't done," he says, shocked.

Heather gets a worried expression on her face and half rises in her seat, peering at our plates. "Mine's done," she says. "Andy?"

"It's fine," Sylvia says, looking my way. She's so polite she'd say anything.

"Mine's a little rare," I say.

"I can't believe it," Flanagan says. "I cooked that bird for a good hour and a half."

"I think maybe you're trying to get rid of us or something," I tell him.

"No, no," he sputters. "I'm awfully sorry. I just can't believe it. I feel terrible." He says it just like his high-school drama teacher taught him. Sylvia claims he's a genuine, sincere man who has the unfortunate condition of carrying himself in an affected manner. I don't buy that: he's out and out an actor.

"Don't worry about it," Sylvia tells him. "It's good." She takes another bite of her chicken.

"What are you doing?" I ask her.

She looks at me warningly. As if I'm causing the problem here. As if I'm the one who's attempting to kill us.

At least the raw chicken slows Flanagan's mouth for the rest of dinner.

* * *

I sat at my desk for a while, unable to work. Reuben had closed his door, a solid oak door with a brass knob, and I sat numbly staring at it, following the grain's pattern with my eyes. It was difficult to believe what he had told me.

But then I became angry. I couldn't believe what was going on: my boss and other people were making money off me and my wife.

And then it hit me. Sylvia and I had salted some money away; we were hoping to buy a house in the next few years. It wasn't much, but it was definitely a start. I could invest it. I could grow that money faster than we'd hoped. I rapped on Reuben's door.

He opened it. "Yes?"

"I'm distraught," I said.

"Pardon?"

I looked around, conspirationally. "That confession you shared earlier," I whispered. "It's causing me distress."

Reuben looked at me quizzically.

"I think I need the day off," I said.

"Andy," he said. "We're going to be busy today. I don't think—"

I became angrier. "I think I need a raise, too," I said, raising my voice. "And an advance on it. Cash."

"Andy, what are you trying to pull here?"

"Nothing. I'm just telling you I'm distressed. By my work load and my low pay. I might have to seek," I paused dramatically and walked to my desk.

He followed me. "What?"

"Personal counselling." I winked. "And marital."

Reuben's face paled. "You wouldn't jeopardize," he sputtered. He couldn't finish his sentence.

I shrugged.

"Fine," he said. "Take the rest of the day off."

"The advance?"

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed me some bills.

"Thanks," I said. "See you tomorrow. Bright and early."

I left for the bank.

* * *

After dinner we drive out for ice cream and, once everyone's got their cones, Heather says, "Do you two want to drive around, have a look at some houses?"

"Heather," Flanagan says, warningly.

"Sure," I say.

"Why not?" Sylvia says.

"Great. I know just the neighbourhood. Huge houses. You won't believe them." She says to Flanagan, "I'll drive."

Flanagan shrugs his shoulders.

In the car, everyone's pretty quiet. There's a slight drizzle, and the wipers flick across the windshield in long intervals. Heather's intent on getting us where she wants us to be, leaning forward at intersections, trying to read the street signs. At the intersection she wants, she banks left onto a dark street.

"Wait'll you see these houses," she says.

Along the street, large houses loom. Most of them are well-lit by porch and garage lights. Some have picture windows with lights on inside. It seems that nobody's at home in any of them.

"They're all empty," Sylvia says.

"No," Heather replies. "Everyone's just out for the evening. Oh, look at that one. Can you believe it?"

"Wow," I say. I like looking at houses, imagining living in them. It gives me a crazy feeling, an erotic feeling.

"Wouldn't you like to live there?" Heather asks.

"Who wouldn't?" Flanagan says, a little hostile.

"Lots of money here," Heather continues, ignoring Flanagan. "Where's it all come from?"

"Makes you feel a little ill, doesn't it?" Sylvia says. "All that money."

"Only if you have no ambition," Heather says.

"I feel like a ghost," I say. "Like we don't exist."

"That's weird," Sylvia says.

"I'm about all housed out," Flanagan announces. "Let's go."

* * *

Back at Flanagan and Heather's, I go out to get our bags from our car. A vehicle approaches, its headlights throwing my shadow into the trunk. I hear it slow, so I turn. It's a black Mercedes, with two men in it, their eyes straight ahead as if they don't see me. The passenger says something, and the driver nods. The window slides down, and the passenger bends forward; the top of his head looks like a muzzle of a cannon. I stand there, thinking that this is from a movie or something. As the car passes me, the guy lobs an object from the window. I duck behind my car and hear whatever the guy tossed crash through the branches of the huge pine in Flanagan's yard. I peek from behind the back wheel, and the Mercedes, with Montana plates, brakes and then, squealing its tires, turns at the corner.

I stand and dust my knees off. I look back at the house, and, between the branches of the tree, I can see Flanagan, Heather, and Sylvia sitting in the living room. Beneath the tree, there's a rectangular package wrapped in butcher paper. I crawl in under the branches—there's mounds of dead needles Flanagan needs to clean up, the lazy arse. I pick up the package, and it flops in my hand like a paperback. In black marker there's writing on the paper: "To Andy, With Love, 314159 Montana

Ltd." I pull the tape from the edges of the paper and open the package. It's a book: *Tantric Sex: Your Beloved and You.*

I'm flipping through it when Flanagan comes out and calls me. I wait for a bit, hoping he'll go back in. "Andy," he says. "I can see you." Flanagan—eyes like an eagle.

"Oh," I say. I jam the book into my back pocket and crawl out. We stare at each other for a long time. "You ever check those roots to see whether they're clogging your sewer hook-up?" I ask finally, pointing at the pine.

He looks puzzled. "No. Not yet, I mean," he says.

"I'd get on that right away, Flanagan. This pine's too close to the house. You'd better keep an eye on it. Could be an ugly mess, those roots."

He shakes his head, goes back inside.

* * *

When I come back with the bags, Flanagan and Sylvia are laughing, and Heather is setting mugs of coffee in front of them. I look at my watch. It's eleven, and I'm getting tired. I sit down in a chair across from the couch, and Heather sits on the sofa beside Flanagan.

"Well," Heather says. "Here's our coffee." She takes a deep breath, releases it audibly. "Those were some houses," she says and takes a sip from her mug.

Nobody says anything. Finally I say, "They sure were."

"Wouldn't you want to live in one?"

"Of course," I say. I'm watching Flanagan, who is staring at Sylvia, his mouth drawn. Sylvia's looking out the window. "If we had the money. Which we don't and probably won't."

"We vote N.D.P.," Sylvia adds, looking back at Heather.

"Don't get me started," Flanagan laughs.

"We're trying not to," I say.

"But those homes," Heather continues. "So beautiful." She shakes her head. She puckers her lips and sips her coffee. She sets the mug down on the coffee table. "What would you do with a million bucks?"

"I'd bring back Ed Broadbent," I say, looking at Sylvia, hoping that she'll smile. "Buy him some nice suits, set him up with some slick advisors."

"Heather," says Flanagan.

"We'd buy a house," Sylvia says. "Buy a house, give some money to our family."

"Why? Did you win a million dollars?" I ask.

Heather looks at me, takes a deep breath. "We're good friends," she begins. She pauses for dramatic effect and looks at Flanagan, who is staring at the carpet, fiddling with his hands. "Flanagan and I," she continues, "have found something—"

"Heather," Flanagan says again.

"We've found something truly amazing."

There's silence.

"Life changing?" I ask.

"Truly. We wouldn't be doing our duty to you—" she gulps. "As friends. If we didn't tell you about it."

Sylvia and I look uneasily at one another.

"Flanagan and I have started a business together."

"That's exciting," says Sylvia, unenthusiastically.

Heather pulls, from beneath the couch, a long, narrow cardboard filing box. She opens it and presents Sylvia with a glossy brochure. She flips it open, points out pictures of many people in front of wonderfully large houses.

"These people belong to the Millionaire Club," she explains. "They've sold over a million dollars worth of product."

"Heather," Flanagan interrupts. "I don't think either Sylvia or Andy is interested."

"Oh," Heather says. "But—"

Sylvia mouths "Thank you" at Flanagan.

I say, "I'm interested."

"See," Heather says.

"What do you think?" Flanagan asks Sylvia. "You want to hear this out?"

Sylvia shrugs.

"Maybe we should leave these two together. Let them make plans for the future. We can have a look at the basement. I can show you what I'm planning down there."

"Sounds good."

The two of them get up and go downstairs.

* * *

Heather speaks precisely: her thin lips, like pruning shears, clipping each word, tight. As if her tongue, narrow and quick, is plucking marbles from a milk bottle, flicking them from the edge of her tongue, tack, tack, onto hardwood. I'm not listening to what she's saying, only how she's saying it. I imagine her tongue, dry and warm, flicking across my chest.

"Say 'torque,'" I say, interrupting her.

"What?"

"Lickety-split. Valediction. Teleology."

"Pardon?"

"Duckie. Tricky dicky. Please."

We stare at each other, listen to Flanagan and Sylvia laughing downstairs. I look toward the doorway. I stand, walk over to it. Stare down it for twelve seconds. I turn back to Heather. She's sitting on the couch, staring vacantly at the doorway, her brochures clutched to her chest. She strokes them, gently runs her fingers along the edge of them. Her hands are too large, I think, and dry and ugly. "You're really quite pretty," I tell her.

She looks at me as if I've hurt her. She stands and drops her pamphlets, which land with a thud, onto the coffee table. "Fuck," she says, shaking her head, "fuckety fuck fuck."

* * *

I wake to a rhythmic tapping against the wall. Heather and Flanagan are making love. It angers me that they have so little concern for us that they can go

about doing this as if we aren't even here, and Flanagan, Flanagan—I see him rooting around on top of Heather like a rabbit. I rise from my sleeping bag. I have to wake Sylvia and let her hear Flanagan and Heather together, hear their baby-making. And I have to tell her about us and Logocarp, about our future, our potential.

But when I touch her shoulder, she's awake already, and she whirls over on the couch and stares up at me, her eyes dark with tears. Startled, I step back and topple over the coffee table. Heather's pamphlets scatter like leaves across the carpet. Flanagan and Heather stop. Sylvia watches me, but my tongue is tied. I don't know how long she's been crying. I don't know how to say any words that will mean something to her. She rolls over, faces the back of the couch again, and I lie back on the floor, my elbows carpet burned.

And then Flanagan mumbles something to Heather, and the two of them begin again, just as if we aren't there.

The Second Coming

The aloe vera's flames had scorched the living room ceiling and blackened the wall. It rested in its red pot beside Mason's chair, shooting orange flames to the ceiling. Mason started from his seat and flung down his book. "Wha?" he shouted, weaving, panic-stricken, in front of the plant and waving his hands. "Dixie! Look at this!"

Dixie turned from the television set and gazed at her husband. "It's been like that for a while," she said and turned back to the TV. "I tell you about it every day. You never listen."

Mason looked at his wife, then turned back to the plant. Calming himself, he stepped closer to it. He held his hands out: surprisingly, it threw little heat. Kneeling, he inspected it more closely. White-speckled leaves fanned from a central stalk, and a new spear was sprouting from the top. The flames sparked from the tiny hooks that edged the long, slender leaves.

"It's still green," Mason said. "And it's still growing."

"I *water* it," Dixie said.

Mason grunted. He went to the kitchen sink and filled a tin watering can. When he returned to the living room, Dixie was staring at the aloe vera. Mason could see the orange flames reflected in her eyes.

"I told you, I water it. Yesterday, even," she said, pointing at the watering can.

"But the fire?" Mason asked, a little sarcastically.

"Water doesn't do anything to it." She cocked her head. "Hey, can you hear something?"

"Nope." Mason poured the water on the plant. The soil hissed and steamed. The flames flickered, then shrank.

Mason pointed at the plant. "See?"

"Wait. Give it a minute," Dixie said. "Hear that? Sounds like 'Hey baby.'"

"What?"

"Hey baby hey baby hey baby hey baby," Dixie chanted. "Like that."

"Don't hear it." Mason lifted his right foot out of the water that was spreading on the floor.

"You must be deaf." Dixie turned back to the TV. The screen went blank, then flashed blue. The picture tube popped and crackled. Dixie prodded the buttons on the remote.

"I'm still waiting," Mason sung.

A blue spark shot up from the aloe vera. Then another and another until a solid tongue of blue flame lapped the ceiling.

"Hah!" Dixie said. She did a double-take at the plant. "Great. Now you've made it go electric." She dropped the remote and glared at Mason.

Mason pulled off his wet socks. He went to the kitchen and returned with two boxes of baking soda. He sprinkled the soda liberally on the plant, until it heaped on the leaves and soil like snow. The blue flame continued to lap at the ceiling. Mason's shoulders slumped.

Dixie cocked her head. "You sure you don't hear anything?"

"Positive."

Back in the kitchen, Mason put on rubber gloves and, over those, oven mitts. He hurried to the apartment door and stepped into his rubber boots. He opened the door, stuck his head into the hallway to see if anyone was there. It was empty. Trotting back to the living room, he saw Dixie nodding her head as if she were keeping time. She was murmuring, "Hey baby hey baby hey baby."

"I'm going to try and take this thing outside," Mason said. He shook his hands, shrugged his shoulders, trying to loosen his muscles. He snatched the aloe vera's pot, but he couldn't lift it. It was, it seemed, rooted in place. He let go and looked at Dixie. "How long has this been going on?"

"Years."

"Oh." He threw off the mitts and gloves, picked up his book and sat down. "So it should be OK if we leave it."

Dixie shrugged. "I suppose."

* * *

Because Mason looked a lot like Elvis, he wore a white sequinned jump-suit and large sunglasses to work on Saturdays. He wandered the car lot, greeting customers and informing them of the advantages of this model over that. At noon and at 3:00, he performed on the back of a flat-deck trailer, grinding his hips, singing a few of the king's greatest hits. The customers watched, munching free hot dogs. For the last song of his set, he did his rendition of "Hound Dog," made famous by the lot's TV advertisements. "You ain't never bought a Rabbit," he shouted, winking at the crowd, and canting his hips. "So you ain't no friend of mine."

* * *

Every morning, Mason drove across the bridge to work, heading south over the North Saskatchewan River.

One particular morning, Dixie slipped out of the apartment under the pretense of having to buy floss at the corner store. However, once out of the apartment and on the street, she hustled past the store and scurried to the bridge, glancing often over her shoulder. She was wearing Mason's jump-suit beneath her coat.

When Mason drove to work, he didn't notice her; he drove past her without a glance.

A television crew that happened to be passing through the neighbourhood in a beige van did notice, however. How could they not?

Dixie clung to the side of the bridge, her arms outstretched and her pale, thin fingers hooked around the black mesh fencing. Her heels were jammed against the concrete as she leaned forward over the river. Like an icon she hung there: her head

dangled limply between her shoulder blades, her thin brown hair fallen forward, covering her face.

The van skidded to a halt, and a slim, blond reporter dropped from the passenger door, her red high heels clicking neatly. She trotted toward Dixie, but her left ankle twisted, and she fell, tearing her nylons, skinning her right knee, and she cried out in pain. Dixie heard this and lifted her head slowly.

Tears rolled down both sides of her thin nose and dropped over the high, sharp ridges of her cheekbones. The tears streaked through her rouged cheeks and dropped, red, through the air to the river.

The cameraman, a squat man with a rather square head jammed beneath a black baseball cap, caught Dixie's action on film; he smiled and murmured, "Oh yeah baby that's good."

Dixie puckered her lips and said something, but neither the reporter nor the cameraman heard it. In fact, the reporter thought that Dixie had blown them both a kiss.

"Are you getting this?" she asked the cameraman.

"Oh yeah," he said, grinning.

Dixie clambered over the fence to the bridge's sidewalk. Wiping her eyes, she gazed south. She picked her coat up off the ground and shrugged it over her shoulders. Hearing the quick clicks of the approaching reporter's heels, she turned.

The reporter shoved a microphone close to Dixie's lips.

"Are you OK? What were you doing?" asked the reporter, brushing her hair from her eyes.

Dixie thought a moment. "I don't really know what to say," she said, finally. "What would Elvis say, do you think?"

The question stumped the reporter, and Dixie walked away.

That night, the question from the TV caught Mason's attention, and he looked up from his book. He saw Dixie on TV.

"Is that you?" he asked.

"It was," answered Dixie, already flicking the channel.

* * *

Dixie heard Mason come in the door. She heard him drop his keys onto the table. He groaned as he bent to unlace his boots. She heard them hit the floor. He tromped down the hallway and opened a cupboard in the kitchen. She heard it slam: he never eased cupboards closed. The refrigerator opened, and she heard a can of beer scrape along the wire shelf. She heard the hiss and snap of the beer's release, of the can cracking open. She heard him pour the beer into the glass.

She did not move. She watched the television, nothing in particular, just flicking through the channels. She looked out the window above the TV: it was dark outside. She saw the streetlights glowing yellow.

She heard him come into the room. She saw his reflection in the TV: he was wearing his white jump-suit. He sipped his beer. He looked around the room. He paused, stared at the phone which she had taken off the hook. He brought the handset to his ear, then placed it in the cradle. "At least," he muttered, "she could just unplug it. Then I'd get the messages." He set his beer on the coffee table. He left. She heard him open the closet in their bedroom.

He returned, wearing his pyjamas: cutoff sweats and an old T-shirt. He sat across from her, picked up a book from the coffee table. He began to read.

"Love me," Dixie whispered.

"What?"

Dixie stood. "Love me," she repeated. She ground her hips.

Mason stood and looked at her. She stepped closer to him and put her hands on his hips. Her lips brushed against his ear. Her hips pushed against his, moved away, ground against him again. Together, they gyrated around the living room, her hips controlling their movement.

Mason pulled her closer.

"Tender," Dixie whispered.

Mason slipped his hand beneath her shirt, and his fingers skimmed across her back, tracing circles. "I'll be gentle," he said.

She stepped suddenly away from him, her hips still rolling. Her eyes closed, she unclasped the button of her jeans. The aloe vera flared. "No," she murmured. "Tender."

Her jeans slipped to the floor. Her underwear glittered, reflected the electric flame of the aloe vera: she had sequinned her panties.

And then, for the first time, Mason heard it. The buzz Dixie had spoken of, the cyclic hum that came from their electric aloe vera.

"Tender," Dixie whispered.

Mason froze. "This is crazy. Dixie—"

"No," Dixie shouted. "No. Not Dixie—"

There was a blinding flash of light. Mason went limp and crashed to the floor. When he woke, his eyes and head ached. The room was silent, and the aloe vera sat very still in its pot, cool and green. He stood slowly and stumbled down the hallway to the bedroom, calling Dixie's name.

* * *

The hotel room is small and dirty, has three stained yellow walls. The fourth is covered with about eighty gold-flecked, mirrored squares, each a square foot in area. Mason watches himself move, naked, around the room, a bottle of rye in his hand.

The room cost him fifty dollars a night. American. There is orange shag carpet on the floor, and two pieces of dog crap the size of his ring finger lie beneath the bed.

One reason Mason chose this hotel is that it has a riverboat prow attached to one side, a paddlewheel on the other. Mason is partial to riverboats. But the main reason is that the sign in the parking lot reads: SO YOU WANT TO BE THE KING? AMATEUR NITE TONITE OPEN STAGE 8-12 $1.99 BUFFET.

For some time after Dixie's disappearance, Mason was uncertain of what to do. But four nights ago, sitting beside the dead aloe vera, Mason made up his mind. He'd give up fixing cars, give up selling them. He chose, in his words, to do something *real*. He'd start small and work his way up to the big time.

Mason looks at his watch and decides that it is time. He begins carefully, gently tugging the zipper of his garment bag down and lifting the sequinned white jump-suit from its hanger. He steps into it, and a thrill shoots from the base of his

spine to the short hairs on the back of his neck. He wraps the white belt around his stomach and fastens the diamond studded buckle. He slips his feet into the white boots that he'd shined to perfection that afternoon.

For a few minutes, he shimmies and shakes in front of the mirrored wall. He turns around, wriggles his ass, curls his lip and breathes, "Uh-huh ooh yeh thenk ya vey much." He tugs at his collar, puts on large dark glasses. He shouts, "That's one for the money!" He smiles at himself in the mirror.

Mason walks out into the hall and takes the elevator to the basement. The doors open, and he steps out of the elevator into a long polished hallway, crowded with men in white sequinned jump-suits. Someone's version of "Hound Dog" echoes in the hall.

Mason saunters over to one of these men. "Friend," Mason drawls, "you ever catch a rabbit?"

The man laughs.

Mason does, too. He thinks, "Yep, I'm starting small, but I'm working my way up to the big time."

* * *

She leaps from the dune in the direction of the fireworks. The dune, on its leeward side, drops sharply and then gradually levels out. In all, she falls five metres through the dry air. She lands, barefoot, in white and fine sand that is still warm from the day's heat. She backs up the slope, stumbling, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

The fireworks are a long way off, and there is no noise except for the whisper of her breath and the rustle of her feet in the sand. Just above the glow of the city, the

fireworks burst, red flares streaking out from the central circle of the explosion. Like puckered ruby lips, like a blown kiss. Other streamers arch up, flecking the midnight sky like golden fingernails rubbed across black bricks. She imagines she could hold the green bursts in her cupped hands, a flock of sparrows, maybe, spherical and expanding, her arms flung out by their force.

As she reaches the top of the dune again, the fireworks cease. She gasps for breath, staring eastward, her chest heaving. A star appears in place of the fireworks. She gazes intently at it. It seems to pulse, to glimmer. Another star appears above the first, and another and another. Her eyes climb upward, leaping from star to star until she is looking directly above herself at a cloudy haze of light, a dense clutter of stars.

She feels herself telescoping up and up. She sees the cloud separate into a million discrete bits of light, and it flashes across her brain that she can feel every grain of sand that sifts between her toes, every individual grain's edges and corners beneath her soles and around her ankles.

Her lips quiver, bend slowly into one form and then another. She doesn't understand what she's saying. She doesn't know her own name, doesn't know where she is, or how she got there. She lies down. And waits.

House

At Kamloops they stopped at a Safeway that was about to close. They bought a hand of bananas, two oranges, two coffees, a loaf of bread, and sandwich meat. In the car, she assembled sandwiches on her lap. Daniel drove. They ate them quietly, angrily. She offered him a banana, and he ate it. When she had finished her own, she rolled down the window.

"You're not tossing the peel out the window, I hope," Daniel said.

Elspeth turned and looked at him.

"It's illegal," he said.

"Oh, come on."

"I'm serious. Don't do it. I'll stop the car and wait till you go back and get it."

The dashboard lights glowed against his face, lighting the slant of his cheekbones. He seemed skeletal, she thought, and overwhelmingly tired, his eyes black and his cheeks sunken. It had been a tough trip: he'd had to take time off to make it, and they even had to dip into the meagre funds they were saving for a down

payment on a house. They might not have even gone if she hadn't been pregnant. Daniel had wanted her to break this news to her parents sometime over the course of the weekend. But she had not: her mother was in her glory ensuring that the wedding would go without a hitch, and Elspeth could not bring herself to break the gaiety with that kind of news.

Daniel leaned forward and lifted his coffee from the cup holder and sipped it. He glanced at Elspeth and shook his head. "I'm serious," he said again. "Don't."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head out the window. Her hair blew from her forehead, and she felt her ears reddening, numbing in the winter wind. She opened her eyes into it. The white line next to the car wavered. She knew this discussion was becoming serious for him. Everything became serious for him; everything had meaning, everything acquired weight and significance. He'd spoken impulsively, but she could see him working to elevate the tossing of the banana peel into an abstract principle. The law was on his side, after all.

She tossed the peel high into the air, toward the ditch. She turned in her seat to see it fall, but it was too dark outside. She looked at Daniel.

Daniel braked the car and turned onto the shoulder. "I'll wait," he said.

She sat, staring straight ahead. They both sat like that, silent, for twenty minutes. Elspeth said, finally, "We've got to work tomorrow, Dan."

Daniel shrugged his shoulders and switched radio stations. He drummed his fingertips against the wheel for a few minutes, but at last he got out of the car and lurched into the snow in the ditch. He disappeared in the darkness, and Elspeth slid over to the driver's seat.

When Daniel returned he tapped on the driver's window and held up the peel as if it was dead flesh. Elspeth smiled, tentatively. Daniel motioned for her to move over, but she shook her head. Daniel rolled his eyes and walked around to the passenger side.

"Fine," he said, lowering himself into the passenger seat. "You drive. I'll sleep."

* * *

An hour out of Edmonton, Elspeth turned south off the highway and then east down a roughly-paved road. Daniel woke and sleepily looked out the window. "Want me to drive?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

He nodded, staring ahead at the road, his eyes half-lidded. "Where are we?"

"Out by the lake," Elspeth said. "Almost home." She put her hand on Daniel's knee. "I got tired of highway driving."

In the summer they often drove out here, to the beach that rimmed the southern edge of the lake. On their days off they brought picnic lunches. Elspeth wanted to see the lake in the winter, walk on it. She liked this stretch of road: the pastureland on the south side and the houses, shaded by poplars, on the north.

The headlights washed across a realtor's sign. Elspeth slowed. The sign stood at the entrance to a drive that led, she knew, to a house that both she and Daniel had admired on their day trips. She slowed the car and parked in front of the sign. She shook Daniel. "Danny," she said and reached across him to open the glove compartment.

"Hmm?"

"That white house by the lake," Elspeth said as she rummaged in the glove compartment. She pulled out a pen and a notebook. "It's for sale." She jotted the agent's name, Paul Ades, and number in the book.

Daniel sighed. "We can't—"

"It might be fun just to look." Elspeth shrugged. "It can't hurt."

She got out of the car. The house stood at the top of a small rise, overlooking the lake to the north-east. A marsh skirted the base of the rise, bulrushes jabbing through the snow. The yard light lit the swath of packed snow that climbed from the road to the house. Lights burned in the windows, making the house shine, Elspeth thought, like a star.

She stood for some time watching the house. This past summer they'd talked about it, seriously, as if they could afford it, even then. They'd imagined the cool of the basement, the view it commanded of the lake, the garden out back. The pastoral setting attracted them: pastures stretching from their bedroom window, Holsteins grazing across the road. Once, they'd brought binoculars with them so they could inspect the house more closely, and Daniel had declared the shingles practically new—three years old at the most—and had verified that the siding was new, also. But—she smiled now at the thought of them seriously discussing this—it was too far from the city; the drive would become tiresome. They were better off looking in Edmonton.

Finally she turned. Daniel had reclaimed the driver's seat. She rapped on the window, and he rolled it down.

"Let's drive down to the lake, Daniel," she said.

Daniel looked at his watch and shook his head. "We'd better get home."

Elspeth turned back toward the house. Daniel got out and stood beside her. He put his arm around her. "Come on, babe. If we hurry, we can get some sleep, and I can cook us some breakfast before work."

* * *

Elspeth could hear the smack of Daniel's teeth suck away from the mash of meat loaf and carrots in his mouth. "Can't you chew quietly?" she asked.

He was leaning against the doorway of the spare bedroom, his plate resting on the palm of his hand, and his fork, heaped with potatoes, midway to his mouth. He stopped chewing and stared at her. "What?"

"You chew so loud I can't even think," she said. "Can't you eat in the kitchen?"

He swallowed. Elspeth could hear it. She cringed.

"No. Your stuff's all over the table."

She turned back to the desk. What he said was true. But still. "Do you have to watch me?"

"Touchy, touchy," he said and left. She heard him sit in the easy chair and flick on the television.

"Hey," she called. "Did you put the ad in the paper today?" She heard a voice calling play-by-play for a hockey game. She waited. "Daniel?"

"I forgot."

"We've got to sell it, Daniel. When the baby comes, we won't have room for it." She glared at the desk. Daniel had bought it cheaply from an ex-roommate, and he was reluctant to part with it. As a gift to him last year, she had, with the help of a co-worker, Rob, removed the desk from Daniel's apartment—solid oak, it weighed a ton—and taken it to Rob's garage. There she sanded a quarter inch from its entire surface, the fine dust choking her and coating the hairs on her arms. She stained the desk a deep burgundy to match one of Daniel's bookcases, and she fastened ornate handles to the drawers. Daniel wrote at this desk, or said he did, and she hoped refinishing it would encourage him in his writing. It did, but briefly. Now, with papers and bills flared across it and piles of books teetering on it, the desk seemed to be enlarging itself, as if it meant to engulf the entire room. "I'm going to call the Salvation Army to come get it," she called.

He didn't answer.

"Did you hear me?" she called.

"Yes," he said, quietly, startling her. He was standing behind her in the doorway. "I heard you."

"Good." She turned back to the desk, tossing a sheaf of paper into the garbage.

"Just let me know when you're calling," he said. "I'll give your folks a call right after."

Elspeth sighed. "It's not the same thing." She smiled, her lips tightly together. "Besides, they wouldn't believe you. They don't like you."

He shrugged, holding his hands, palms up, before him. "That's why—"

"It's not even any of their business, Daniel."

"I'm not asking much."

She shook her head. "Unbelievable," she muttered.

"Elsie. Come on. We agreed."

She shook her head. He didn't even realize how belligerent his smugness was. "You're always so righteous," she said.

"That's not fair."

"No?" She swept her arm around the room. "This is your mess. You deal with it." She pushed past him. At the apartment door she grabbed her coat.

"Where are you going?" Daniel called after her.

"Out."

She drove to a Tim Horton's and bought a donut. At her table, she began to cry. A small boy across the aisle stared at her. She grimaced, and the boy's mother tugged the sleeve of his coat. He swung around in his chair, and his mother shook her head at him. Elspeth watched the two of them and then went into the washroom to splash cold water on her face. Her reflection looked back at her, and she thought she looked terrible. No wonder the boy had stared. Patches of red splotched her face, and her forehead was breaking out. When she passed the boy, he stuck his tongue out at her. His mother said, "Tyler! Smarten up." She apologized to Elspeth for her son. "Oh, it's all right," Elspeth said. "It doesn't matter."

She started the car and let it idle. She had nowhere to go. Her breath shot from her mouth in white clouds; the windows were frosting over. Then an idea hit her. She peeled her coat from her wrist to look at her watch. It shouldn't be too late.

She eased the car from the parking stall and drove to a gas station. She called Paul Ades.

No, he assured her, it was no problem. He could meet her in an hour at the house.

* * *

Paul Ades arrived in a black SUV and strode quickly over to help Elspeth from her car. His blond hair was clipped short along the sides of his head. He kept it longer on top, scooped into a wave over his forehead. As he approached Elspeth, he smiled and held his hand out. He wore a black leather car coat, a red cashmere scarf tucked around his neck. He was Daniel's age, she guessed, maybe a bit older. He was not what she expected in a real estate agent. She wished now that she'd changed after work. She was wearing a ratty old coat with her Safeway shirt underneath it.

"Elspeth?" He pulled his glove off and shook her hand. "Paul Ades. Nice to meet you. Well, this is it. It's a bit dark to have a look at the outside so why don't we go in?"

He led her to the front step where he tipped a concrete plant pot and retrieved a key from beneath it. As he did, he put a finger to his lips. "Shhh," he said and laughed. Elspeth smiled back at him. He seemed confident, at ease. He stood and tried the key in the lock. He had some trouble with it, but finally he swung the door open. "There we go," he said.

They entered the house, stepping into a large room with a high ceiling. A lamp in a far corner cast a soft light across the hardwood floor. An alcove opened off the room at the opposite end. Elspeth gasped. "Oh," she said. "It's so open."

"And airy," he added. "The paint really expands the area of the room."

"Yes."

Elspeth wiped her boots on the entry carpet and bent down to remove them.

"Oh, don't worry about them," Paul said. "Leave them on."

She walked through the room to the alcove. The floor groaned beneath her. "I love that sound," she said.

"Me too. The alcove really gets the light in the morning."

"I bet."

"Breakfast there is fabulous."

Elspeth nodded. "No doubt." She peered back into the living room. "Where's all the furniture?"

"It's an estate sale," he said. He coughed. "My dad just passed away."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"We've taken some of the furniture we wanted, my sister and I. There's still some in the other rooms." He gazed at the floor and then seemed to remember that Elspeth stood beside him. "The kitchen's through here." He took her arm and guided her through a doorway. "So what do you do?" he asked.

Elspeth hesitated. "I work at the university," she said and moved away from him to the window. "When did they do the kitchen?"

"Dad did it a few years ago. He loved puttering around the place doing stuff like that. Wait'll you see the garage. It's full of his tools."

Elspeth moved to the stove and turned a couple of burners on and then off. She felt Paul's eyes follow her.

"Are you a student?" he asked.

"No. A professor." Elspeth opened a cupboard.

Paul nodded. "Lots of cupboard space," Paul said. "That was always important for Mom."

"For mine, too," Elspeth said. She looked at Paul. In the harsher light of the kitchen, she saw that he was older than she'd initially thought. A strip of short whiskers ran along one side of his jaw. He must have missed them shaving. He saw her looking at him, and he smiled broadly. He had tiny, square teeth, neatly tucked into his narrow mouth.

"The yard's beautiful in the summer," he said. "Dad took good care of it. There's a great view of the lake. Here." He pointed to the kitchen table where he'd spread pictures of the yard, taken in the summer.

She moved to the kitchen table. Paul joined her, his shoulder against hers.

"Can I take your coat?" he asked. He smelled of liquor; she hadn't noticed that, either.

"No, I'm fine." She stepped away from him.

Paul nodded. "Through here are the bedrooms."

Elspeth followed him into a hallway. "A professor of what?" he asked.

"English," Elspeth said.

"Really? I loved English when I was in university."

Elspeth peeked into a bedroom. It was empty. It would make a great study, she thought. "I'd like to see the garage," she said.

Paul nodded and led her out the back door to the garage.

The garage was large and brightly lit. Along one wall stood a row of wood-working tools: a drill press, a lathe. A car, covered by a tarp, was parked along the near wall. The licence plate, Elspeth noticed, read, "6T6LUVER."

Paul smiled at her. "Hey. You've got to see this." He strode to the car and pulled the tarp from it, revealing a gleaming red convertible, top up. "A '66 Chev," he announced. "Nice, eh? The old man used to let me take it out in summer sometimes."

Elspeth walked slowly to the car.

"See that?" Paul asked, pointing at the back seat.

Elspeth looked but saw nothing special. "The back seat?"

"The *perfect* back seat." He laughed and took a step toward Elspeth.

"What are you doing?" Elspeth asked.

Paul coughed, clearing his throat. "'Let me not,'" he said in a deepened voice, "'to the marriage of true minds, admit impediments. Love *is* not love that alters when it alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove. Oh no, it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is *never* shaken. It's the star to every wandering bark whose worth's unknown although his height be taken.'"

Elspeth watched Paul recite the verse. She then looked at the car. She turned but did not move.

"Come on," said Paul. "That's Shakespeare."

Elspeth laughed. She went through the door to the edge of the hill. She could see the lake. In places the wind had swept the ice clean, and it gleamed in the

moonlight. She could see the beach from where she and Daniel had seen the house. She felt that Paul had moved close behind her.

He said, "We could go for a spin. Out on the lake."

She turned, and he smiled at her. Over his shoulder she could see the house glow. Paul touched her arm. She looked at his face, leaned forward and kissed him. "I'm pregnant," she said and stepped back. "The lake sounds nice," she said. "But I've really got to go. I do."

* * *

Elspeth and Daniel tipped the desk on its side, but they were still unable to manoeuvre it through the doorway of the spare room. Its legs would not fit.

"How did we get it in here?" she asked.

Daniel shrugged. "I guess it's grown."

Elspeth inspected the door. They'd scraped a crooked line of paint from it. "We'll have to take it off," she said and went to fetch a hammer.

When she returned, Daniel stood leaning against the desk. He pointed at the door. "That'll cost us if we ever move."

She tapped the underside of the hinge, forcing the pin to rise. She pried it out and then did the same with the other hinge. The door was lighter than she expected. She carried it into the living room. "That should give us enough room," she said.

It did. They lifted the desk and carried it into the hallway. Elspeth asked that they set it down, so she could rest a moment.

"Are you sure you should be carrying something this heavy?" Daniel asked.

Elspeth nodded. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath. "Ready."

They lifted the desk again and carried it to the elevator. They set it down, and Daniel trotted back to their apartment for the desk drawers and to lock up.

Elspeth had borrowed Rob's pick-up. She and Daniel loaded the desk into the truck bed. Daniel strung rope around the end of the desk to keep it secure. He tried tying a knot he'd learned as a kid but couldn't remember how to do it. The cold reddened his hands.

"My fingers are numb," he said. He tied a granny knot. "It's not far, is it?"

Elspeth shook her head. "No. It'll hold till we get there."

They headed west, out of Edmonton, Elspeth driving. As they left the city, snow began to fall. The truck's headlights reflected off the flakes so brightly that Elspeth had to squint. She hadn't told Daniel where they were going. She had told him simply that she'd sold the desk and that they would have to deliver it. Daniel, to her surprise, did not object. He asked her how much she'd sold it for. She said, "Enough," and he'd left it at that.

As they neared the house, Daniel shifted nervously in his seat. Elspeth told him to relax. When she turned into the house's drive, Daniel said, "Elsie?"

"They wanted the desk," she said. "So I sold it to them."

"But there's no one here."

It was true: the lights in the house were off.

"It's OK. They know we're coming. They left a key." She killed the engine and hopped from the truck. "You've got to see this place, Daniel." At the door she lifted the plant pot and produced the key. She held it aloft. It gleamed in the porch

light. "See?" she called. She inserted the key into the lock and flung open the door. "Come on in," she said.

Daniel stepped cautiously through the doorway as Elspeth flicked on the lights. "What do you think?" she asked.

He looked around nervously.

"Our sofa against that wall, I think, and the easy chair right here," Elspeth said. "Can you imagine it?"

Daniel nodded. "Are we allowed to be here?"

"Of course."

"Elsie," Daniel began.

"Let's get the desk," Elspeth said quickly. "It goes in the study at the back."

"What are we doing here, Elspeth?"

She paused in the doorway. She knew he was frightened by her behaviour, but she was scared, too. He was so sure everything would be all right. He assumed too much, or didn't account for what might go wrong. He didn't acknowledge, for example, that certain possibilities were diminishing the larger she grew.

"I brought soup and bread," she said. "We can have a late dinner." She turned. He seemed tiny, like a child, standing in the middle of the room with his winter clothes on. "I never thought I'd be able to live in a place like this, Daniel."

* * *

Daniel heaves the axe above his head, behind it, his back arched, his belly thrust forward. His head tips back slightly, but he's intent on the block of wood on the chopping block: his eyes bulge as they stare down at it. He pauses for a moment,

the axe poised above him, and then he sweeps the axe through the air. He rises onto his toes, and his butt shoots backward as his top hand slides down the axe handle. The axe bites into the dry wood and sinks easily through it. Two pieces skitter off the chopping block.

Elspeth watches him from the kitchen window. She waves to him, and he waves back at her, smiling. He flexes his bicep. She laughs. She's frosting up the glass. She smells the baking bread. Daniel sets another piece of wood on the block and chops it. And then another.

She has convinced him that it is not technically breaking and entering: they have the key from the plant pot, after all. It was thrilling, something exciting for a change, she said. Once he relaxed, he began to look around. He liked the house, liked its openness, just as she guessed he would. She left him wandering the rooms while she returned to the car for the ingredients for the dinner she'd planned: black bean soup and freshly baked bread. She started dinner and suggested that a fire was a good idea. Daniel went to the garage to find an axe, and he started chopping wood.

Daniel swings at another piece of wood, but he misses. The axe blade arcs in front of him and thunks into his ankle.

"Shit," he cries out.

Elspeth gasps and runs to the door. She calls out, "Are you OK?"

"No," Daniel shouts, hopping on one foot. "I axed myself."

Elspeth laughs, thinking it's a joke, but Daniel glares at her.

"Sorry. Is it bad? Really bad?" she asks.

Daniel stops hopping, takes a deep breath. He peers down at his foot. "I can't tell. It hurts a lot. It cut through the bloody boot."

"Come on in, and we'll have a look at it."

Daniel limps to the door. She sits him down on one of the chairs and, kneeling, gently pulls his boot off and then his sock. It is not a long gash—only the corner of the blade has struck him—but deep and slightly curved: it gapes open, smiles at her. Surprisingly, it does not bleed much. His foot is clammy in her hand, and Elspeth lowers it to the floor.

She goes to the bathroom and rummages through the cupboards. She returns with a box of bandages.

Daniel holds up his sock, his finger poking through the hole the axe made, and laughs. "Would you darn my sock, mother?" he asks.

Elspeth stops in the doorway. She grimaces at him and tosses him the box. "Take the bread out when the buzzer goes." She puts on her coat and goes outside.

"Ah, Elsie," Daniel calls after her.

In the yard, Elspeth retrieves the axe from the ground. She peers carefully at the blade, at its corners, trying to determine which struck him. She can't tell; there's no evidence of his wound on the blade at all. She looks at the pile of split wood he's made, and she guesses that they've got enough. The axe is heavy in her hand, and she takes it to the garage, her boots crunching in the snow.

Daniel's pulled the tarp from the car. He's even lowered the roof. She goes to the car, feels the metal, feels the cold sheen of it. Leaning over the door, she runs her hand along the back seat, pats it. As she does this, the axe butts against the metal.

She bends down and peers at the side of the car. She's scratched it, and she licks her finger and rubs at the mark. She puffs her breath at it as if cleaning her glasses and wipes it with the sleeve of her coat. She can see her face in the shiny metal, behind the scratch. She smiles at herself, then raps her reflection with the butt end of the axe blade.

Paul Ades, she thinks, where are you when we really need you?

An odd thing to think, wouldn't you say? This thought comes to her in Daniel's voice, so strikingly that she whirls to see if he's behind her. He's not.

She turns back to the car and sees that she's scratched it even more now. She lays the axe in the back seat. On her way out, she flicks the lights off. Standing outside the garage, she sees Daniel limping across the kitchen, oven mitts on and the breadpan in his hands.

Telescope

In order to see through the telescope, Manny had to drag a chair across the carpet and set it before the window. He stood on the chair and squinted through the lens at the cliffs across the lake. He tilted the telescope until the dock flashed past, and then he swivelled the telescope until the dock came back in view. He focussed it, and—there she was—Curran sharpened into form at the end of the dock, tanning, stretched on her belly, on her chaise, book in hand. She smoothed her hair from her forehead, twisted it into a thick plait between her shoulders. Her muscles scurried like mice beneath her browned skin. There was a sheen on her skin. The bridge of her nose had a bump. She flicked her tongue across her lips. Later, Manny would hug her when she came in so he could smell her. She would smell of outside and sunshine: cut grass, cedar, coconut. She would tousle his hair.

He heard a creak behind him. A rope of guilt tightened in his chest. He cocked his ear, then glanced over his shoulder: no one there. It must have been Uncle Dave in the next room. Manny could hear him talking on the phone. He turned again

to the window. His uncle's girlfriend had fallen away, shrunken in size. Manny sighed. He knew his heart was growing blacker each time he did this.

There were no clouds in the sky, and the lake lay flat and green like the lenses of sunglasses. A perfect day for swimming. He was grounded, though, and was not allowed outside. Uncle Dave's boat bobbed alongside the dock, over the boat platform Manny had broken the day before.

He couldn't help himself: again Manny peered through the telescope. Curran idly kicked her legs in the air: her soles white, her body brown like toffee. Manny's eyes curved along her calves and the rise of her bum.

He hopped down from the chair. He wondered what his father was doing. Maybe they could play crib. In the hallway, he decided to creep up on his father and give him a start. He eased his feet from stair to stair. He emerged into the gloom of the kitchen, all the blinds shut against the heat of the sun. His father stood at the window in the living room, looking out the window, a pair of binoculars raised to his eyes. Manny crouched behind the couch and peeped above it. His father tilted his head back as if he was examining the ceiling. He rolled his head from side to side. He set the binoculars on the table and went out. He sauntered across the lawn to the dock.

Manny stood and looked about him. He picked up a deck of cards and dealt a hand of crib. He looked at each and decided which cards to throw into the crib. He spread the cards, face up, in front of him and played the hand, practising the counting. He played another hand, but playing alone bored him, so he climbed the stairs. He passed Uncle Dave's room and saw through the crack that he was still at the

computer. When Manny entered his own room, he shuffled to the window and climbed onto the chair.

His father was standing above Curran, who lay propped on her elbow, looking up at him, her hand shading her eyes. His shadow fell across her belly. His back was white and broad like a sail, although his shoulders were beginning to redden with the sun, as was the small bald spot at the top of his head. He had a farmer's tan: his skin was white above his elbow, but his forearms were red. Shrugging her shoulder, she tugged the strap of her swimsuit halfway down her arm. There was no tan line; her skin there was as brown as everywhere else. His father, lifting the hem of his swimsuit and pointing at his leg, said something to her. Curran shook her head. Manny was uneasy about this, and then he realized why: his father was thinking the same thing as he was. He was not only imagining Curran naked on the dock, he was talking to her about it.

Suddenly, Uncle Dave yelled, "Hey boy!" behind Manny, and Manny started from fright. Uncle Dave was standing in the doorway, grinning.

Manny jumped down from the chair. "You scared me."

"Ready for a boat ride?"

"I'm grounded today. Not allowed to go outside." Manny glanced at the telescope.

Uncle Dave frowned. "You've been inside all morning," he says. "I'll talk to your dad. We'll work something out."

"OK."

Uncle Dave nodded toward the window. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing."

Uncle Dave moved toward the window and looked out. Manny bumped the telescope so that it was no longer trained on the end of the dock.

Uncle Dave smiled. "Manny," he said, his voice rising in pitch. "You got your eye on my girl?"

Manny's face reddened. "No," he said. "Just looking at the boats on the lake."

* * *

Manny's head, a black lump of slick hair, emerged from the water first, and then his face, narrow and thin. Lake water drained from his frail shoulders onto his chest, down his skinny thighs and knees. For balance, he stretched his arms wide. On the dock, the other boy, John, worked the wheel, cranking and cranking as hard as he could. Manny's entire body lifted from the water, his feet splayed on a carpeted slab of wood, his knees bent. John, the wheel having reached the point at which it would no longer turn, gave a whoop and released it.

Then there was a moment, a small, small moment, when Manny stood perched on this boat platform, at the apex of its rise, the water draining between his toes, his arms stretched wide. A moment just before the drop of the platform, before the slap of the platform against the water. A moment when Willy, Manny's father, grinned, happy with this life, with his son's life, with everything. It had to do with the lake behind his son, the bluffs on the far side of the lake, the summer smell of his brother's wife, Curran, beside him. Willy shook his head in wonder. "That's my son," he said.

He realized he'd said this aloud and, embarrassed by this surge of pride, added, "He can amuse himself for hours with pointless games like this."

Curran nodded. "They're like tiny gods, rising from the water like that."

Willy grunted his agreement. A shadow crossed his face. "They won't break that thing, will they?"

"I don't think so."

But in the end they did break it. Who knows how these things happen? It's not wholly correct to say they broke it: the boys were there when the thing gave out. When the gearcase shrieked, the platform sank. The boys tried to wheel it out of the water, but the gears would not budge. Willy glanced up from his crib game with Curran and saw the boys struggling to turn the wheel. "Oh no," he said and laid his cards down.

When John saw Willy marching to the dock, he leapt into the water and swam for the spit of land a hundred yards east of the dock. Manny watched John swim away, wishing he could follow. He watched his father coming toward him. He tried the wheel again but could not move it.

"What happened?" Willy asked.

"Nothing. It just broke." Manny's throat tightened.

"Let me see." His father knelt by the wheel and tried to turn it. It would not budge. He sighed and looked heavenward. "This is a very expensive machine, Manny."

Manny stared at his feet, unsure of what to say. Then he said, "John broke it. He was turning it when it screeched. And then he—"

"You were both playing with it, Manny. Don't blame other people."

"But—"

His father shot him a glance that shut him up. They heard a boat approach, and both of them turned. It was Uncle Dave, returning from town.

"You'll have to tell your uncle what happened. I won't do that for you. And we'll talk later about how long you'll be grounded."

"But I didn't do anything."

"Manny," his father said loudly, warningly. And then in a lower, softer voice: "Curran and I saw you." He turned and waved to his brother. "And don't whine."

Uncle Dave returned the wave. Manny waved, too, feebly. He feared what his uncle might do when he was informed of the broken machine. Maybe there would be no more boat rides. Maybe, even, they'd have to leave.

His uncle cut the boat's engine, and the boat floated toward them. Manny's father grasped the boat and held it close to the dock while Uncle Dave tied a rope to a hook.

"Hey," he said when he'd climbed out of the boat. "Who died?"

Manny's father looked at Manny, waiting. Manny drew circles on the dock with his toe. "Manny," his father said.

"The boat lift broke," Manny said.

"What?"

"No," Willy said, "the boat lift didn't break."

Manny looked at his father, confused.

"*You* broke the boat lift," Manny's father said. Then, to Uncle Dave, "He and the neighbour's boy were playing on it, lifting it up and down, up and down, up and down. Finally they broke it."

"No way," said Manny's uncle in disbelief. He looked at Manny.

Manny nodded.

His uncle turned to the wheel and tried to spin it. He couldn't. He scratched his head. "Oh well. What can you do? Things happen."

"We'll pay to have it fixed," Manny's father said.

"Nah. Don't worry about it. It was going to go sooner or later anyway."

"I can write you a cheque when we get home. Mail it to you."

"No. Thanks. Look, don't worry about it."

"At least part of it."

Manny's uncle shook his head. "I can afford to fix it, Willy."

"So can I."

Uncle Dave watched Manny's father for a moment. "That's not what I meant."

Manny's father began to say something, but Manny interrupted. "I get an allowance, Uncle Dave. I'll save it up and send it to you when there's a lot."

Dave laughed. "No need, little man." He grabbed Manny's shoulder and shook it. "You up for a boat ride?"

"Maybe later," Manny's father said.

Dave rolled his eyes.

"Wait'll you have kids."

"OK. OK. Sorry." He turned and handed a bag of groceries to Manny. "Take these to the house, alright? And don't let Curran see." He winked. "There's burgers and hot dogs in there. We'll barbecue them tonight while she's out."

* * *

The first night at Uncle Dave's, Manny could not sleep. Curran had made up only one bed for Manny and his father, and Manny struggled to remain on his half of the bed. The weight of his father, a thick-limbed man, angled the mattress toward himself. Manny felt as if he had to balance on a crest of a wave. It was impossible. If he lay on his side, he rolled slowly onto his back and butted against his father's back. If he lay on his back, he slipped across the sheet as if his father was a magnet. Manny tried hooking his arm over the side of the bed and lying on his stomach, but still he felt his father's pull. He wondered how his mother managed to sleep in the same bed with him. Finally he lifted himself from the bed. He pulled a blanket from the closet and, laying it beside the bed, stretched himself out on it.

He lay awake, still, staring at the ceiling. Someone had glued glow-in-the-dark stars to the stucco, and the room was tinged green. On the way to the lake, his father had said that they would pray for the opportunity to save Uncle Dave and Curran while they visited, but some hearts were hard, and they might have to wait for them to soften. He told Manny that Curran was a dabbling Buddhist, and she was trying to convince Uncle Dave to study Buddhism, too. "It's a little like the blind leading the blind," Manny's father said.

At church not long ago, they had seen a blind man baptised. Manny didn't understand how that was possible. "He's blind," he said. "Doesn't Jesus have to heal him first?"

"Blindness, in the Bible, is a metaphor," his mother explained.

"But not all the time," his father added.

"Don't confuse him," his mother said.

As far as Manny can tell, being a Buddhist means two things. First, you're not saved. Second, you can't barbecue meat. Uncle Dave had to make a secret run into town to buy some, and they couldn't cook it while Curran was around. She's not his aunt, either, another fact that disturbs Manny.

Manny fears for Uncle Dave's soul and for Curran's, as well. But he's worried about his own, too. At home, he wakes, sometimes, in the middle of the night, the house ticking and groaning. He worries that Christ has come again, and he's left him behind. He lies in bed, straining his ears for any sound from his parents, a knot tightening in his chest. He creeps from his bedroom, trembling, to the doorway of his parents' bedroom. He peers at their bed through the dark. Satisfied that he sees two mounds rising and falling beneath the covers of their bed, he tiptoes back to his own room and tries to fall asleep.

* * *

During the day, until two o'clock, no one is supposed to bother Uncle Dave. He sits in front of his computer tracking stocks, placing orders. He makes his living this way and thinks that Manny's father could as well. Manny and his father watched Dave trade for an hour on the first day.

"The thing is you don't have to pay for three days," Uncle Dave said. "You buy it Monday, sell it Tuesday or Wednesday, and you've laid out none of your own money. Zip."

"I need a sure thing, though," Manny's father said. "Something certain."

"This is it. Look at me: I make, on a good day, six or seven hundred dollars. Sometimes more, sometimes a bit less."

* * *

Manny watched his father and Curran play crib. Curran laid her cards down carelessly, dropping them onto the table. Sometimes they glided across the table onto his father's pile. "Oops," she'd say, pinning it with her index finger and sliding it back to hers. Manny wriggled himself onto her lap. He could tell she wasn't very good. His father reached across the table and pointed out the combinations that she hadn't counted. Sometimes she laughed when he did this and brushed her fingertips across his forearm and said thanks.

She let Manny sit there for a while but then said, "Manny, my leg's falling asleep." He hopped down and wandered outside. On the dock, he crouched and watched a school of minnows flit in and out of the shadow. He climbed into the boat and pretended he was driving. He looked at the house. It was a tall house, and wide, and a row of peaked windows ran along the second storey, overlooking the lake. The sun glinted against the panes. They seemed dark green. Manny was happy: you couldn't see in from here. Uncle Dave's would be the one on the left, Manny's on the right. Manny went back into the house.

His father said, "Really?"

"Well. For the most part. I mean, sometimes it gets boring. But Dave loves it here. He gets a lot done. We're lucky to have this place."

His father dealt another hand and quickly threw two cards into his crib. He watched Curran make her decision. His father had a red face from working outside so much. His hair—eyebrows and eyelashes, too—were the colour of straw, and in the dimness of the kitchen, where they were playing, his father's face seemed like a tomato with pale yellow paint above his eyes.

"As long as Dave's happy," his father said when Curran tossed her cards into the crib.

Curran looked up at his father. "You could be happy for him, you know."

"I *could*? What do you mean? I am. We're both very happy for him. Sheila and I."

Curran nodded. "Well," she licked her lips. "You could let him know, is all I'm saying."

"And for you."

Curran glanced at Willy as she cut the deck. Willy turned up the seven of clubs. "Sheesh," Curran said. "That's good for the crib." She turned to Manny. "Is he always this lucky?"

Manny nodded. "He always wins at home, too."

"Is that right? He even beats you?" She tapped her cards on the table, twice, to straighten them. "I find that hard to believe."

"He doesn't really know how to play," his father said.

"Well. Is your dad afraid to teach you?" Curran asked Manny.

"He can't pay attention long enough," his father answered.

"I can," Manny said. And then to Curran, "I can count the cards already. A little bit, anyway."

"Come over here and help me, then," she said. Manny went to her, and she lifted him onto her lap.

"Am I too heavy?" Manny asked.

"Not yet." Curran tousled Manny's hair. "But soon you'll be as big as your dad."

Manny's father snorted, and Manny noticed that his father sucked his stomach in. His chest expanded when he did this. He was playing without his shirt, and his shoulders glowed like a ghost's.

* * *

Manny bobbed in the water, his fists clenched around the handle, the rope stretched in front of him like a snake. His lifejacket bit into his armpits, and the strap between his legs twisted into his butt. The wakeboard strapped to his feet was heavy. He couldn't move his legs except to pull them closer to his chest or push them farther away. Panic rose in his stomach. His heart pounded, and his stomach felt like he'd swallowed a helium balloon. He told himself, "I will not be afraid," and then shouted, "OK."

The boat roared, churning a white froth behind it. Manny flexed his arms against the tension of the rope and leaned back, holding his feet up, keeping the edge of the board above the water. He moved through the water, pressure building against the underside of the board. He began to tip forward, his body lifting from the water.

Suddenly he was standing, and the board swung beneath him so that it pointed at the boat. Curran and his father were standing in the back of the boat, cheering. Curran clapped her hands above her head. Uncle Dave sped up, and the water slid beneath Manny, chattering against the board and rattling Manny's knees.

"Alright, Manny!" Curran called back at him.

Manny, smiling, lifted a hand from the rope to wave, but he lost his balance and tumbled across the water. The rope skittered toward the boat. When he came up, Uncle Dave was banking the boat in a wide circle toward him. "I did it!" Manny called to them as they floated alongside.

"Way to go, son," his father said. "First try, too."

After a couple more runs, Manny clambered into the boat. "You've got to try it, Dad. It's so cool."

"Why don't you give it a shot, Willy?" Uncle Dave asked.

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on," Curran said. "Don't be a wuss."

Manny's father laughed. "Alright."

As Manny's father floated in the water, Uncle Dave said to him, "Just do what I told Manny. Keep the edge out of the water and let the boat pull you up."

"Alright."

Uncle Dave guided the boat away from him, the rope unfurling in the water.

"Go," Manny's father called, and Uncle Dave gunned the boat. Manny's father was dragged through the water, a wake rising on either side of him. He let go of the rope.

"Whoa," Uncle Dave said. "That's big splash, eh, Manny?"

Manny laughed as Uncle Dave banked and, just before it hit the wake, gunned the boat. It slapped down in the water, and Manny squealed with excitement.

"Keep the edge up," Uncle Dave said to Manny's father. "And let the boat do the work. You're submarining."

Manny's father coughed. He spat. "OK."

"I did it, Dad. You can do it, too," Manny shouted.

"Thanks, Manny."

The next time, though, he was dragged through the water again. His head went under. Manny called out, "Dad!" His father bobbed to the surface, sputtering.

"I know," he said when Uncle Dave steered around. "Keep the edge up."

"Are you OK, Dad?" Manny asked.

"You bet. Maybe give it a bit more gas, Dave."

"I'm giving you enough."

"Just a bit more?"

Uncle Dave shook his head. "Alright."

This time Uncle Dave gave the boat a lot of gas. The prow lifted from the water, and Manny felt like he was going to flip out the back of the boat. His father jerked out of the water into the air and fell onto his face. Curran said, "Grow up, Dave."

"He wanted more gas," Uncle Dave said, but, on the next attempt, he didn't accelerate as quickly, and Manny's father rose from the water, wobbly, his feet swaying back and forth beneath him. Manny and Curran clapped. Manny gave a

whoop. His father gave the thumbs-up signal, smiled. Uncle Dave banked the boat suddenly, and Manny's father skittered across the wake and wiped out. Curran gave Uncle Dave a dirty look.

"Now, that's a tumble," Uncle Dave said. "Right, little man?"

Manny said nothing. Uncle Dave was making him uneasy. He felt sorry for his father.

Uncle Dave circled the boat around Manny's father, said, "You're not carving the water. You've got to carve it. Define your turns. Don't be afraid of it."

Manny's father nodded and smiled grimly.

"Are you OK, Dad?"

"You bet, skipper," he said.

When his father rose from the water the next time, Manny could see that his father's jaw was clenched, that he was concentrating very hard. "Go, Dad!" Manny shouted.

Manny's father fell again but hung on to the rope and was dragged again. He finally let go and flipped across the water like a rag doll.

Manny looked furiously at Uncle Dave. "You're doing it on purpose." Tears came to his eyes, and this made him angrier. He wiped his eyes, trying not to cry. He clenched his fists and glared at Curran. "Make him stop," he yelled.

She turned to Uncle Dave and said to him, "Relax, honey."

"Hey, Manny. I'm just fooling around a bit. Take it easy, there. Your dad and I are just joking. Look: he's OK."

Curran asked Manny's father, "You alright?"

"Sure."

"Want to give it another try?" she asked.

"Yep. I'll get it yet."

"Manny's pretty upset, Willy," Uncle Dave said. "Maybe you'd better give it up."

"It's alright, son," Manny's father said. "I'm OK." He looked at Uncle Dave. "Just give me one good ride."

Manny said, "No, Dad. Just get in."

"Don't be silly, Manny. I can't just give up."

"He won't let you up."

"Manny. Smarten up. I'll do one more run."

This time Manny's father got up and boarded behind the boat for five minutes. He waved at the boat, and then he let go. As he slowed, he sunk into the water. Uncle Dave circled the boat, and Manny's father climbed in.

"See," he said to Manny. "Nothing to worry about." They boated to the dock in silence.

* * *

Curran agreed to play a game of crib with Manny. Manny sat where his father had sat the day before. After a couple of hands Manny said, "I'm happy for Uncle Dave, too. And for you."

"Thanks, Manny."

"He just gets a lot of breaks is all."

Curran looked at Manny. "Yes, I suppose he does."

"I mean, nobody ever gave my mom a house."

Curran shook her head. "No," she said, looking at the board. "No one ever did."

Manny watched Curran shuffle the cards. Her fingernails were long and painted white. They flashed as she shuffled. His mother's fingers were red and chapped. She clipped her fingernails close and had to rub lotion on her hands a lot. "Do you like my mom?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much."

He nodded and looked out the window. His father was standing at the end of the dock talking with Uncle Dave. Uncle Dave pointed across the lake. Manny strained to see what he was pointing at. A glint in the water: a houseboat. "She has to work," Manny said. "Or else she would have come."

"That's understandable. You can tell her that she's always welcome."

"I like you both."

Curran nodded. "I like you, too, Manny. Your play."

He laid down a card. He asked, "You don't have a dad, do you?"

"No," Curran said. "He left my mom before I was even born."

Manny set his cards on the table and looked at her, as sincerely as he could. "You know," he said, "God will be your father if you just ask him."

Curran laughed. "Oh Manny, you're sweet."

"It's true," Manny said. He felt his face flushing. The rims of his ears began to burn.

Curran nodded. She reached across the table and laid her hand on his arm. "Thanks, Manny," she said, "But I'm not ready for that."

* * *

Manny slipped into the water. Its coldness ran through him, shivered his blood. He ducked his head beneath the water to adjust himself to it. He opened his eyes. The water lay green before him, shading darker beneath him and fading to a light, almost yellow hue near the surface. He swam a short distance and eased his head above the water. His father and Uncle Dave were still talking on the swimming dock, facing the middle of the lake. It was early evening, and their voices carried across the water toward him, indistinct. He peered back toward the house, saw Curran on the back porch. He kept his head low in the water, swimming breaststroke in order to avoid splashing. He felt invisible, like a stick in the water. From the house he'd be no more than a ripple in the water, if that, and the men, he was sure, hadn't seen him, either. He floated toward the dock, touched it just enough to stop his drift through the water. He could hear their conversation now.

"It'll come back up," said Uncle Dave.

"It better. I can't afford to lose the money."

"Hey." Uncle Dave punched his brother on the shoulder. "Don't worry. We're brothers. I can cover you."

Manny's father looked at his arm where Uncle Dave had punched him. "Don't," he said.

"Oh, relax." Uncle Dave tapped him again.

"I said, 'Don't.'" Manny's father rose and walked to the edge of the dock. He looked down. "Manny," he said.

Manny grinned and waved. He stretched his arms onto the dock.

"Why do you always have to creep up on people?" his father asked, helping Manny up. "Don't do that."

Uncle Dave winked at Manny and, gesturing with his head to Willy, mouthed, "Big baby."

Manny looked at his father, who had also seen the gesture. He shook his head. "Grow up, Dave."

Uncle Dave laughed. "Come on, Willy. Don't get so uptight."

Manny's father said, "Everything's a joke to you, isn't it?" He turned away. "Everything's been handed to you, that's why," he muttered.

Uncle Dave frowned. His forehead wrinkled. "You know your problem, Willy?"

Manny's father turned. His face was white and sadder than Manny had ever seen before. His jaw was clenched, and a vein on the side of his temple had become purple. "What?"

"Hey," Manny said. They were making him nervous. "Hey," he said again, bouncing, trying to rock the platform. "Who's the king of the mountain?"

"Not now," his father said.

Manny looked at Uncle Dave and smiled, even though he didn't like Uncle Dave right then. He looked tiny with the lake stretched behind him. He had a small, scrunched face. Manny clenched his fists. "I'm the king of the mountain," he cried

and rushed across the dock, his head lowered. He hoped to carry Uncle Dave off the dock with him.

Uncle Dave side-stepped Manny's rush and caught him by the waist, lifting him into the air, over his shoulder.

"There's a time and a place," Manny's father said.

"Ah, he's just trying to have some fun," Uncle Dave said. "Aren't you Manny?" He poked his fingers into Manny's sides, making Manny squirm. Uncle Dave held Manny out over the water. "Hey, Willy. I'm sorry. Truce?"

Manny shouted, "Dad! Help!" His father turned, and before Uncle Dave dropped him, Manny was glad to see that a smile was creeping onto his father's face.

Manny plunged through the cold water. He opened his eyes and, meaning to come up on the other side of the dock, swam toward the far side. There was a splash, and he turned to see his father falling through the water. Manny rose to the surface just as Uncle Dave shouted, "Woohoo!" and leapt from the dock.

Manny's father broke the surface, and he shook his head, his hair spraying water. Manny waited until his father had wiped his face and then thrust two hands through the water, raising a wave over his father's head.

"Manny!" his father shouted and swam toward him. Manny froze. His father's eyes were dark and angry. Manny began to swim away, but his father's hand came down on his head and thrust him down.

Manny gasped when he went under, bubbles escaping from his nose and mouth. He flapped his arms, trying to propel himself toward the surface. His father's fingers, though, splayed around the curve of his skull, tightened and held him.

Manny opened his eyes. He saw his father's heavy body in front of him, through the green water, his legs scissoring like a frog's legs, his free arm stroking through the water. Manny's throat tightened. He flailed his arms and legs but did not rise. His eyes widened. His father's chest seemed green through the water. The hair on it floated, waving like weeds. Manny wrenched his head from side to side. He clutched at his father's fingers, tried to pry them loose from his scalp. He could hear his heart pumping and could feel the rush of his blood in his nose. His lungs ached. He felt like he was emptying out, as if a sharp and heavy rock at the bottom of his throat was pushing everything out of him, weighing him down. He flailed his arms. He shook his head. He saw his father's toes, their white nails. He opened his mouth and yelled. Bubbles shot before his eyes. He twisted his entire body. He tried to swim away.

At last the fingers released. He shot to the surface and gasped for air. He turned in the water and faced his father. He wanted to say, "You tried to drown me," but his throat burned, and he could only gasp hoarsely. He coughed and spit water. He began to cry.

His father, treading water, said nothing for a moment. "Don't cry," he said. He pointed his finger at Manny. "You started it. Don't start what you can't finish."

"Christ, Willy," Uncle Dave said.

Manny's father turned to Uncle Dave. "It's none of your business."

Manny struggled to the dock and hauled himself onto it, his chest aching. He lay on his back, spread-eagled. His arms trembled; he could not stop them. He rolled onto his side and watched his father float on his back. "I was just playing," he choked.

Uncle Dave treaded water, looking from Manny to his father and back again. After a while Dave said, "We know." He swam to shore.

His father remained silent, his jaw clenched. Laughter carried across the water from a boat on the lake. Manny rose. He said, "I'm sorry." He dove into the water and swam to the spit.

He walked from the water and entered the trees. Before he sat down, he made sure that he was hidden from view. Dirt clung to the bottom of his swimsuit. He cried. His father hadn't tried to drown him, only threatened to do so, but the threat of it frightened him. He started to get cold. He stood and walked farther into the woods, rubbing his arms, trying to dry the water with friction. Stones and twigs studded the ground, and he cut his heel on one of these. He could see the lake on the far side of the spit, and he wound his way toward it, emerging onto a narrow beach. The neighbours' house sat ahead of him, on his left, a couple of hundred yards past the crook where the spit met the shore. It too was a large house. Manny followed the shore toward the house, thinking he could escape for a few hours out of sight of his uncle's house.

Midway between the end of the spit and the crook, he crossed a path that led into the woods. He halted. The path meandered back the way he had come. He decided to follow it.

The path was narrow, and it was like walking a tightrope, setting one foot directly in front of the other, heel-toe, heel-toe. It ended at a ladder that had been nailed to a tree. Manny craned his neck and saw that a treehouse loomed above him, its floor sprawled across the branches of the tree. It was camouflaged: someone had

painted it brown, and branches had been stapled to the sides of it. He climbed the ladder and thrust back the trap door at the top. He poked his head through. Looking about him, in the dimness, he saw a lawnchair and a small table made from a No Parking sign and broken hockey sticks. Manny climbed into the room.

Manny sat in the chair and closed his eyes. He was very tired. He wanted to think. He wanted to pray. He prayed for forgiveness, and he prayed that God would let him know that he was saved. He listened for an answer. He thought of how his father says that God doesn't speak the way humans speak, you've got to have your ear tuned to just the right pitch. Manny cocked his ear. He heard voices drifting across the lake from the houseboat. He imagined, then, that if God were to speak it would be just like that: a muddle of voices and maybe you'd catch a word or two. But mostly it's through silence. How do you understand silence?

Manny prayed that he'd be able to run the race he'd begun. He couldn't remember beginning anything, however, and he prayed for forgiveness for this, too. He searched his brain for what he'd done. He hadn't just joined in a game, he'd begun a new one. It wasn't fair what his father had done, but he had done it: he had his reasons. Manny doubted that he should have splashed his father. It was wrong to have done that. He felt guilty. He would have to apologize.

The air was close around him. Windows had been cut in three of the walls, but slats of wood hung on hinges in front of them. Beside him, on the window ledge, a pair of binoculars rested. Manny set them on the table and then unhooked the slat of wood from the roof. From the window, Manny could see his uncle's house. He could see everything, clearly: the house, the back lawn, the dock, and the swimming

dock. Manny lifted the binoculars to his eyes, and the dock shot forward. He panned across it, and Curran's chaise came into view.

Manny thought, "I should leave." But he didn't. He didn't know where to go. He didn't want to return to his uncle's house yet, did not want to face his father and apologize for starting the fight. Because that was it, that was surely what he had started: the fight. There was nothing else. What had his father meant? Manny didn't know.

Manny sat in the treehouse for a long time. The sun set. He heard boats on the water and their wakes lapping against the shore of the spit. He finally heard Curran call him. She stood in the water, the water halfway up her calves. She wore a white shirt, and he could see her bra through it. He didn't want to be found there. Surely he was not responsible for this place. And yet how could he tell Curran what he knew?

The voices on the boat ceased.

Curran called him again.

"What?" one of boat voices said, quietly.

"Manny?"

"Yeah?" said the voice.

Curran hesitated, peering into the darkness over the water. Finally she said, "It's time for bed, Manny. Come on in. He's sorry."

Manny climbed down the ladder and slipped through the trees toward the shore. "Hey," he called, desperate to hold her there in the water, to keep her waiting for him. "Hey, I'm coming."

Dumbsaints

1.

Ned heard it coming and, as Fyvie maintains, the wind did gust: the breath of God moving in their midst—Fyvie, Spink, Old Fergus, and Ned—tinning Old Fergus's barn. Ned cocked his head and listened before a vague, white idea of danger surged across his mind. Old Fergus yelled, and Ned moved, but too late, and the ladder grazed the scalp above his left ear and caught him square on the shoulder. It knocked him to the ground. It flushed the breath from his lungs. He scrambled on all fours—God brings us low, like beasts—into the yard where he stood, stunned.

He touched the tender area above his ear with his fingers and, pulling them away, saw that they were red with blood. He turned. The ladder lay before the milk house, and Fyvie, on the roof, laughing, peered down at him.

Spink called, from the far side of the milk house, "What's so funny?"

And Fyvie called back, "Jesus got beaned by an aluminum ladder."

And that night, Ned's vision made its debut: a highway stretched itself before him like a black finger, a black finger flicking to the horizon where there was a white rectangle, like a movie screen. The wheel shimmied against the palm of his hand, the screen looming larger and larger as he raced toward it. The car's heater ran at full blast; it was intensely hot; he woke in a sweat, the early morning seeping into his room.

It drained him, this vision, and he woke feeling like a ghost, pale and drawn. His legs, as if the muscles had wasted away, were mere ripples beneath his quilt. His head ached. His wound burned. He brushed his fingers against its thick black stitches.

He thought that it would be best if he wrote the vision down, or at least his impressions of it, but his fingers ached from work. He held his curled right hand to his face, and as he stretched his fingers, the joints creaked like stale elastic bands. This pained him, and even though every morning it was like this, he was not used to it. Ned flexed his fingers faster and faster, and the pain fled as his hand loosened. He did the same with his left hand. He rolled over to retrieve his notebook from beneath his bedside table. His father stood in the doorway, dressed in his bathrobe and his hair tousled.

Ned gasped. "Dad?" he said.

After a moment, his father answered, "It'll be awhile before they're used to it, you know. Your hands." He flexed his own hand, open and closed.

Ned nodded. "It's been a couple of months."

"Huh," his father grunted. "You might never get used to it. That's entirely possible, I suppose. But it's good for you, toughens you up." He clenched his fist and flexed his arm. "A healthy dose of reality. You'd better get used to it." They looked at each other. His father said, "Your head feels OK? I was nervous last night, thought you might be concussed, so I watched you."

"I'm fine."

"Good." He turned to leave but paused and faced Ned again. He said, "Spink says you're not bad. A bit slow, though. But not bad. Learning." He made contact with Ned's eyes, and Ned looked away. "He's doing me a favour, Ned. Don't forget that."

"I won't. I'm working hard."

His father compressed his lips and nodded. "OK, then. See you tonight," he said and padded down the hallway.

Ned Ward: from last September to May, a theology student at Wheaton College, Chicago, where his girlfriend, Julia, also studies. They date chastely, rubbing against each other at the end of each date through four layers of clothing, more if it is cold outside. Of his vision, she is sure that the hand of God gripped him. Of this he is not certain. She writes: "You are blessed by your vision, by your special knowledge, Ned: in the end, there will be a white heat and a sudden flash. The veil will be torn away. A pure, white realm beyond—heaven and truth. Cleave to this thought, Ned, and live day by day, with your parents and Fyvie and Spink, praying

that you can persevere. The vision verifies that you are making the right choice. Come back to Wheaton."

After the ladder had struck Ned, when he stood in the yard with Fyvie laughing down at him, and Spink coming around the corner of the milk house, and Old Fergus rising from the grass by the trees, water came to Ned's eyes, and he thought, "Don't cry, don't cry." He thought of onions and the crackle of their parchment skin; he thought he smelled them. Pulling his handkerchief from his pocket, Ned turned. Spink had set the ladder against the roof. He climbed to the top and fastened it in place with a nail on each side of it. Spink said something to Fyvie, but Ned could not hear what it was. Spink descended, and Fyvie followed. Ned turned again, and Old Fergus was beside him.

Old Fergus, nodding toward Ned's gash, said, "Let's see."

Ned pulled the handkerchief from his scalp. Old Fergus peered at the cut. He looked at Spink and Fyvie, who had just reached Ned.

After a moment Spink said, "That needs stitches. You OK?"

Ned nodded.

"Good," Spink said.

Fyvie snorted.

"What?" asked Spink.

Fyvie snorted again and nodded at Ned. He said, "The wages of tin."

Later, Ned's father liked that. "That's the lesson, here, Ned. The wages of tin. What have I been telling you?"

"It was a joke," Ned's mother said.

"Nevertheless," his father said. "When Balaam's ass speaks, we must attend."

Ned's father relished the gash on Ned's head and gazed thoughtfully at it many times over the course of dinner that evening. The doctor had stitched Ned's scalp with thick black thread so that the stitches would be visible and easily removed in ten days.

"Look at our tough man, here, mother," Ned's father said. "Look what theology gets him." His father believes, and has said, on more than one occasion, "Theology can't put bread on the table." And each time, Ned thinks about communion and the white cubes of bread passed in silver plates along the pews of their church but says nothing.

"I think it's sad," his mother said. "That man laughing."

"That's reality," said his father. "Nobody cares what happens to you except you yourself." He lifted a forkful of potatoes into his mouth, chewed them slowly. "When I went to university, I worked construction, and the guy above me on the ladder dropped a hammer on my head. That taught me a lesson: always look to see what's ahead. I bled like a stuck pig. A sixteen-ounce hammer." He shook his head, incredulous.

"He wasn't climbing the ladder," Ned's mother said.

"What?"

"He was screwing the tin in. On the ground."

His father regarded Ned. "Nevertheless," he said. "You've got to keep your head up."

This was the thing: in the winter, Spink curled with Ned's father, and they were good friends. When Ned came north to work for the summer, Ned's father told him that he had filled Ned's position as teller at the bank.

"Spink's son plans to study business when he's done high school," Ned's father explained. "So I thought I'd give him an opportunity to use his skills in a work environment he can expect to be in when he graduates. Spink says you can work with his crew this summer."

So Ned did. And Spink's crew—Spink, Fyvie, and Ned—tinned the roofs and sides of barns all summer.

2.

The crew began at Old Fergus's place by stripping the shakes from the barn. They leaned ladders against the roof and laid weathered two-by-eight planks across T-bars hung from the rungs of the ladders. Standing on the planks, the crew rammed the flat blades of their shovels beneath the edges of the shakes and pried them loose. Clouds of ancient dust and the crisp husks of flies leapt into Ned's face. The shakes spun to the ground where Old Fergus rode over them with his mower, mulching them.

Old Fergus: an old bachelor, sixty-five, who dresses in stiff, long-sleeve workshirts and green workpants. He stuffs his reading glasses, his cigarettes, note paper, and flat carpenter pencils into the front right pocket of his shirts. He joins the crew at coffee, bringing hot coffee and oranges or bananas for them to eat. Fyvie and

Ned peel the oranges and fling the skins over their shoulders into the willows. Old Fergus's dogs run after them and nose through the underbrush. They trot back to the crew, tails arced proudly over their rumps, the peels in their mouths. Fyvie and Ned toss the banana peels, too, seeing who can hang them highest in the trees. When Spink finishes his coffee, he stands, looks at his watch, and Fyvie and Ned gulp whatever coffee they have left and stand, also. They file back to the barn, and Fergus shakes the peels from the trees and then returns to his house. In the afternoons he lies down in the shaded grass beneath the willows and watches the crew work. Sometimes he suddenly sits up, and, pulling paper and a pencil from his pocket, jots something down. Sometimes he dozes.

"He's crazy," Ned's father says of him.

"He's lonely," Ned's mother says.

"Mullins should be ashamed of himself. He's always whining about the shape that barn's in but won't sink a dollar of his own into it."

"Old Fergus is a lonely man," Ned's mother says, as if she likes the sound of it. "Old Fergus is a lonely man."

"That may be, but he's not long for this world. What's he leaving? A tinned and gleaming barn."

"I like him," Ned says.

"He's crazy, Ned." His father chewed his meat. After a moment he said, "You've got to start saving for the future right now. A little bit of each pay cheque has to go into your savings. I'll arrange it at the bank tomorrow."

3.

As far as Fyvie was concerned, Old Fergus's place was the best place to work. Old Fergus rented the place out to the Mullins, who ran their dairy operation from the barn. Hugh Mullins had driven south to Edmonton for a course on milk production, leaving Brenda alone to run the place.

Fyvie's eyes followed her as she worked, shovelling shit from the stalls, or forking hay into them. "She's a fine looking woman," Fyvie said. "How'd you like to have your balls bouncing against her chin?" Fyvie told Ned how he'd like to catch her in the barn, alone, what he'd like to do to her.

Ned watched her work, too; he saw how her arms rippled out of her shirt and how her sweats draped her legs: the flesh of her thighs brushing that loose cloth sent shivers through him. The word, too: flesh. Ned said it to himself, "Fleshuh," and it led, always, to the idea of the taut whiteness of Brenda's thighs. Ned thought of Fyvie's fantasy, as he drifted to sleep at night. He, too, imagined catching her after the cows had been sent to pasture and clamping her neck between the rusted bars of the milking harness. He pulled her sweats down to her calves and tore her panties off—surely they were white (they had to be: in all that grime, the dust and that shit, her underwear would be pure white, gleaming in the electric light of the barn, the naked bulb burning above the stall). And he pushed into her, the bulls stamping their hooves at the far end of the barn and kicking up the smell of mouldering hay from the floor. Her tough hands and her scorched arms gripping the harness. A tight whiteness beneath the loose and grimy clothes. Her body white, muscled.

4.

For years Fergus sensed that the water was coming. He could feel it rising in his bones, cold and dark. Through his toes and through his shins. Into his thighs and hips, his pelvis, his coccyx. Swift up his spine to his skull.

And that was not all: at times, his head tipped backwards, his knowledge a strange and sudden weight, a misshapen lump at the base of his skull. His head tipped back, and his mouth fell open; he searched the sky as if to read some explanation in the hieroglyphic clouds and stars, or in his stuccoed ceiling. Other times, his head whipped to one side as *something* swept by the edge of his vision, catching the corner of his eye like a hook. He whirled round in his yard or in the Co-op, and the heel of his boot spun bruises on the ground. And sometimes he caught himself mumbling words he could not understand and that he could barely hear. His cigarette fell from his mouth, and the words came like plosive burps. Fergus knew they had a meaning that he could not translate. And all the while this feeling in his bones, rising.

And so when, last summer, Fergus heard that they'd finally scooped enough gravel from the gravel pit to expose an artesian well, he went, in the evenings, to watch the pit flood. At first, the water crept slowly from the earth. The floor of the pit became tacky, and gumbo stuck to boots and to the bucket of the backhoe that swung gravely into the earth, scraping through the wet gravel, lifting it upward and tumbling the load into the back of the waiting dump truck. For a week or two, the gravel was merely wet, then, in another week, the backhoe splashed through an inch of water to get to the gravel, water running from the bucket like rain. In the next

week, the water rose higher, and the boys brought pumps in, but they couldn't pump the water out fast enough.

It shouldn't have surprised them, the water, as the pit's not far from the shop the Mullins boys built a few years previously. They had to backfill the land they got—it was swampy—and that's why they bought the pit in the first place. They got their money's worth out of it and then some, selling gravel to outfits all around the area. Still, there was gravel there, and gravel's money. Hugh's talking now of building a house up there on the hill overlooking the pit, talking about hauling the berms away, landscaping, making the pit a pond. Maybe, he says, he'll stock it with rainbows from the hatchery down the highway.

A lot of rain came down that summer, and the St. Cyr flooded its banks. The hatchery water lifted and lifted, finally hauled itself over the hatchery dam and rolled right into the St. Cyr itself. Fergus and Hugh went down and had a look. The water, clear and ripe with fish, tipped over the dam, foamed at the base. The hatchery fish escaped. 400,000 of them got into the St. Cyr system, more than should ever have been released, and nobody could figure out why they had that many fish in the first place. It played havoc with the rest of the fish in the river, all those rainbows flinging themselves over the dam, making their break for freedom, flitting through the streams to the swollen St. Cyr. And there were some big ones in there, too, not all of them small fry and fingerling. After the escape, there was no limit. You could catch all the rainbow you wanted, haul them out one after the other if you chose. Fergus and Hugh headed up the highway to the reservoir, put their boat in the water and dropped their lines.

A mass of fish grew, a lump of silver on the bottom of the boat. At times a fish flopped, his flanks iridescent, against the aluminum hull. When there was no longer any room for their feet, they rowed to shore and hauled the boat onto the bank. Fergus sat in the beached boat, grasped the fish by their tails and swung them against the seat opposite, hard enough to hear the snap, like a thick twig, when their heads cracked. He swung them—or tried to—only once, establishing a rhythm, their heads snapping, ticking like a clock, the seat becoming flecked with blood. He handed them to Hugh, who took them to the dock where others were filleting their catches, and he rinsed the guts in the cold water. In the end, they caught too many, and they tipped the edge of the boat against the water, the fish sliding like slivers of ice into the lake. Hugh took the paddles and stirred the water, herding the dead ones away from the shore so Fergus could splash water on the seats and the bottom of the boat.

They hauled the boat on shore and flipped it upside down so the water would drain from it. They lit a fire and sliced the lemons they'd brought in the cooler with the beer. They stretched the fillets of the larger fish on sheets of tin foil smeared with butter and laid circles of lemon, like little yellow suns, over the sides of the fish. They folded the tin foil and placed the packages in the glowing embers, beneath the flames of the fire.

Fergus decided, then, that he'd redo the barn and leave it, when he died, to Hugh and Brenda.

And so he'd hired Spink's crew to tin the barn. In the mornings, while he sketched and re-sketched the plans for his boat, Fergus watched the crew, just visible above the willows, scramble across the roof of his barn. He liked to hear them work:

their shouts, the whine of the saw, the clatter of lumber, the thump of their hammers. In the afternoons, he'd wander to the barn and lie down in the shaded grass.

He liked Ned: he always arrived first, a half-hour before the others, and Fergus knew that when he first heard the dogs bark, Ned had come. Fergus would rise from the kitchen table, munching his rye toast, and, through the window, watch Ned ease his truck across the rutted yard to the front of the house. The dogs, Sam and Jack, darted at the front wheels, and, when Ned killed the engine, they hopped, expectant, to the truck door. Ned swung it open and dropped to the ground. Kneeling, he scratched each of the dogs behind the ears and said something to them.

He pulled his lawn chair from the truck bed and, after setting it in the patch of sunlight next to the willow's long shadow, fetched his duffel bag and tool belt from the truck, as well. He settled himself in his chair, on the swath of grass between the yard and Fergus's fence. He poured coffee into the lid of his thermos and pulled a book from his bag. He read, sipping his coffee as it steamed in the early morning air. Jack usually pissed on one of the truck's tires and then trotted off, followed by Sam, toward the back of the house. Fergus finished his toast and dabbed the crumbs from the plate with his finger, which he then licked and wiped on his bathrobe. He put the plate in the sink, poured a cup of coffee and went out to talk with Ned.

5.

Once the shakes were stripped from the roof of Old Fergus's barn, Ned marked the sheets of tin as they lay on the ground. He measured intervals of twenty inches, made a mark on the tin and then, using a square, drew a line across the sheet. He punched a hole at the top of the sheet and dragged it to the barn. Spink stood at

the peak of the roof, dangling a yellow rope with a hook on the end, to which Ned attached the tin. The edges of the sheets were sharp, and, at times, as Ned steadied them before Spink hauled them up, they slid across the flesh of Ned's fingertips, slicing through it. Ned wrapped bandages around his fingers.

And Spink, on top of the barn, hauled the tin up like silver fish, the tin turning slowly on the rope. When the wind gusted and fluttered the rippled plane of tin out and away from the building, Spink flexed his knees and leaned against the weight of the sheet, and when he'd hauled the tin to the roof, he stooped, holding the rope with one hand, and leaning out into the air with the other, grasped the tin with his fingers. He stood up with it, careful to hold it at arm's length.

A squall blew in once, just as Spink had hauled a sheet to the roof. He held the rectangle of tin as it snapped dangerously in the air, the wind lifting it and Spink's arms above his head. He widened his stance, turning his head away from the tin. Fyvie, also on the roof, saw Spink's struggle and flattened himself against the roof. Ned wondered what would happen if Spink let go, where the rectangle would spin, whom it would cut. He touched the bandages wrapped around his own fingers, pressing each with his thumbs: they felt thick and dull. Spink stood at the peak of the roof, against the grey sky. And then the wind died. The tin slumped to the roof, and Spink simply carried it to where it belonged.

At coffee, once, Ned told them about his visions. They—Spink, Fyvie, and Old Fergus—stared at him blankly.

Finally, Fyvie smiled and asked, "What kind of car do you drive?"

"What?"

"What car are you driving in your dreams?"

"It's a vision," Ned said. "I don't know. It doesn't matter what kind of car I drive."

"It matters," Fyvie said. "Christ, it matters. If your dreams are from God, he'd have you driving a '58 Chev Bel Air. That's how you'd know."

"No," Spink said. "It'd be a Shelby Cobra."

"Uh-uh," Fyvie said. "That car's clearly of the devil."

"Then how about a '68 Mustang?" Spink asked.

"That might be OK, but it isn't heavenly."

"You're missing the point," Ned said.

"What's the point?" Old Fergus asked suddenly.

"The point is," Fyvie said, laughing, "the kid's a fuckin' loony."

Old Fergus stared at Fyvie for a long time. Fyvie squirmed in his seat and said, "Christ, Fergus, you creep me out." He stood and stalked away.

"What's the point, Ned?" Old Fergus repeated.

"Never mind."

Ned wrote to Julia about this conversation. "Maybe," she replied, "it's a Prelude."

6.

Ned had to re-attach a lightning rod to the top of the barn's east end. He had trouble fixing it in place—a stripped bolt—and Spink and Fyvie left him, shaking their heads, to run into town for some cold pop. Fergus had lain down in the long

grass in the shadow of the trees and dozed. Finally Ned finished, and he lowered himself down the four levels of wobbly scaffolding. Spink had jerry-rigged the scaffold: the lowest frame was bolted to the chassis of an old hay wagon so that Spink could tow the contraption wherever he needed it.

"They've gone into Rime," Fergus said as Ned reached the ground. "Sit a bit."

Ned came over and lowered himself into the grass beside Fergus. "It's a hot one," he said, wiping his face.

Fergus nodded. Ned had taken off his cap and was running his fingers through his hair, and the black thread showed through. Fergus said, "When are your stitches coming out?"

"In a couple of days."

Fergus poured a cup of water from his thermos and offered it to Ned. Ned took it and drank it down in a gulp.

"You still having your visions?" Fergus asked.

"Yes," Ned said, defensively.

"People think you're nuts, you know."

Ned glared at him.

Fergus shrugged. "If people want crazy," he said, "give them crazy."

"I'm not crazy."

"I didn't say you were."

Ned finally said, "Nobody understands them."

Fergus shrugged his shoulders. "Does anybody need to?"

"Yes," Ned said. He stood. "I do."

"Sometimes it takes a while."

Ned turned. He studied Fergus's face.

Fergus screwed the cap onto his thermos and slowly stood. He tapped his forehead and said, "Crazy."

They stared at each other. Fergus hoped Ned would ask him if he had visions. But he didn't. Instead, Ned turned to the scaffolding. "They'll need that at the west end, I guess."

Fergus nodded. Then he asked, "How much is Spink paying you?"

"Six bucks an hour."

"That's hardly anything."

Ned shrugged. "He gives me a raise each month. As I get better at what I'm supposed to be doing, he says."

Fergus dug in his shirt pocket for his cigarettes. He placed one in his mouth and offered another to Ned. Ned shook his head. "I can pay you more," Fergus said, clenching the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "I could use a hand around here. You work hard enough. I'll double what Spink pays you."

"What would I do?"

"Odds and ends. Maybe some painting." Fergus drew on his cigarette. When he exhaled, he watched the smoke drift toward the road. "I need someone to drive me to Edmonton." He tapped his eyes. "Can't drive myself."

Ned hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "I'll have to think about it. My dad got this job for me. I feel obligated."

Fergus frowned. He stubbed his cigarette into the grass. "Suit yourself."

"Thanks, though." Ned walked to the scaffolding. He pulled the chucks from each tire and picked up the tow bar Spink had welded to the wagon. He leaned into the front axle, a four-by-four tie, and the wagon began to move. Holding the tow bar close to his thigh, he turned his body so that the axle turned, as well. Above him, the scaffolding swayed uneasily.

"You need a hand?" Fergus called.

"Nope. I've got it."

Fergus watched the wagon roll away from the barn, Ned guiding it into a position from which he could pull it to the west end. One of the tires, though, dropped suddenly into a deep rut, and the scaffold planks rattled against their supports. Ned glanced up worriedly, and he pushed harder, straining to dislodge the wheel.

The scaffolding leaned farther from the wagon's centre, slowly, so slowly, Fergus thought, as if time was freezing, like a river. And all the while Ned, his shoulder jammed against the axle, pumped his legs, his feet slipping on pebbles. He pushed for all he was worth. But finally the tires on his left skidded; there was a pop, two of them, and small clouds of dust chuffed from the ground. Then the tires lifted, and Ned grasped the axle, hanging on it with all his weight. But the wagon kept tipping. Ned let go, scrambled backward on his palms and heels, like a crab, and the whole thing went over. It slammed to the ground, crashing through the corner of an old outbuilding on its way.

"Holy shit," Fergus said.

The next morning, Ned arrived, as usual. Fergus watched him from the window, then joined him at the gate. Ned stood, fidgeting.

"Looks like it'll be a good one," Fergus said, lifting his mug toward the horizon.

Ned nodded. "I hope so."

Fergus sipped his coffee. "Rough day, yesterday," he said.

"Yes."

Fergus said, "They're not coming today. Spink called me this morning. They're headed elsewhere. To another job. Maybe tomorrow, too. He said that if you showed up, you're to straighten out all that scaffolding. He asked me to lend you a sledge hammer."

Ned looked blankly at Fergus.

"The sledge hammer's by the scaffolding," Fergus said. "I took a few swings at that mess last night, but there's a touch left."

"Oh," Ned said.

"You're still welcome to help me out, you know."

Ned nodded. "Thanks."

"I don't think there's any more raises coming from Spink, Ned."

Ned looked at Fergus. "What do you want to go to Edmonton for?"

Fergus smiled. "Come on in," he said. "I'll get you a cup of coffee and show you."

Inside the house, Fergus led Ned to his study. Beneath the window stood a drafting table. Scattered about the room were sketches of a boat. When they walked in, sheets of paper rustled against the wall to which they were tacked. Ned, peering closely at them, saw that they were topographic maps of the area around Rime. Rime seemed to be the epicentre.

"There's two coastlines," Fergus said. "The present one's miles away. But years ago, this area used to be underwater. This high ground here, obviously, was the coast."

"Oh," said Ned.

"But that's not important. Here, look at this." Fergus thrust the blueprints for a twenty-eight foot, metal hull boat at Ned. "That's what we're heading to Edmonton for."

"A boat?"

"The hull. I'm going to finish it myself."

"It seems large."

Fergus nodded.

"I don't know, Fergus. No one else will go with you?"

"No. You're the only one who knows."

"Everyone'll know when it gets here."

"But then I won't have to explain it." Fergus paused. "I figured you wouldn't need an explanation."

7.

Old Fergus decided he wanted a couple of the outbuildings tinned before he and Ned left. As Spink had business to get done in town, he sent Fyvie to help Ned do the job.

Brenda waved at the two of them as she disappeared into the barn. Fyvie stared after her, thinking hard. With his elbow, he nudged Ned. Fyvie raised his eyebrows and gestured toward the barn with his head.

"Hugh's still away," he said. He rose from his seat and sauntered toward the barn. He turned and asked Ned, "You coming?"

Ned shook his head. Fyvie shrugged and, continuing toward the barn, tossed his cigarette to the ground.

When Fyvie disappeared inside, Ned stared at the small, galvanized silo in front of the barn. Its cap had blown from the top, and so rain had wet the feed inside, and it smelled, fermenting. Barn swallows lined the silo's rim, tipping themselves suddenly down into the rotting grain, disappearing into the darkness and then suddenly reappearing, fluttering into the sky and then alighting again. Ned watched the birds, listened for noises from the barn. Finally he rose, and when he reached the barn and peered inside, the birds lifted from the silo in a body, and curled through the air to the trees.

Fyvie and Brenda sat at the far end of the barn, smoking and talking. Ned tried to disappear, but Fyvie saw him and called to him. Fyvie laughed. "What did you come in here for, Jesus, eh? Come here."

Ned walked down the centre aisle of the barn toward the two of them. They watched him, each of them smiling. Ned nodded to Brenda and said, "Hi."

Fyvie said, "This is the one that's in love with you, you know. He fantasizes about you all the time. Can't do his work right cause of you."

Ned blushed.

Brenda said, "Is that right?"

Ned looked at the ground.

"He's going to be a preacher," Fyvie said. "A preacher of l-o-o-ove."

Brenda laughed.

Ned mumbled, "We should get back to work."

"I'll be there in a minute."

Fyvie, when he joined Ned, was singing, "Come, Sweet Jesus, Come."

Fyvie was cutting the tin, and Ned was hanging it. Ned turned, and he saw it happen: Fyvie looked up when Brenda passed, the saw in his right hand whining through the tin. Two of Fyvie's fingers dropped to the ground like bolts.

But Fyvie didn't scream. He held his hand up to his face, the blood pumping out of the two stumps and down his arm. He still held the saw in his right hand.

Ned yelled, "Fyvie!"

Fyvie looked stupidly at the saw, as if he'd never seen such a thing before. He stared at it for a long moment. Finally, he eased his finger from the trigger and set the saw down. He rocked backward, tipped over the edge of his heels onto his butt.

Brenda had stopped in the yard when she heard Ned yell, and now she ran to Fyvie. She kicked the saw away. Old Fergus rose from the grass by the trees.

"You OK?" Brenda asked.

Fyvie didn't respond; he turned his hand in front of him, studying alternately its back and its palm.

Ned ran to Fyvie and Brenda. "He cut off his own fingers," Ned said.

Brenda said to Ned, "Take off your shirt. I need to wrap his hand in something."

Ned looked at Fyvie. He sat on the ground, stroking his damaged hand with his good hand as if it were a pet, tracing the tendons gingerly with his fingernail. Old Fergus approached from across the yard. Ned knelt beside Fyvie, considered his hand with him.

"Ned," Brenda said.

Ned pulled his shirt over his head and handed it to Brenda. He felt self-conscious in front of her like that, half-naked: his chest too narrow and too white. She tied it around Fyvie's hand. She said, "It'll be alright, Fyvie. You'll be OK."

Ned said to Old Fergus, "Fyvie needed his hand wrapped."

"We'd better get him to the hospital," Old Fergus said. He and Brenda slipped their arms under Fyvie's armpits, dark with sweat, and heaved him onto his feet. "Don't worry, Fyvie," Old Fergus said. "We'll take care of you." They led him to Ned's truck and helped him climb into the passenger seat.

Ned stood there, watching them. Then he looked at the ground, at the piece of tin Fyvie'd been cutting. With his toe, he lifted the edge of the tin. Beneath it, in the

dust, lay Fyvie's two fingers, each pointing a in different direction—one toward the barn, the other at the road. Ned considered: Fyvie might like to have these fingers back. He squatted and peered at the fingers closely. There was a wart, like a blind and stupid head, at the end of Fyvie's index finger. Ned lowered the slat of tin gently to the earth. He turned to the truck and saw that Old Fergus was watching him.

"Ned, let's go," called Old Fergus.

As Ned stared at him, Old Fergus slowly shook his head. Ned wondered what that meant. Past Old Fergus's head, above the pasture, a flock of swallows banked through the air. They moved as one, more or less, maintained their sphere of movement. The sun flashed across them, their wings glinting like a fish turning in the current. Ned pulled his hankie from his pocket and spread it on the dirt. He pushed the tin aside and plucked each finger from the ground and dropped them into the middle of the rag. He laid the corners on top of the fingers and held the rag up by them. The fingers were lighter than he'd imagined they would be. He clutched them as he ran to the truck, their blood soaking into the creases of his palm. When he thought about this, he almost dropped them out of fright.

In the truck, Fyvie rocked back and forth on the seat, moaning, his hand clutched under his armpit. Old Fergus sat beside him, next to the passenger door. Ned laid the sack of fingers on the dash and dug in his pocket for the keys. He climbed up next to Fyvie, started the truck and turned the truck toward the road. In his rear-view mirror, Ned saw Brenda waving from her face the dust that the truck raised.

Around a corner, the fingers skidded across the dash, almost out Old Fergus's open window, and Old Fergus jammed them tightly against the windshield. They left a dark streak across the dash, and Old Fergus, noticing this, plucked the sack of fingers from the dash and dangled it between his thumb and finger. He swayed the fingers in front of Fyvie. He said, "Quite the job, Fyvie."

At the hospital, Ned helped Fyvie from the truck and guided him to the reception desk.

"He severed his fingers with a circular saw," he told the nurse. "That's my shirt." He pointed at Fyvie's bandaged hand.

"Did you bring the fingers?"

Ned patted his pockets. "Yeah, yeah. They're in the truck." He ran back to get them. He ran past Old Fergus, who had lit up a cigarette outside the hospital doors. Ned peered into the truck but couldn't see the sack of fingers. "Where's Fyvie's fingers?" he called to Old Fergus.

"Fyvie's got them. I shoved them into his pocket."

Ned pulled a yellow rain-jacket from the bed of his truck and put it on and ran back into the hospital. Fyvie had been taken into an examination room. "The fingers are in his pocket," Ned told the nurse at the desk. She nodded.

8.

They started out at dawn, or near it, the next day. Old Fergus had borrowed Hugh's flat-deck tow truck, and it sat in the yard, gleaming. Old Fergus leaned against its hood.

"You're late," he told Ned.

Ned glanced at his watch: he wasn't late.

"Let's get moving," Old Fergus said.

And so they did. Old Fergus hauled himself into the passenger seat, and Ned settled himself behind the wheel.

They drove south along the highway, Old Fergus's eyes blankly trained on the pavement ahead. The first day they drove as far as the hot springs. They pulled into the lot of the motel across the highway from the springs, and Old Fergus got them a room. They continued the next morning.

White posts lined the highway, marking the miles, and it seemed to Ned that Old Fergus counted these, whispering numbers under his breath. After a while, Old Fergus asked what mile they were at.

Ned waited until they passed a marker. "Mile one twenty-seven," he said.

Old Fergus nodded, a smile twitching the corners of his mouth. "At mile one fourteen, stop."

"OK."

Ned slowed the truck as they approached the marker. Old Fergus leaned forward in his seat, peering intently at the ditch.

"What are you looking for?" Ned asked.

"There should be a road off here," Old Fergus answered. He shaded his eyes with his hand.

Ned pulled the truck onto the shoulder, and the two of them dropped from the truck.

"There," Old Fergus said. "See it?" He pointed at a gap between the trees, a few hundred yards from the highway. It was true: there was a road there, or what had been a road, at one time. Ned could see an impression running through the clearing to the trees. Knee-high grass had overgrown it, and trees had closed in over it.

"Let's go," Old Fergus said.

"Down that?"

Old Fergus nodded.

Ned looked at the ditch. If he took the truck at it head-on, they could probably get down safely.

They got back into the truck, and Ned eased it from the highway into the clearing. When the tires dropped over the rim of the pavement, the wheel bucked in Ned's fingers, but he kept the truck straight. Once they were on the flat of the clearing, the track he was to follow was more visible: the land on either side of it dropped away into shallow ditches. Ned drove cautiously across the clearing into the tunnel of trees. Branches clutched at the truck, squealing across the roof and doors.

"Hugh's not going to like this," Ned said.

Old Fergus didn't hear him. He sat forward in his seat, his fingers splayed on the dashboard, his knuckles white. He stared blankly at the track before the truck, or maybe past it, into space.

"How far, Fergus?"

Ned's question woke Old Fergus from his reverie. "What?"

"How much farther?"

"We're close." He pointed ahead. "There."

They emerged from the trees. On their left, a cluster of buildings stood in deep, yellow grass. A hip-roofed barn, a large shed, and a house, all in various stages of decay. Ned turned into the yard, and they got out of the truck.

The house was leaning to one side, its front windows black and vacant, a grey strip of plywood nailed across the door. Its black roof, sagging in the middle, had holes in it, and one end of the porch tilted at a wild angle. The barn behind was in worse shape: one end had slumped sideways to the ground, and the rest seemed bent on following. What had once been an outbuilding was heaped next to the barn, its grey timbers poking into the air.

Ned and Old Fergus kicked through the grass. Old Fergus was silent. He stopped in front of the house, staring at it. The air hummed with insects.

"What is this place?" Ned asked.

Old Fergus gave him a look that told him to be quiet.

Ned shrugged and sat on the porch. Old Fergus went to the back of the house. He called, and Ned went to join him. Old Fergus stood by a green pump.

"Give me a hand," Old Fergus said. "I can't get it going."

Ned tried the handle, but it was rusted in place. He leaned on it with all his weight and could feel the handle giving, slowly, and then it squealed. The handle dropped down, and Ned pumped until water came.

Old Fergus cupped his hands beneath the water and lifted them to his nose. He sniffed. "Rusty," he said, and dropped the water to the ground. "Used to be the sweetest water anywhere." He looked around. "Let's get going."

They drove back to the highway. After a while, Old Fergus said, "I had a dog there. A tawny mutt, with a curled tail. One night he came in—Maggie, my wife, it was her dog, really, always wanted him in the house at night. So we let him sleep in the back mudroom, and he'd curl himself up in the boots and shoes. In the mornings, he'd come into the kitchen for breakfast, and I'd give him some toast, or a bit of my egg. One night, we let him in as usual, and he headed straight for his bed and lay there. But the next morning at breakfast, he didn't come to the kitchen, so I went to find him, and there he was, in the mudroom, struggling to stand. And when he saw me, his tail thumped against the floor. I guess he'd got into some trouble the night before, and we hadn't noticed. He'd just curled up on the floor—he was bleeding from his belly—and hadn't made a sound. He stuck to the floor. I soaked a rag in warm water and loosened the blood in his fur. Maggie stroked his head. When he stood, there was a black arc of blood on the floor. I cleaned him up, made him a bed from a box. Maggie tried to clean the floor. She got most of it, but she could never get it right out. He would never sleep there again. Maggie made me bring his bed into our room."

Ned nodded: he didn't know what to say. He didn't know that Old Fergus had been married. He didn't think anyone in Rime knew that. At last, he asked, "What was the dog's name?"

Ned could feel Old Fergus's eyes on him. He turned and met his gaze. Old Fergus's eyes burned with what Ned supposed was anger.

Old Fergus turned back to face the highway. "Joe," he said, shaking his head.

They reached Edmonton late in the afternoon and in the rain, the wipers flicking across the windshield, the tires slushing over the wet pavement. Old Fergus was anxious to pick up his boat, so they drove to a small sheet metal shop in the city's west end. Ned turned into the parking lot and, through the fence, glimpsed the shining hull. They got out of the truck, and Ned followed Old Fergus into the shop. Old Fergus shook hands with a small man in grey coveralls and told him that he was here for the boat. The man told them to drive the truck around to the back, and they'd load the boat onto the truck there.

Ned did this. When he pulled into the back, Old Fergus was comparing the boat to his blueprints. Ned got out of the truck and asked, "Is it OK?"

Old Fergus smiled. "It sure is."

Ned looked at the boat. It was huge, larger than he had imagined, and it loomed ten feet above his head. He inspected its side and saw that the metal was speckled by small squares of different shades of grey. He walked to the stern. A round hole gaped in it, Ned supposed, for the propeller. Thick brown bands fastened the boat to its supports. What Old Fergus needed a boat this big for, he wasn't sure. He didn't think there were any lakes deep enough around Rime.

Old Fergus directed the shop's workers to lift the boat onto the truck. With a small crane, they hoisted the boat into the air, swung it over the truck deck, and gently lowered it. Ned clambered onto the truck and threw tie-downs over the top of it, and Old Fergus fastened these to the far side of the truck. Ned winched them tight with a crowbar.

"Will that hold it?" he asked.

"I think so."

They decided to grab something to eat quickly, and begin the return to Rime immediately.

They came around a bend, just past the hot springs, and a highway crew blocked their path. Ned slowed the truck, rolling down his window as he neared the flagman. The flagman looked at the back of the truck.

"What you got there?" he asked.

"A boat."

"I meant, what are you gonna do with it?"

"Build it." Ned looked over his shoulder. "That's just the hull."

The flagman nodded. "And then what?"

Ned shrugged. "What's going on here?" he asked.

"Repaving. You'll need to go around in the ditch."

The ditch dropped steeply from the road. Ned looked at it: he doubted that they'd be able to make it safely into it.

Old Fergus stirred in his seat. "What's going on?" he asked.

"We have to go around these guys. Through the ditch."

Old Fergus eyed the road ahead and the ditch. "No way," he said. "We'd tip."

"There's no other way to get by?" Ned asked the flagman.

"Nope."

Old Fergus leaned across Ned. "We'll just go ahead slowly," he said to the flagman. "We'll watch where we're going."

"No way. You can't get through on the road. Just through the ditch."

"That's crazy. We'd tip."

The flagman shrugged. "I didn't load a boat on the back of your truck."

Fergus sat back in his seat. He reached into his front pocket for a cigarette. He lit it and said, "Just drive, Ned."

"What?"

Fergus drew on his cigarette. The ash glowed. "You heard me. Drive."

"Let's try the ditch. If we back up a bit, we should get a better angle into it. It'll work."

"Drive, Ned. Or I will. Move over." Fergus slid from his seat to the ground.

Ned opened his door as well and stepped onto the pavement.

"What are you doing?" the flagman said.

"I'm driving through," Fergus said. He stopped in front of the flagman and pointed down the highway. "You can't close off the highway like this. People have to get through."

"I said, 'You can't get through,'" the flagman raised his voice and stepped in front of Fergus. "You'll have to use the ditch."

Down the highway, some of the road crew had stopped their work and were watching the scene, leaning on their shovels. A man with a white hard hat, the foreman, slowly made his way to the truck.

"Get out of the way," Fergus said to the flagman.

The flagman glanced nervously toward his foreman.

Fergus stepped past him.

"Hey," the flagman said. He clutched at Fergus's arm, spinning him around. Fergus stumbled against the truck's hood.

Ned stepped toward Fergus and held his hand out to him. Fergus swatted it away. Ned's face reddened as he watched Fergus stand. Ned turned. The flagman stood a couple of feet away. Ned shoved him.

"Hey, hey," the foreman called. "Take it easy, guy." He trotted toward the three of them.

Ned stepped in close to the flagman. He smelled of tar and cigarette smoke. His face was broad and tanned.

"Just relax," the flagman said. "I didn't mean to trip him."

Ned shoved the flagman again. The foreman was there by then, and he grabbed Ned's shoulder, throwing Ned toward the truck. Ned lunged back at him, and that's when the foreman hit him.

Ned saw it coming—he even thought, later, that he heard it—but he moved too slowly. He ducked his head as the fist flashed across his face. The knuckles crashed against the bridge of his nose: Ned felt the force of the blow before he heard its crack. He dropped to his knees, holding his hands to his face, and toppled onto his side. His hands warmed with the blood from his nose. He kept his eyes closed.

Old Fergus said, "Let him be."

Old Fergus touched Ned's shoulder and gently rolled him onto his back. Ned felt the blood pool against his eyes.

"Let's see, Ned."

Ned dropped his hands to his side.

Old Fergus swore under his breath. "You got a hankie, Ned?"

"In my back pocket." Ned could hear the road crew milling about them, murmuring to one another. Old Fergus pulled the rag from Ned's pocket and dabbed Ned's eyes.

"Can you see?"

Ned opened his eyes cautiously. They ached. His nose eclipsed the corner of his right eye's vision. Old Fergus stood above him, his face twisted in concern. "Yes," Ned said.

Old Fergus helped Ned to his feet. Old Fergus pulled a shirt from his bag and handed it to Ned. "Here," he said, "hold this against it."

In the end, there was nothing to do but return to the motel a couple of miles back. They could try the ditch, the foreman said, but there was no way they were getting through on the road.

That night Ned slept blackly, dreamlessly. He choked fitfully awake, feeling as if he had not slept at all. His face throbbed; the pain, heavy and dull, weighted his head against the pillow. He laboured to breathe, his throat caked and dry. An ice pack pressed against his nose like a glacier, and his cheek felt as if it had frostbite. The darkness of the hotel room drowned him. He felt suddenly faint; he couldn't tell

which way was up. He flung the covers from him and sat on the edge of the bed. The pressure around his nose eased, slumped toward his lips. With his finger, he traced the painful arc his nose carved across his face.

He thought: in the end, maybe, Old Fergus is, like everyone says, a crazy old man. What did his mutterings amount to? His craziness cost him nothing. Suddenly angry, Ned flicked on the bedside lamp.

Old Fergus's bed was empty.

Ned stood. Old Fergus was not in the room. The room was sparely furnished: two twin beds with a night table set between them and a desk against the far wall, over which hung a blue-tinted mirror. Ned caught his reflection and stepped toward the mirror.

His right eye was turning brown, and a yellow bruise flushed beneath both eyes. He examined his back. Two raw scrapes bloomed on his shoulder blade. On the desk before him, Old Fergus's boat plans lay spread. On them, two pencil stubs lay crossed. Ned flexed his fingers, anxious. Turning, he saw Old Fergus's duffel bag slouched against the foot of the bed. So he was around somewhere. Ned's stomach leapt. He tugged a pair of jeans from his own bag and slipped them on. He eased a sweater over his head and jammed his bare feet into his boots.

Outside the motel, Old Fergus slept, slumped in the driver's seat, his arm on the window sill, a cigarette smouldering between his knuckles, its ash long. His bathrobe gaped open at his chest. The boat sat behind him in the light of the motel's red neon sign, a wound in the night, Ned thought.

He strolled to the boat and rapped it with his knuckles. It echoed hollowly. He glanced at the cab where Old Fergus was sleeping. Ned clambered onto the truck bed, then onto the cab. He stood there, listening for any sounds Old Fergus might make. Hearing nothing, he grasped the prow and hauled himself onto the boat. He stood high above the ground. He peered into the bottom of the hull, but could see nothing but shadow. In the stern, a makeshift ladder had been welded to the inside of the boat, and Ned climbed down. The air was cooler in the bottom of the boat. He looked about himself. It seemed useless, this boat, a waste of money and of time. He touched his nose. And a waste of my face, he thought. He lay down, shivering with the cold of the metal. He rolled onto his side to ease the pressure of his nose. This close to the metal he could see the weld down the middle of the hull: it was orangish-blue, the colour of oil on water. He rolled onto his back.

He stared past the motel sign, trying to see the stars. It occurred to him that he knew nothing about this boat, absolutely and completely nothing. He did not know why this boat was so important to Old Fergus, and, worse yet, he did not know how to ask. He felt panic rising into his chest. His nose was throbbing again, and the side of his head ached. If he was honest with himself, he did not know anything about his own visions, either. He scrambled to his feet and raced to the ladder. He needed to get out of this boat. He climbed the ladder and dropped to the parking lot.

Old Fergus still slept. Ned stood beside the truck and watched him sleep. The cigarette had burned almost to his knuckles. Ned bent his head near it and blew on it. The ash glowed brighter, and still Old Fergus did not wake. Ned blew on the ash again, and Old Fergus's hand twitched. Ned stepped back. Old Fergus started awake

and shook his hand. He inspected his knuckles and then, noticing Ned, said, "Burned myself."

"We could head up the highway now," said Ned. "The crew's here at the motel."

Old Fergus nodded.

"I'll go grab our bags."

When he returned, Old Fergus was sitting in the passenger seat. Ned tossed the bags in and started the truck. He flicked the headlights on. He turned onto the highway. The pavement slid beneath the headlights like water. They drove in silence.

When they reached the barricade, Ned slid from his seat. He lifted the sign and tossed it into the ditch. Ned drove the truck onto the gravel. He could feel the weight of the boat behind him: the wheel shimmied, and the back end of the truck slurred from side to side because of it. He liked the feeling, liked pulling the truck under control. When they reached the far end of the construction area, Ned had to remove another barricade. He pulled through and stopped so that he could replace it. He peered back along the road they'd come, and he followed their tracks back down the highway a short distance. They washed back and forth across the road. He thought, this really isn't so bad. As he returned to the truck he saw a flare of light from the cab: Old Fergus lighting a cigarette.

Ned pulled himself back into the cab and rolled down his window. "What are you going to name it?" he asked.

Old Fergus sucked in a breath of smoke. He exhaled. "*Persephone*," he said.

Ned glanced at Old Fergus. "Ulysses's wife," he said, although he wasn't sure.

Old Fergus stared out the window and said nothing.

9.

When he returned home, Ned's mother gasped when she saw his face. She touched his nose with her fingertips, the palm of her other hand pressed tightly against his cheek.

"It makes me look tough," Ned said, trying to reassure her. "Julia'll love it."

"All it looks like is you lost a fight," his father said.

Ned shrugged.

"I hope Old Fergus is paying you well enough. This sort of stuff doesn't happen at the bank, you know."

Ned nodded. "I quit," he said. "I'm leaving next week for school."

The three of them stood in a circle. Ned's parents watched him with concern.

"How could someone do such a thing?" his mother asked, shaking her head.

"People leave," said his father. "It happens all the time."

10.

Fergus edges along *Persephone*'s hull. The boat shifts suddenly, and he drops through the air, his bathrobe swelling behind him like the wings of a great white bird. A long fall, longer than he would have wished, and he twists his body so that he can land on his feet and roll, his shoulder dipped and head tucked, as he'd done years ago in training.

But that was a long time ago, and he's forgotten the way to roll, or his legs have, and he hits the ground hard, his slippered feet flat, pain hooking through his hips. He shoots forward onto his chest and outstretched palms, sliding through the long grass, flattening a track.

She threw me, he thinks. I can't believe that she threw me.

He lies on the ground, staring up at the night sky, a pain in his hips beginning to pulse. *Persephone* glints in the light as the moon emerges from the clouds. Lifting his head, he can see the brace that gave way—a short length of two-by-four he jammed between the ground and her hull—flat on the ground. His body is not as resilient as it used to be, and Fergus is sure that his hip is broken. He pushes his chest up with his elbows and gathers his right leg beneath him. He tries to stand, but can't, and reconciles himself to wait for Ned. He looks at his watch. Its luminous face says that it is 3:00 a.m. Ned will be by at 8:00. Five hours.

The ground is warming beneath him, but the air is cold and damp. His breath mists before his face in slow puffs. The clouds, scalloped like fish scales, turn slowly across the sky, lit by the moon behind them.

He wishes he were dressed. His bathrobe and slippers are not warm enough. There is a tube of Vick's and a package of cigarettes in his bathrobe pocket, and he pulls the tube out, squeezes a little of the lotion into his hand and rubs his chest with it. The artificial heat warms him briefly, but the fumes make him cough.

He reaches into his pocket for his cigarettes, brings one to his lips and lights it. The dogs come by: Jack—a mutt with mostly shepherd in him—and Sam—a golden retriever. They come by, and he lifts his hand and scratches Jack behind the

ears. Sam sniffs around Fergus's feet and wanders off to sniff around *Persephone*. Fergus pulls Jack close to his chest, hugging the dog's warmth, and the dog relents. Fergus hears a sprinkling against the hull, then Sam pads through the grass. Jack struggles. Fergus lets him go, and the dogs leave him.

Ned will come by at 8:00, Fergus thinks. But then a weight forms in his chest as he realizes that he might not. But surely, Fergus thinks, he will come, even though the boat's been delivered. He thinks of Ned's nose and, despite himself, chuckles. A good kid, Ned, but he sure can't fight. He imagines himself, years ago, how he would have taken the foreman on. He might have lost, but it would have been fun. For sure he'd have given foreman something to remember him by. Something more than bruised knuckles.

The pain has eased a little, and Fergus tries to stand again. He lifts himself onto his elbows and rests a moment, staring at the hull of *Persephone*. What ever possessed him, he thinks, shaking his head. He sits up, but a pain lights up, arcing through his pelvis. He lowers himself into the grass again. *Persephone*. Is that Ulysses' wife? He doubts himself now. Ned would know. But that means he's named her wrong, and there's no re-naming her now. He racks his mind. He's sure Persephone is not Ulysses' wife. But what is her name?

But maybe Ned is wrong. He didn't understand the story about Joe, after all. All he could ask was the dog's name. And Fergus had wanted him to ask more.

* * *

"We have to rise above it," Maggie had said. She was looking away from him, out across the fields, ruined by hail the fifth year running. Strands of hair

straggled from her forehead, slick with rain. She turned back toward him. "We're bigger than this, Fergus—"

He struck her, his hand flashing from above his shoulder, from above his head, angling down, across her face. A crack, like the sound of a branch snapping, broke the air. She fell to the ground, her hands clutched to her face.

He stood above her, trembling stupidly. He was shocked at what he'd done; he'd done it without thinking. He bent down, reached out to her, stammering. He wrapped his fingers around her arms, pulled them from her face.

The blood crept from her mouth. He was shocked that it did not flood from it, but it crawled thickly, a stream just after the spring thaw, the water thick, coagulate with ice. She'd fallen to her back, her head on the gravel.

"I'm sorry," he said, stupidly. He wiped the blood from her chin with his handkerchief.

She looked at him, her eyes rheumy. Gathering herself up towards him, she cleared her throat as if she were going to spit at him. She hated him, then; he could see it in her eyes. He braced himself, but she did not spit at him. Her eyes went cold, distant, as if she were looking through him at the clouds above. She was reconciling herself. She rolled onto her side and spat. Her spittle lay there, thick and red, like a fat earthworm. She looked back at him, and he recognized the cold look. It was the coldness that crept into her when the hail had come before, a coldness that crept into her when she set herself against something, set her shoulder beneath it, lifting it, her shoulders creaking against it.

She said, "I forgive you."

He stood. She rolled over, coughed, and spat again. He left her there.

At home, he called the dog to him, his fingers stinging from the blow he'd given Maggie. He kicked at a stone embedded in the wet yard; his toe missed it, but his boot heel caught against it as his foot arced up, and he stumbled. He stooped and with his red fingers plucked the stone—mottled grey, smooth as though it tumbled down a streambed—from the ground. He flung it against the house, and it crashed through the kitchen window.

The dog had not come, so he whistled, his fingers in his mouth. From the direction of the barn, the dog's bark came to him, distant and muffled. No doubt he lay in the loft, sheltered from the hail.

They could get the grain off the fields and sell it for feed again, but that would not be enough. Not any more. An ugly thought formed in his mind: something he could not understand was driving him from his land.

And Maggie, although she thought she did, had no mercy for him. She accepted whatever happened as the cross she had to bear. And now, he knew, he was that cross.

He saw the dog come around the corner of the barn, and he slapped his thighs. The dog trotted toward him.

Fergus decided that he would take the dog with him when he left.

* * *

Finally Fergus sleeps. He starts awake later, the sun rising. Penelope, he thinks. That's Ulysses' wife. There's a vehicle on the road; he can hear it coming. He looks at his watch: eight-fifteen. It must be Ned.

It is Ned. He pulls into the yard, and when he spots Fergus on the ground, he rushes to him. He bends over him.

"You OK?" he asks.

Fergus nods.

"Can you stand?"

Fergus shakes his head.

Ned looks around, deciding how to get Fergus to the hospital.

"Ned."

Ned looks down at Fergus. "What?"

"You meant Penelope."

"I know," Ned answers. "I'm sorry."