

PRISM international

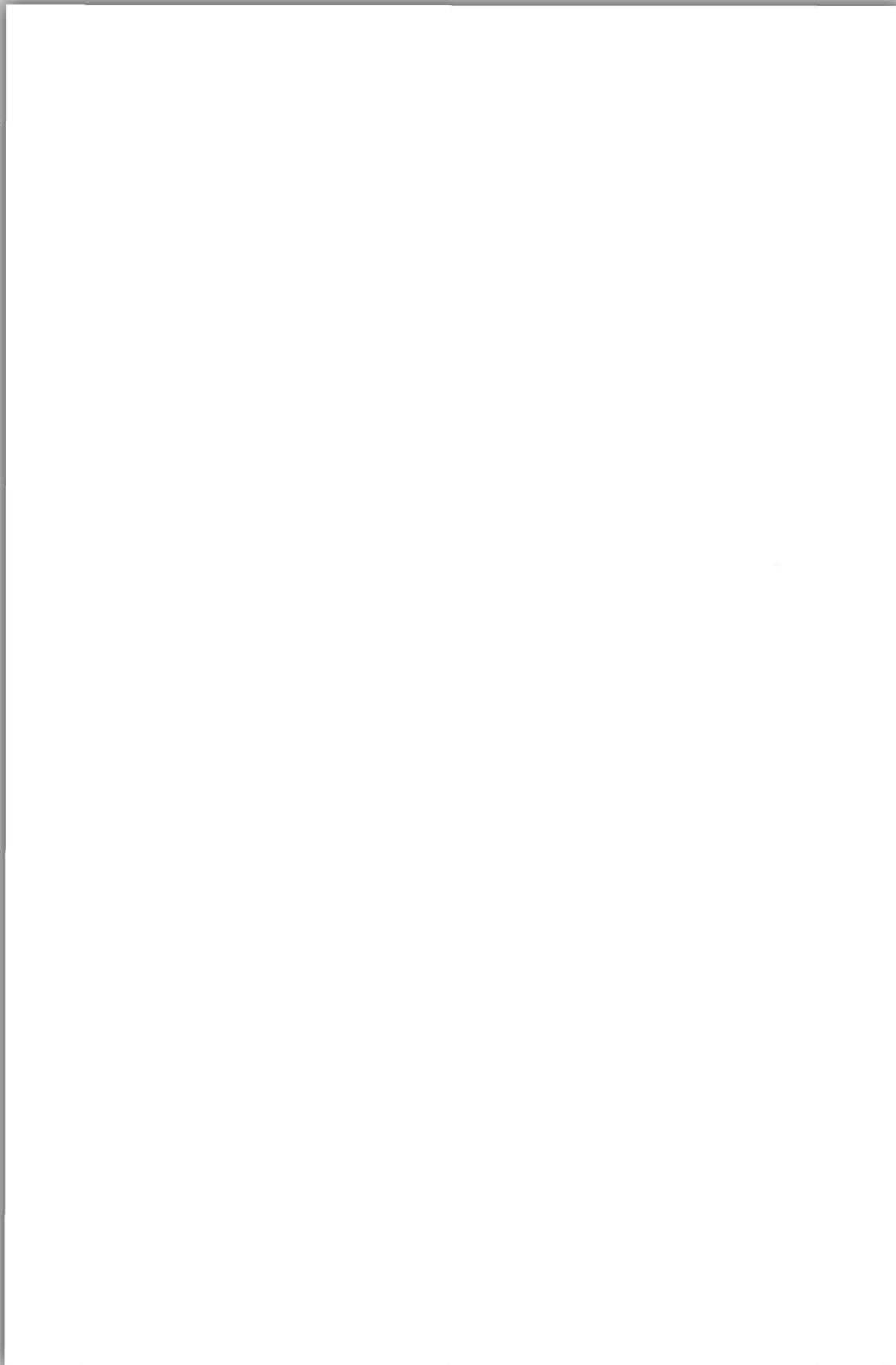
Summer 2003

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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World





PRISM international

2002 PRISM Short Fiction Contest

Grand Prize – \$2,000

"Sperm King"

Jane Eaton Hamilton

Vancouver, British Columbia

Runners-up – \$250 each

"Where They Are Now"

Tammy Armstrong

Vancouver, British Columbia

"Catching On"

Rebecca Bengal

Austin, Texas, USA

"White Bread Fiction"

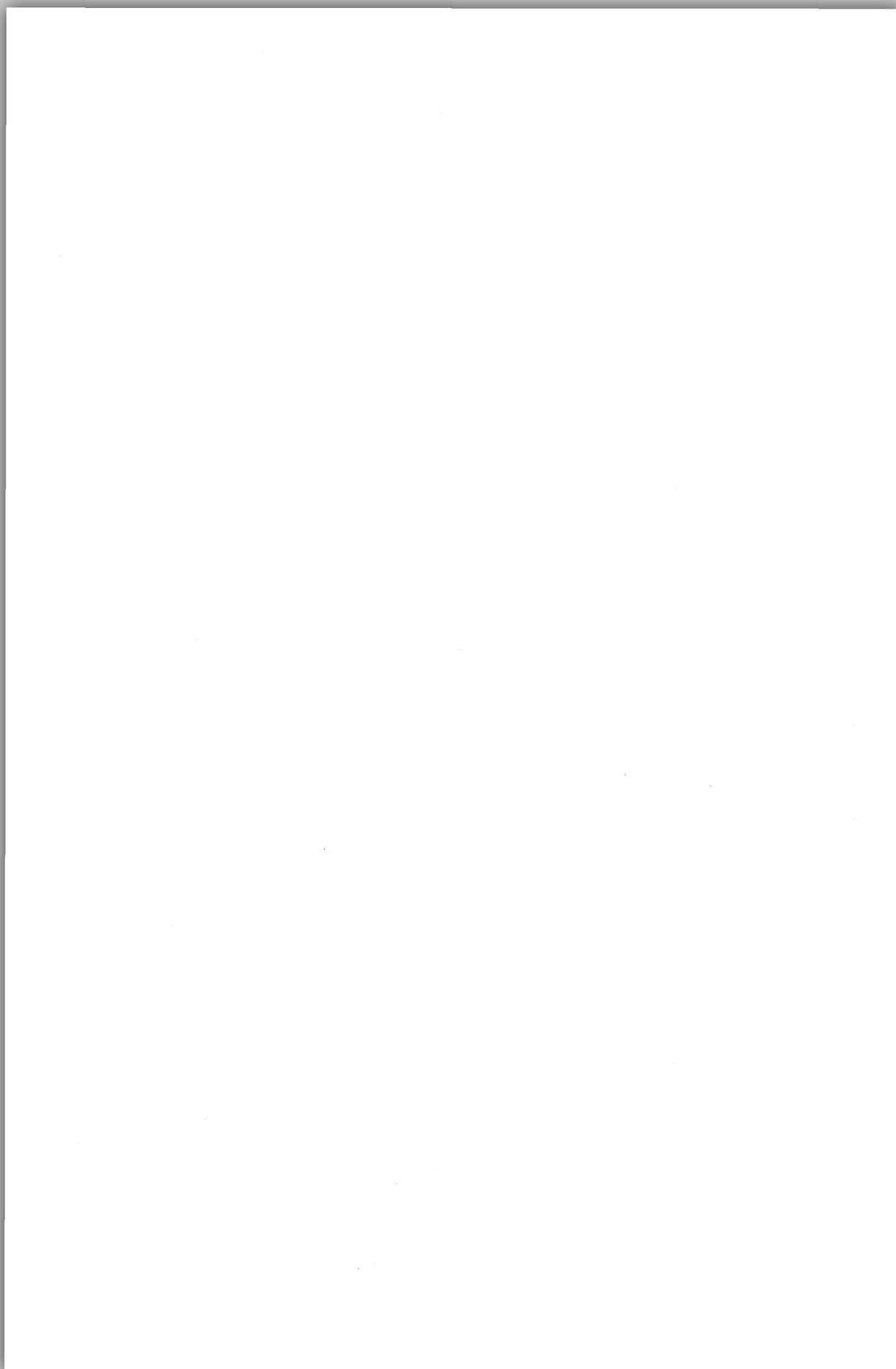
Heather Birrell

Toronto, Ontario

"What We Wanted"

Michael V. Smith

Vancouver, British Columbia



PRISM international

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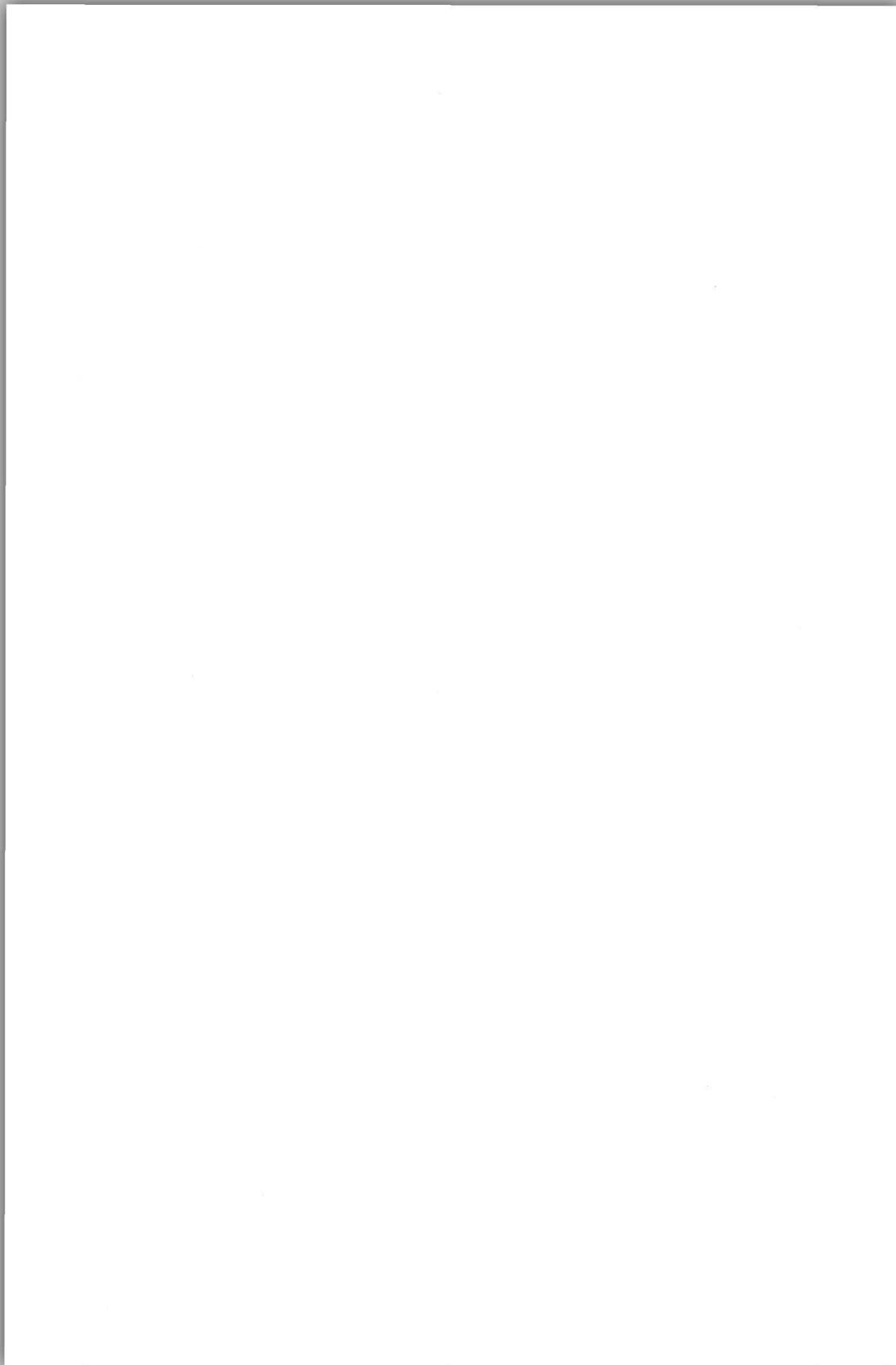
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Choosing Favourites

Among my writing colleagues, no pursuit results in more embittered consternation, more cries of disbelief, more arguments through the wee hours, than a discussion about which books hold up as truly great works of fiction. A novel or collection of stories lauded by one writer invariably suffers the criticism of others. What one person deems subtle another calls obtuse, impenetrable; what one praises as meaningful another dismisses as sentimental or didactic. We argue in circles, frustrated by what we perceive as the blindness, weakness, lack of sophistication of another's choice.

There's a reason I'm telling you this.

Judging a fiction contest is no different than choosing a favourite novel, or for that matter, choosing a favourite colour. We can all come up with criteria, lists, systems and standards of measurement, but in the end, no real objective or empirical "best" exists; there remains only what we, as individuals of particular tastes and aesthetics, believe to be the best. So, with that in mind, this is how I, possessed of my own influences, preferences and biases, chose this year's winner:

Over several days, I read through all fourteen short-listed stories. I set aside the strongest work and, by the end of my reading, had five stories neatly piled on my ottoman. Here were the characters, the fictional worlds, the narrative events that compelled me, as a reader, to invest at page one, often within the first few sentences. These stories demanded to be read again.

I admired the scope of Heather Birrell's "White Bread Fiction," an ambitious meta-fictional piece with truly heartbreaking moments; "Catching On," by Rebecca Bengal, the tale of two homeless men who decide to hop a train, hooked me with its sure narrative voice and vivid, telling detail. I found Michael V. Smith's story of awakening and betrayal, "What We Wanted," a whirlpool of curiosity, anxiety and sexual tension, and "Where They Are Now," by Tammy Armstrong, charmed me with its tender, off-kilter treatment of the bizarre world of a Hollywood child star.

A different judge may have easily selected any one of these four stories as the winner. All five finalists had obvious and distinctive strengths. All five stories also tempted my editorial mind—a little nip and tuck here, a reworking of a paragraph there, a reconsidered ending. But, in choosing

the winner, "Sperm King," by Jane Eaton Hamilton, I selected a story whose sophistication and depth of character eclipsed any minor editorial quibbles I might have had.

Hamilton's keen sense of scene, her instincts around timing and delivery, her ability to balance humour and a churning emotional under-current impressed me immediately. The dialogue, clever and knife-edge sharp, resonated with subtext. Her characters—multi-dimensional, complex in their desires and anxieties—were at once sympathetic and accountable, their desperate actions forcing me to smile and cringe at the same time. "Sperm King" delved into the entanglements of relationship and jealousy, the complicated, often unconsidered ways in which ordinary people pursue, discard, and tolerate one another. Hamilton's approach was mature and insightful, satisfying in its willingness to do more than skim the surface of scenes, to dip into the mire of need and insecurity that stains everyday interactions.

The five stories in this issue are brave and alive, each one an intimate and visceral experience, like putting your hand to another's wrist and feeling a pulse. I'm grateful for the opportunity to encourage these writers, and I eagerly anticipate seeing more of their work in print. I hope the work of this year's winners either affirms or challenges your opinions about good fiction, and, more importantly, leads to some all-night discussions about what makes a story good.

Jane Eaton Hamilton

Sperm King

Tina said, "I can't believe how good it is to see you." She meant my wife.

A week ago when I'd answered the phone and told her I was coming to Vancouver with Ruth, she said, "Are you two joined at the asshole? Roger, just send Ruth. Ruth can come alone.

"Don't think I've forgiven you," she added, but there was a strange catch in her voice.

Later on Ruth said, "Of course you can come with me. Tina's completely forgiven you."

Tina used to be my girlfriend, till I fooled around on her with her best buddy, with Ruth.

Tina's baby arrived swung in an infant carrier by the new man, Eric, the cop. He had ham-steak hands, a beefy head—hell, he was big all over. Even his nose was big, and red with popped blood vessels. He scanned me like a bar code. I didn't know what he knew or didn't know about my history with Tina. Ruth made the requisite noises over the baby, who was pasty and plump-cheeked.

Tina and Eric worked up in Cape Smash, Nunavut, where he was the only cop in town and she was the only doctor. She had office hours, but also on-call emergency hours. She did a lot of peculiar medicine, as when someone came in with an abscess threatening to pull his own tooth. There were no dentists. The guy was going to pull it out using string and a doorknob if she didn't assist, and it didn't matter that she hadn't done a similar thing before.

There was pain, blood, relief, gratitude. Sometimes it didn't go as well. One time Tina thought she was about to deliver one baby and there were three. One time there was a stalker who killed a nurse—hunting knife. Occasionally Tina tried to save the life of a sled dog after a mauling by a polar bear, or a kid after a mauling by a sled dog. Sometimes there were corpses. One time a Native woman in a body bag woke up.

But these days, she said, life sucked. They were on leave. "Mat and Pat leave," Tina called this, telling us Eric was the only RCMP in his detachment to ever take it.

Big whoop, I thought. Like I wouldn't take one.

The condo was Tina's; she'd put her money in it before she'd met Eric

but after me. She'd taken the contract up north to get rid of her medical school debt—go up far enough and a third was forgiven off the bat. The money was great, if you could stand the weather. Stand the isolation. Stand not seeing daylight for four months a year. Stand the only cop in town.

The dog Tina and I had gotten when we were together was at the door to meet us, but instead of being a puppy she was now old and fat. Stiff, a beer keg on legs. I knew how she felt. My back plagued me endlessly and lately my knuckles were swelling up. Her paws didn't seem big enough to support her weight. Her butt wiggled; she picked up a slipper and carried it across the room.

"Hello, Miss Dog," said Tina affectionately. Tina looked at me. "See? Roger? She remembers you from back before you were a jerk."

The dog looked like she ate chocolate cake for dinner every night and, when Tina took off her car coat, I saw she pretty well looked the same. Her hair was still the strange colour of carrots, like when we were living together.

The cop moved inside like a cop, long, strong, vaguely threatening strides, pausing before he moved around corners. Tina had always liked her men big—it was why she was attracted to me. Only this guy had me by forty pounds, easy. Maybe fifty pounds. Concrete muscle.

The condo was pretty bland. I thought it was maybe going to be in an old warehouse in Gastown, but it was in a new building on the water, only not with a view. Two bedrooms across the living room from each other, a soaker tub in the master bathroom, a heat exchanger in the gas fireplace, a garburator. Everything fresh, you know? The way new places are? But sterile as the autoclave at work. Looked like a hotel. The only picture on the walls was above the master bed—a painting of a bloody moose. The furniture was basic, new, not expensive. Tina had been going to put us on an air mattress in the living room, but the woman who looked after the place while they were away agreed to go stay with a friend and surrender her room.

It wasn't even cold outside. It was January; it was Vancouver; Eric had pointed out actual cherry blossoms in trees lining the streets. He said in January up north the glasses inside their cupboards wore overcoats of ice.

I said I could identify. I said in Edmonton cows in the fields were freezing from the hoof up. "Leather statues."

"I can beat that," said Eric and passed his hand over his butcher-block jaw. "Our cat's tail snapped off in the door."

I frowned. It seemed important to one-up him. "Once, Ruth got frost-bite on her boobs."

Eric said, "No way." He looked at my wife—assessingly. He dropped his gaze to her breasts.

"He's shitting you," said Ruth, and shot me a look. Why couldn't I talk

about this? My wife had exceptional breasts. She was an underwear model for a department store. She was the most beautiful woman in any room, and she was in this one. She had it all over Tina. Except Tina had the baby.

I kept thinking how Eric could pull my record, find out if I had warrants. Not that I did. Why would I? I managed a dental office. But if I did, the man could find them.

"I think the baby looks like you," Ruth said to Tina.

The baby didn't look like anyone; he looked like a baby. He looked like a blob. It was supposed to be a compliment to say he looked like his mother, but in fact Tina herself didn't look so hot. I felt a stirring of old worry. She'd had the c-section and the premature baby and then to top it off, the baby had been sick earlier in the month with a respiratory illness that Tina had seen kill some of her patients. She had circles under her eyes down to the bottom of her nose and her skin had a kind of otherworldly pallor. I hated to remember I'd always kind of liked that about Tina—how she seemed like she needed someone.

Tina looked down at herself. "I thought I'd just get skinny again. I don't know, magically."

"You're skinny," said Ruth, although it was a lie. It was the way women lied to other women they liked. "I'm so happy we could come to meet the squirt. I think he has Eric's eyes."

I looked at the baby—how could she tell that? Here's what I saw: eyes, nose, mouth, ears, fat little fingers that didn't stop sawing the air. When I looked at Eric I saw a man, a cop, a huge guy—someone with stubbles of black hair crawling across his scalp like miniature flagpoles. Was that supposed to be the same?

Tina shook her head. "I always tell new moms to be patient. It took nine months to gain that weight and it'll take another nine to lose it." She lifted the baby who was limp with sleep, supported his wobbling head, and put him to her shoulder. "Huh, huh, Peanut," she crooned. She paced and jiggled him.

I said, "So, Eric, how long have you been with the force?"

He was getting us drinks. He carried in glasses of red wine for the women; whiskey neat for us. I was surprised Tina was drinking, but when Eric put a baby bottle in the microwave I guessed she was through with the breast thing. Maybe she didn't want her breasts to sag. She didn't have terrific boobs to start with, not compared to Ruth, anyhow. She wasn't very sentimental—she wouldn't be one of those mothers who feed until their kid is five.

The drink went down, way down, and made my cock warm.

Tina sat down and rested the baby on his back on the tabletop with one hand under his head as a pillow; the baby screamed and tried to get at the bottle's nipple. I knew what the kid was feeling. For guys, it was one long

story from cradle to grave re: nipples. You know how easy it was to leave Tina for Ruth? I snapped my fingers and when I looked back I was already gone.

The baby was wearing a blue getup with feet. Tina squeezed his diaper in the vicinity of his wiener, then she laughed. She said maybe it looked like molestation but she was actually just checking to see if he was wet.

Ruth launched into a thing about did diapers stay dry now, because back when she was a babysitting teenager babies got soaked from chin to toe. Her day, like she was old. She had a few years on Tina, sure, but she had plenty of fertile years left. Ten maybe. And I was only thirty-nine—didn't I have forty more? Tina said how the pee expanded gel crystals and formed a lump at the front of the diaper, keeping the baby dry. For a minute Tina's baby sucked and the girls talked about improvements in baby stuff. Car seats that could actually save lives. Cribs with bars placed so kids couldn't get their heads stuck. New things medicine had learned, for instance that babies had to sleep on their backs.

"Don't they startle?" said Ruth.

Tina moved her palm in a circle on the baby's middle. "I swaddle this guy."

I was getting bored. Apparently babies survived infancy just so their parents' friends could have an excuse to go to bed early.

Tina honked the kid again and said this time he was wet. She went into the bedroom. The rest of us weren't really comfortable without her. Eric walked around. I kept feeling like he was marking his territory. *I pee here*, he was saying. Well, put a frigging picture on the wall then, bub. We didn't know what to tell each other. Was I supposed to ask how Tina was actually doing? I thought I could see for myself. She was having a hard time. Plus she'd told Ruth she was almost sorry she'd ever gotten pregnant. She was due back at work and didn't have a nanny lined up—any nanny around was a woman whose crotch she stared into on a regular basis. She was thinking she had to cut her hours. She'd only been a GP for four years and already she felt like she was on her way out of practice.

I smelled my hands. There was a scent to them, a diaper smell, although I hadn't been that near to the baby.

Eric said, "There's an ice hotel in Quebec that just opened up." He talked about it—the ice slab mattresses, the icicle candleholders, the bureaux carved out of ice with real drawers that opened and shut, although who would want to put his clothes in them?

Ruth said, "I wouldn't stay in an ice hotel unless they had hot tubs."

I looked around. This place could have been an ice hotel. Nobody lived here. Nobody had set down roots. I said, "I wouldn't go near an ice hotel even if a hooker came with each room."

Ruth looked at me with her mouth downturned. She looked exactly like

she did every month when she discovered she had her period.

The dog whined to go out.

I said, "Honey, I didn't mean anything."

Ruth shook her head. "You never do mean anything, Roger, that's the trouble."

Don't air that, I thought. Don't let them know we have our problems.

The dog whined, then scratched the door.

Ruth stood up, stretched—a pretty sight. "Why don't I take her? I could use the fresh air."

Eric looked at me. I thought he was waiting for me to say I'd go with my wife, but I didn't, so he said he would. How did I feel about that? I asked myself the question.

Ruth picked up the dog's leash and whispered to me, "You say such stupid shit."

"What?" I said.

But they went out. I was supposed to stay where I was, but I knocked on the door jamb in the master bedroom. Tina was bent over the baby. She looked up with a lock of hair over her cheek and said to come in. I watched Tina with the baby. His balls were the size of baseballs, but you could mistake his penis for a pencil eraser. She lifted him by his ankles to wipe him. I wondered if he'd someday remember that.

"So," I said. The bedroom was definitely occupied. Suitcases were disgorging clothes like pulled teeth. We'd always fought about this, Tina and me. I liked my habitat neat.

Tina looked at me.

"So, you okay?" I said.

"Who's asking?"

I didn't reply.

"Why did you come?"

Oh, for pity's sake. I heard tears. She was going to start up. I had always hated it when Tina cried. I'd do anything—anything—to make her stop. Except originally I wouldn't drop Ruth. I'd refused to drop Ruth when it mattered. I married Ruth instead.

"I don't know why you came here when I asked you not to."

I just shrugged.

"I didn't want you to see this. Everything's falling apart. Sometimes I can't get through a day, Roger." She stared down at the baby waving his feet in the air like he was riding an exercycle upside down. "This is how I ended up and I don't want to be here. We should've stuck it out, you and me. I never got pregnant with you."

"Hey," I said. I guessed Ruth had been talking to her about my sperm count.

She began to sob. I glanced at the door then gathered her into my arms.

She gave a little cry and put her arms around my neck and hung on tight. "Hey," I said again and smelled her up close, her hair, a scent like the blooming jasmine Ruth grew in our kitchen greenhouse window.

"He doesn't understand," she said. "It's my body that went through all this. Guys don't get it."

I knew she was right. I was getting an erection. I twisted so she wouldn't realize.

"We should've made it work," she said. She pulled away and searched my eyes.

Jesus, I thought.

"We were good, right?"

We were good, but after that we weren't good. I got Ruth and later she got Eric. Good? What did good have to do with it? It was over. We went on with our lives. I still loved her, but I went on lying in the bed I'd made. I wasn't that uncomfortable, even though my back usually hurt.

"I miss you, you know," she said softly. She stroked my cheek with one fingernail.

Her guy and my wife were about to come back in. I thought I should get out of there. I didn't know where the circumstance was going.

She said, "Roger?"

"I should—uh." I couldn't think what I should do. Not this. I wanted to be decent. But decency didn't come organically. It was like a pesticide, chemical and unfamiliar. The baby's legs churned below us while we stood in the fume of his bodily odours.

She took my hand and slipped it under her stretch pants and pushed it down to her genitals. She held her hand over top of it, pressing mine up. She was still looking at me. I didn't move my hand. I didn't move it at all. On the bed, the baby jabbed out his feet.

There was a long set of moments where nothing changed. We stayed like that. I could feel the heat of Tina through her panties.

"Huh," I finally said—a noise. I wanted to say something about being hard. We could just do it, the two of us, and let Ruth and Eric walk in on us. There were tears running down Tina's cheeks. I took my free thumb and wiped one away. She nodded and released the pressure on my hand but didn't pull away.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Things are the pits with Eric," she said. "Well, only sort of. I love the big lunk. I do, but I'm all over the place." She opened her legs slightly.

I knew I shouldn't, but I moved her underwear aside and went inside her so she gasped and grabbed my arm, going up on her toes, holding me in place.

I don't know if either of us heard the door, but Miss Dog bounded into the bedroom and we jumped apart.

Quickly, Tina slipped a fresh diaper under the baby, applied the tabs and clapped the baby's feet together in a game of patty cake. She didn't look anywhere near me. She fondled the dog's big head and said, "Miss Dog, Miss Dog."

Ruth came in red-cheeked from the cold. She looked at Tina and Tina didn't look back. She looked at me.

"Can I hold the little dude?" I said. Tina passed the baby to me. He was unexpectedly heavy. Ruth came over, frowning, and kissed the top of his head. She said something about softness and baby powder.

We moved into the living room where Eric told us the dog had the runs, bad. Every time they'd thought Miss Dog was finished doing her business, she had to start up again.

The girls talked about Tina's pregnancy, which was full of extra water or something and high blood pressure and ended up with the section. Eric brought out photographs which he displayed proudly, laying them out on the table like playing cards. He showed us Tina being wheeled to her room; Tina in bed, a baby monitor strapped across her middle; Tina having an internal; Tina in the operating room. I thought he'd stop there, but he continued. Tina behind a green sheet. The surgeon swabbing. The surgeon cutting. The surgeon reaching in for a foot. The baby caught in a bright shaft of light while below him, a gaping red hole was exposed—Tina's insides. I held that photograph in my hands and stared hard. I felt something, maybe pissed off at Eric. I knew it was just something accidental that had happened, but when I looked at her guts hanging out and Eric's transparent pride I was pissed off. The baby was covered over with white junk with a blue tinge to his skin. He was lifted in a nurse's arms over the divider so Tina could kiss his toe. There were more pictures: the clamped umbilicus. The baby in a bassinet being suctioned. The baby being weighed. He was a month early, but bigger than most full term babies.

Why was this stuff interesting? While Eric showed the photos, Tina leaned into him looking for all the world like a loving wife.

I tried to change the subject. We talked for a while about people we knew—divorces, dead parents, promotions, relocations, illnesses, but there was a brittleness.

"Did you hear Gary Bounds was in detox?" This from Tina.

"What a nimrod that guy was," said Ruth and reached for some pretzels.

The baby was done drinking and Tina burped him over her shoulder. I was at the right angle to see him barf curdled milk.

"Did you know Caroline Freemont has breast cancer?" Caroline was someone the women had once worked with back when Tina was a photographer. "She's having a bilateral mastectomy." Tina looked at her watch and sniffled. She sounded sad, scared. "Omigod, tomorrow. At two p.m. I'd

rather die. You always think, okay, no breasts, big deal, you look like you looked as a little girl, but it's not like that, it's an indent, it's a cave, it's gross."

If a woman has breast cancer, she can undress in the closet as far as I'm concerned. I brushed off my shirt like I had a sudden case of crumbs.

Tina started telling Ruth how getting pregnant was an accident. She and Eric were engaged, she said, but Eric had this vasectomy they tried to get reversed. They shouldn't have been able to get pregnant for a year.

Eric said, "She's right. I was separated from my wife for, like, five minutes when we got pregnant."

"We." Like he was some sort of major stud, new-age dad rolled into one. Like the baby had been inside him too. Give me a break.

Eric drew Tina to him and ensconced her in a bear hug. I still couldn't figure out if the way they seemed affectionate was just for my sake or genuine. Eric was maybe just marking his territory.

"Sperm King," said Ruth and looked at me. Yeah, right at me. Me with the insufficient tadpoles. For a second I didn't know whether she was going to laugh or bawl, but she laughed. She was on her third glass of wine and I for one was grateful. Otherwise she might have been a bitch.

Eric already had kids, twin girls, with his wife who'd moved them to Toronto and simultaneously got serious about being a Baptist. When she heard he'd put a sandwich in someone else's toaster oven, she told the kids their father was going to Hell.

"Pass go," said Tina ruefully. "Collect child support. Every second pay cheque Eric gets goes straight to that cow. I'd be happy if she was the one freezing up from the ground hoofs first."

"I don't mind the child support," said Eric, shaking his head. "I want to support my kids."

Sperm King. Where the fuck was his crown? I could give him a crown: King Big Guy. King-Not-Making-My-Ex-Happy despite his fucking prolific spermatozoa. King Loser.

"We have no say where the money goes," said Tina. "They show up at the airport with holes in their clothes and shoes that are too small. She's not spending it on them, that's for sure. You know where she went for Christmas, our dime? Jamaica." The baby was fussing. She got up, disgusted, and walked him back and forth. "Huh, huh, Peanut," she said. "Huh, huh, Peanut. Huh, huh, Peanut."

Ruth asked if the baby was sleeping through, and Tina said he was, till five.

I thought: fuck, piss, damn. When does Tina get any shut-eye?

Ruth wouldn't acknowledge me. Something was bugging her—suspicions about me and Ruth, I figured. She gave a moué and angled her chair to face Tina.

Tina asked Eric to make some Pablum. Tina said she wasn't supposed to feed a baby this young solids, but he was growing at an astonishing clip: he was the size of a Butterball turkey. So she was giving it to him despite what the books said. A minute later, Tina shoveled Pablum into the baby's mouth. Half of it came right back out.

Eric talked about a big drug bust he'd just been involved in. He talked about how there could be guns behind the door or how a battering ram could get stuck in a door instead of taking it off its hinges the way it was supposed to.

Ruth said, "God, I'd die."

"You take it out, start again and hope you don't get shot now the morons inside have had plenty of warning."

Tina said, "You pace the floor with a screaming baby and wait for him to call home to say he's okay."

I wanted to take her hand, then, but I resisted.

"M'ere, hon," said Eric and pulled her onto his lap before resting his head on her shoulder. Miss Dog waddled over and did the same to one of her knees.

Poor Tina, I thought. Everyone from here to Cape Smash was laying their scent on her.

Finally Eric backed off and laid down on the couch and flipped through the TV stations. He was tired, but I guess he didn't want to go off to bed and leave me with Ruth and Tina, not alone, because of our history. My history, which was about Tina's formerly tiny white ass under my big palms. When he had never had his paws on Ruth's.

Ruth said we didn't have those kinds of stresses. "Not those particular ones," she said dryly.

Eric fell asleep on the couch. I went to bed around midnight. Periodically, I came to and heard the girls up talking. When Ruth came to bed, she huddled to the edge of the mattress, as far away from me as she could get. I thought about pulling her in for a cuddle, but I was afraid she was going to say something. Not that there was any way for her to know anything, but I was afraid she did anyhow. I thought she might tell me Tina was just trying to get back at her for stealing me in the first place, and then I'd get caught out saying that what had happened this afternoon between Tina and me had nothing to do with revenge. It was something else, something that involved just the two of us and a love we still shared. Which would be boneheaded to the max.

In the morning Ruth apologized to Eric for her and Tina being so loud—not to me, I noticed—and asked if they'd kept him up. "No," he said, "it doesn't matter. It was good to hear Tina laugh again."

Ruth held her hand over her heart as if he'd recited the national anthem.

Why couldn't I think of things like that to say? Ruth and I hadn't spoken; she was still pretending not to know me.

Tina came out of the laundry room with a basket of clothes. She said did Miss Dog want a bone? Miss Dog cocked her head and thumped her tail. Tina went into the bedroom. She came out holding a box of Milk Bones. "Did you give these to the dog?" she asked Eric.

He said no.

"Look," Tina said. She showed the empty box, which was bowed open. She looked closer and showed us a patch of glue that had caught some of Miss Dog's hair.

The day was stretching like tar. Which beat mine at home, at least, where I managed a dental office but my days stretched like plastic wrap or old condoms. Forty, fuck, and no good job, no good relationship and crap for sperm. All day nothing went on. Nothing happened except the dog needing to shit. Tina and Eric went to Wal-Mart to buy some diapers and secateurs to cut back a dying ficus. As soon as they were out the door hand in hand and we were in charge, the baby went cross-eyed trying to focus on his fist, then clobbered himself in the nose and started wailing.

"What the fuck did I do?" I said to Ruth. "Aren't you ever going to talk to me?"

She picked up the baby and jiggled him. If he'd been hiding change, it would have fallen on the floor.

She said, "Did I walk in on something?"

"What?" I said and heard the guilty rise in my voice. "What did you walk in on?"

"Don't act like I'm stupid. I'm not totally stupid."

"How come you're on *my* case but you went for a walk with Eric, just the two of you?"

"I didn't used to fuck him."

"If you thought something happened, you wouldn't have been so ya-da-da friendly with Tina all night. You would have been mad at Tina."

She looked skeptically at me. "'Ya-da-da-da friendly'? Jesus, something did happen!"

"Nothing happened. I'm just saying if it had, it would be half Tina's fault, but you seem to like her fine."

She jiggled her leg. "Are you going to tell me whether or not something happened?"

I flicked the TV on. Maybe there was a game I could hide behind.

The baby was really starting to shriek. Ruth gave a sound of digest and took him off to the other end of the condo. That's what was good about the place; when she shut the door, I could barely hear him.

When Tina and Eric got back, Ruth came out. The baby was making funny noises like he was trying to stop crying. Tina took him from Ruth's

arms. She said, "Has my oogie-woogie had his hundred kisses today?" She kissed his cheek again and again. Then she and Ruth took the baby away to give him a bath.

Eric used the telephone in the kitchen. He left a message for his lawyer, then said the guy never returned his calls.

"Tell me about it," I said, as if I had a lawyer. The only lawyer I needed was for bankruptcy court.

"Buddy, I will," he said and sat down and proceeded to do so. He'd been married eleven years. His marriage had been rocky almost since the day the girls were born—one of them had a club foot; one of them was learning disabled and so on. Not easy kids. Maybe his wife had had a little too much to drink during her pregnancy. One doctor said there was fetal alcohol syndrome involved in how the girls' eyes were far apart. But he loved them. "Man," he said and swiped his face, "not just love. I adore the hell out of them."

I thought about that. I wondered what it would be like to have kids you adored the hell out of. Or even a job you liked.

But still, he and his wife split up. She couldn't stand his posting up north. She wanted to go east where her parents lived. She took off in June and, in July, Eric started hanging out with Tina. At first that was all it was, hanging out. They didn't have a lot of peer options in a town the size of Cape Smash. One doctor, one cop, two social workers, one ambulance driver, two lawyers and pretty near everyone else was a patient, a client or a prisoner.

"I was a mess, Rog," he said. "I missed my little girls."

"I guess you did," I said. I didn't like him calling me Rog. Nobody called me Rog. I took some satisfaction from knowing I'd had my hand inside his woman just hours before, at her invitation.

Pretty soon he and Tina were an item. His wife came back to town in September to pack up. He cooled it with Tina while she was around; he didn't think any gossip got back. The problem was, he gave her his computer. "I thought I'd cleaned it out, buddy, but she went to some geek and he got back the email between me and Tina."

"Woeee," I said and stretched my back.

He rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Something about a blow job."

"Oh, man," I said. I had a flash memory of Tina's blowjobs.

So even though they had a prior, signed agreement, his wife started renegeing on visitation and wanting more child support. She believed Tina had broken up her marriage; she believed Tina's income as a doctor should up her payments. "It wasn't made any easier when we got pregnant," Eric said.

"King Sperm."

"She won't let me talk to the kids during the week at all," Eric said.

"Now she says she's going to report Tina to the college for having an affair with a patient's wife."

"Your wife was Tina's patient?"

"She wasn't. Tina saw her once about two years ago. But geez, legally who knows? Not if she went to another doc after that. Maybe so if she didn't."

"That sucks," I said. I'd give him that much—his life sucked lemons.

"You know what, Rog? All I want is a life like this here. Tina, the baby. She could give up work, you know? I could work double shifts and earn enough."

The woman who stayed in the condo arrived to babysit and we all went out for dinner at Tony Roma's. We parked our car in front of a Chinese restaurant called Tin Lung.

Tina said, "That's for the people who can't afford iron."

I laughed but no one else did. I thought how I shouldn't have fooled around on Tina with Ruth back when I had her; I thought how she was a doctor and funny. She hadn't even wanted kids. But getting into Ruth had been like getting into a big bowl of candy behind your parents' backs.

The rib joint was a big treat for me because at home our diet was heavy on broccoli, lentils, soy burgers. Our waitress had a booming voice and she kept using the royal "we." She said, "And how are we finding our dinners?"

Tina rolled her eyes. "With our forks," she told her.

The waitress said, "Are we finding our dinners well?"

"I don't think the pigs feel very well," remarked Tina.

"So, listen," said Eric, wiping his hands on a moist towelette, "things okay with you guys? We've been monopolizing the weekend."

Ruth was thinking about opening up her own modelling agency, which put the fear of God into me, financially speaking. I had an unpaid tax bill she didn't know about from when I fiddled the books so the government took less out each pay cheque. My back wouldn't stop spasming. Some days, Ruth barely spoke to me. "I could win the lottery," I said.

"Rog," said Eric, "you don't know the half of it." He shoveled curly fries into his mouth. "People think, fuck, you're with a doctor, you must have some cash."

That's what I thought. Pity, though—Tina hadn't been a doctor when I knew her, just a broke med student who'd given up a fairly lucrative career in fashion.

Tina swabbed her face. "I'm not used to this. I used to spend. Sure, I was in debt up to my eyeballs, but I paid everything off every month. Now I've got a running line of credit of ten-thousand dollars every month and a maxed-out VISA. We're deeper in the hole every day."

Ruth said, "Welcome to our world." Though actually she made not bad cash, which kept us afloat.

Tina said, "I've never had fights like Eric and I have fights."

Tina and I'd had a couple of fights ourselves, back when we were together.

Ruth said, "That's not necessarily unhealthy." I was going to remember that line so I could use it on her, later. She was sitting pressed up against the wall of the booth, keeping good distance. I put my hand on her leg but she pushed it off.

There was something fragile in Tina's voice, like glass falling. "Eric interrogates me. I just give in to get him off me. 'Leave me the fuck alone. Fine. You're right. You win. Whatever. Just leave me alone.' He thinks he won but I still the resent the hell out of him." She looked at Eric like she was mystified by his appearance in the booth beside her. "I used to be solvent. I used to travel all over the world. I know none of this is his fault. It really isn't his fault. It's his fucking ex-wife."

Eric mopped his plate with a piece of bread.

Tina's eyes were brimming. "Maybe I have a little postpartum depression, too."

"Oh, honey, it'll be okay," said Ruth, reaching for her hand.

"I don't think it will. What, his ex-wife's going to stop choking us? She's going to squeeze till we're broke and ruined. I'll get suspended and end up working at the local high school as a janitor."

The waitress stood over us and said, "Are we wanting dessert tonight?"

Tina coughed. "Are we wanting a tip?" she said, her voice wavering. Then, to us: "I'm really sorry, you guys. Like you came all the way to Vancouver to hear my woes. Besides, I'm wild about the big galoot when I'm not having a breakdown. This is the big one. This is the forever one."

Ruth said, "Don't feel bad. We all hit rough patches."

Rough patches? I could feel the gravel against my cheek. I said, "For instance, my boss is thinking about closing his practice."

My wife did not know this. "What?" she said. "Roger?"

"He wants to retire to Hawaii."

"Jesus," said Ruth.

I hadn't meant to tell her this way. I hadn't meant to tell her at all, unless I had to.

"When's this happening?" Tina said.

"It probably won't," I said. "It's still talk."

"If it happens," said Ruth.

"I don't know. Next summer. Next winter. Two years. I don't know."

"Jesus," repeated Ruth. She tapped her fingers against her lips like she was feeling them for puffiness. They were always puffy—she had regular collagen injections.

"Rog," said Eric, "I'm sorry."

Ruth said, "Life sucks. Doesn't life so suck?"

The girls looked at each other and I saw it: They were both about to cry. Jiminy Cricket. The first drop fell down Tina's cheek and hit a rib bone on her plate.

Eric said, "At least you're not the goober who stole your wife's smile."

I thought about that. I could have claimed the honour, actually, and in more than just Ruth's life. Tina's, for another. Other lives too. Maybe I had Ruth's smile in my pocket and I could reach in and touch it back onto her face. I thought about whether in a couple of years, Eric would start to resent Tina's unhappiness, even though he'd caused it, whether he'd resent her for being someone he could wreck to that degree.

Ruth, her voice choked, said, "No, you're not. Don't say that. Tina loves you, Eric. She's where she wants to be." Ruth looked at me. "Tell him, Roger. Tina's where she wants to be."

"I don't know," I said. I thought she wanted to be with me. Sort of. Maybe with me.

"Am I, though?" said Tina. She looked at Eric. She swabbed her face with a napkin. "I don't know. I'm a real douche bag to Eric sometimes. I think he's responsible for the whole lousy sinkhole of my life." She blew bubbles through her drink straw. She looked at me. "Shit. Maybe Roger's the one responsible. If I'd never met Roger, things would be better."

I looked at her and then at Eric. I didn't know what he thought.

Finally Eric said, "Roger's not involved in this."

"Hear that?" my wife said and poked me. "You're not involved. Tina and Eric don't want you messed up in this."

"I'm not involved," I repeated. I hoped Eric had left his firearm in Cape Smash. Why wasn't I something interesting like a cop? I thought about all the women in my past and how they'd got there. Ruth and Tina and others, women I had made promises to, women I had broken promises to. Because I'd want them and then I'd stop wanting them, as if desire was something under pressure that finally blew its top and dissipated like steam. Maybe every couple's desire was like that. Already Ruth felt like more my sister than someone I was intimate with. She felt like my maiden aunt I'd set up housekeeping with. I didn't know how to stop that from happening. I didn't know how to see any woman as still sexy and desirable after a couple years. I felt attracted to Tina again, but it was perverse, because I knew I hadn't, once. My feelings rose up and fell off, not things I controlled. With Ruth I was supposed to be mature; I was supposed to understand this was it, this was what human relationships were like, fading away over time, going grey as clouds—and that was okay. Ruth said I had intimacy issues, but who didn't have intimacy issues? Sometimes I couldn't get it up. That was an intimacy issue, all right, needing Viagra. Sometimes, so what, it

was up but I still didn't want to do it with Ruth.

I did like Ruth, though. I loved her. I did want to be with her, more or less. If I could stop myself with other women, I would be with her a long time. All the time we had left in life. She had a lot of good characteristics, probably even more than Tina. I mean, she was no doctor, but she was generally kind, and not moody except around the baby stuff, and she liked my aging parents. She was great looking.

Tina lowered her voice. "Say for argument's sake I fucked Roger again."

"Don't say that," said Ruth. Her head sawed back and forth. "You did not fuck Roger. Roger, you didn't fuck her, right?"

I said, "Shit." I said Tina was just upset. I said no such thing had transpired.

Tina's eyes blazed. "You patronizing bastard. All you ever care about is saving your own skin." She chewed on her straw as if it was an extra-long cigarette.

Eric got up and walked out.

I didn't want to be there either. I wanted to be anywhere else. I looked around the restaurant. I wanted the waitress to come over and interrupt, but for once she was nowhere to be seen. I wanted to get on a plane and fly back to two days ago. That was the problem with me. I didn't know how to stop when things were already bad enough. I had to make them worse. It was a compulsion.

Tina said, "Don't worry. I wouldn't have fucked him. I have someone better now." She barked a laugh.

"He's not so bad," said Ruth.

Thanks a lot, I thought. "Excuse me," I said and got up. I stood there for a minute. Tina leaned across and whispered something to Ruth that made Ruth cast a glance at me and laugh like a knife.

I found Eric outside smoking rollies. I accepted the butt he dug out of his Drum pouch.

He held a light for me. I could tell he was mad. The tips of his ears were red and his neck was huge, knotted with tendons. Why wouldn't he be mad?

I had a cop mad at me. Not a terrific situation. "Hey," I said, "I admire how much you care for her. She's something to put up with."

"She makes up for it," Eric said. "I'd know that more than you."

"She would've left me anyhow, eventually, you know. She needs someone like you."

He picked tobacco off his tongue.

"You got to treat her right," I said.

"I will. I am."

"You're nuts about each other now, sure, but it's not always going to be the honeymoon, you know."

He looked up as a plane flew overhead.

"That ex-wife crap is hard," I said.

Eric lowered his chin.

There was piss on the side of the building. That's what it looked like, even though there weren't any homeless people around. I said, "Tina's just trying to tick you off, saying that. She's just trying to get under your skin."

"Yeah," he said. "Why not?"

"She's just got PMS or something. Whatever happens when a baby is born," I said. "Her juices are all over the place." People came out and stepped past us, a man, a woman and a half-grown child. They flagged a passing taxi and drove away.

"That ice hotel," Eric said, and lifted his face to blow smoke rings. "You sleep wrapped in furs. Maybe you could freeze to death. Maybe you could have hypothermia in the morning. In Cape Smash, Tina resuscitated a baby who wandered outside in the snow with just her diaper on."

"That right?"

"The baby's core temperature was sixteen degrees Celsius. When we brought him in, he was frozen stiff as a steak. Tina couldn't get a breathing tube in because his mouth had turned to ice. She couldn't put a needle in the kid's veins because they were frozen solid."

"That so?" What else should I say? I was feeling bad for what I'd done with Tina, all of a sudden.

"His heart didn't beat for at least two hours. But you know? That baby's fine now. He lost two toes to frostbite and one finger up to the first knuckle."

I wondered what he was trying to say.

He looked at me. Behind his head I could make out the curved blue outlines of Vancouver's mountains, the white slash of a ski resort.

"You always fuck around on your women?"

"Do I always fuck around?" I ground out my cigarette under my heel.

He waited.

"I guess I do," I said, and nodded. "One way or another."

"Kind of figured," he said.

"I'm trying to change. I am changing." I wasn't changing so much as turning forty with no prospects.

"You know what you learn on the force? Things can get pretty bad," he said, "but still get better. People can turn over new leaves. They do all the time."

"Yup," I said, although I wasn't sure it was true. I felt, though, like Eric was changing. I hadn't liked him and now I was starting to. Now I was admiring him despite myself. He was an honourable guy and I should just admit it. He wasn't going to use his brute strength to beat the crap out of Tina or anything.

"So you just have to go on doing your best."

Sperm King, I thought. "Yup, you do. Until I guess you don't anymore."

"Right," he said. I couldn't believe this guy was a cop, that he took full grown men down on a daily basis. He had the size, but he was as gentle as a golden Labrador, as Miss Dog.

He said, "You gotta give each day a chance. There's this guy on 'Oprah,' right? And he says to do 'What if?'"

I looked at Eric and he shrugged and explained that he and Tina had been watching a lot of daytime TV. Mat and Pat leave, he said.

"So, like, what if my ex-wife gets Tina suspended? Well, okay, Tina gets to spend more time with the baby. I'd like that. She'd probably like that once she got used to it. What if we go further down the financial tubes? Well, so what? We just sell the condo. What if you slept with Tina?"

"I didn't sleep with Tina. God, how long do you think you and Ruth were gone? Ten minutes? That can't be any kind of compliment to me."

"Okay then," he said. He turned to go back in, waited for me to proceed him. He put his hand on the back of my neck somewhere between a choke hold and a caress.

When we got back to the table, Tina was telling a story about a patient she'd assessed who thought a foam cushion was her son. She kept asking the cushion for its opinion on the competency questions.

"Would you agree?" the woman asked the pillow. "I was born in 1914?" Or: "It's 1956 now, isn't that correct?"

The conversation stopped dead as we sat down. Tina looked hard at me, but I couldn't discern any message in how she did it. She didn't seem upset any more, though. I looked at my wife.

Eric kissed Tina's cheek.

"A piece of foam?" said Ruth and grinned. "Ouch. Must have been a hard labour."

Tina said, "Woman's son started life as a contraceptive sponge."

Ruth laughed then sobered. "At least she had a baby." She nudged me with her knee.

"Well, yeah," I said. "That's me. King Shit-for-Sperm."

"It'll happen, you'll see," said Tina.

"Sure," said Eric. "When you least expect it."

Tina raised her eyebrows at me. "Make sure it happens."

"Okay," I said. Something had changed without us fixing it. "Sure, okay. I'll give it my damndest." I knew Ruth must have sensed the change, too, because she slipped her hand into my lap.

Michael V. Smith

What We Wanted

Barry Somer's body went from screaming round the pool, rapping on foreheads, swinging from the shower rail, and flinging boogers to doing nothing at all, to disappearing, to dying. When he was eleven a dump truck flattened him against its grill and then the crumpled boy that was Barry Somer slipped under the truck and disappeared. That's when I looked away.

The crowd of neighbours that came out to help, or gawk, or bring their kids back into the house saw the smashed and tattered body that was Barry, but I didn't. I was the last to see Barry as Barry and not a broken mash of whatever bones and skin and hair death leaves behind. And if I'm right, I was the last thing he saw too.

They can say what they want, but I wasn't haunted by Barry's death. That was something of a relief. It was the living Barry that woke me up with night sweats and had me vomiting two out of three meals. I never told them. In twenty years since, I have never told another living thing.

We were boys together. When my mother wanted me to join a sports team to impress my father—I was a miserably underweight gangly of arms and legs—she claimed all I needed was exercise to grow meat on my ribs. The weight sounded appealing. I picked swimming because it was the only non-contact sport we could agree on. We bought a pair of baggy green swim trunks at the Kmart and reserved a place for me over the phone. I was moderately excited. I had visions of myself heftier, doing elaborate dives that I would choreograph in my head in slow motion. I would touch my nose with my feet. I'd be amazing.

My first day of lessons started after supper on a Tuesday. Mom decided to make something light so I wouldn't get cramps, but the cold cuts and salad irritated my dad. They bickered until I told them swimming lessons weren't worth going to if it only made them fight. My mom looked at the digital clock on the microwave and packed up our plates. "We're late," she said.

As she turned into the parking lot for the community centre, halfway through a cigarette, Mom sighed, "You could help me out a little here. Is your father doing all this for nothing?" She gestured at the brick wall ahead of us. I shrugged and opened the car door.

She took a slow drag on the cigarette. "Sometimes, I don't think you

like us," she added, chipping at her nail polish.

Unsure what she meant, I smiled nicely, trying to convince us it was a joke, and closed the door. I can see she thought I was cruel. Perhaps I was. I didn't like them much. I didn't like their drinking and the scenes my mother made. I didn't like the way they could bellow at each other and, mid-sentence, how my mother could pick up the ringing telephone and sound sweet as heaven. My life felt small and cramped. We were neither financially comfortable nor well-adjusted. I hated my body. I invented friends at school whom my mother asked to meet. I told threatening classmates I had an older, bigger brother who went to a school across town. I lived a lie to protect myself from my parents and another to save me from kids at recess.

Walking into the community centre with my swim trunks and towel in a plastic grocery bag, I saw three boys in ball caps goofing around. We'd signed me up for an all-boys group because Dad said it would be more competitive, but, oddly, the swim instructor turned out to be a woman. Jenny was tall and lean, with unusually rough hands, and long chlorine-blonde hair around a tight little happy face. She was pretty enough, but more a failed movie version of a lifeguard than an actual bombshell. My mother came in after me and filled out the forms, signed her cheque, and said she'd be back for me. "Have fun," she coached, tousling my hair, which she'd never done before, in a move designed to make me look the part of a sporty kid.

I had never seen a public indoor pool. Dad didn't swim, which made paying for an hour at an indoor pool an unnecessary luxury. Swimming either involved a trip to the beach to wade in the river or a three-block walk to the local park's gated and crowded cement pool open for the height of summer. As the door to the change room closed behind me, I knew again that I had fooled myself into thinking things could change. I was sick with fear at what the next eight weeks held in store for me. We were sixteen pre-pubescent boys who already seemed to be grouping off into cool and uncool, in a cement room, without windows, with a large shower area, a row of freshly-painted toilet stalls, and two sets of urinals, kid height and adult.

What I never realized until standing in that mess of boys was that we would all be taking our clothes off, unseen by the instructor. Already I was trying to devise ways to get out of swimming. Jenny could be dangerously careless or the pool water would burn my skin. I considered faking an accident, only I was fearful that I might drown for real.

Perhaps Barry noticed a look of dread on me right away. Perhaps he saw my doubts running across my face, but I didn't notice him when I came in. I have no idea where he was in the mix of boys pulling their shirts off. At that age, I tried not to look at boys. By comparison, my own skin felt

softer, unconvincing, fake. I wasn't real like other kids were real. I didn't exist the way other boys made space for themselves in the world. It was—and is—a truth I stand by, that when boys take their clothes off, they *need* to be noticed and respected, which paradoxically makes them cruel. Watching them was both taboo and what they dared you to do.

I headed straight through the change room with barely a glance at anyone. I locked myself into a stall with a loud click of the deadbolt and slipped my trunks on.

When I came out, Barry Somer was waiting for me, holding up my pale blue briefs. He'd grabbed them from under the cubicle without my noticing. "Cute," he said, smiling. "They're like cotton candy."

He was a big kid, big in his hands and feet, with a thick neck, which made him seem more muscled than he was. He had clean hair that looked freshly cut. From first sight, I knew he wasn't menacing, not mean, but restless. He was a nice attractive kid. It was just the two of us in the change room's white tiled bathroom area and he was smiling a killer smile at me.

"Where do you live? I'm across the street."

"On Carlisle."

"Which house?"

"It's yellow, why?"

He shrugged, and handed me my underwear, no jokes, no teasing, no humiliation, which dropped my heart to the lower depths of my stomach. With that bit of generosity, he was capable of convincing me to do just about anything. The look on his face said he knew it, and he couldn't wait.

I took my flimsy briefs from him and tucked them in a leg of my pants and rolled them up. Next week, I'd bring a knapsack with a zipper to keep a better hold on my stuff.

When my father asked me later that night as he turned the ground for my mother's flower bed how the "swim thing" went, I choked on my plan to get out of it.

"Great," I said.

"How many laps did you do?"

"We don't do laps."

He looked puzzled, not at me, but at the shovel sticking into the dirt. "What do you do?"

"We hold our breath. And dog paddle. And the dead man's float." I thought he knew all this. "We're just learning. It's a beginner's class."

"But you can swim," he said. He looked me in the eye with a wrinkled brow.

"You have to do the first class," I lied, authoritatively, "before you start doing laps."

"Oh. So you'll do laps when you're done?"

"Next week," I lied again. There seemed no point trying to explain the organization of levels and testing and badges. "We'll do lots of laps," I said and he went back to gardening.

Perhaps I'm more like my father than I care to admit. I don't like children. When they begin to talk in full sentences, when school comes into their lives and they associate with each other, their minds change. I'm convinced they warp, betrayed by the trust they placed in their parents. How could we not resent being abandoned to a room of noisy spoiled strangers, each wanting to be cute and loved and necessary at the expense of every other demanding kid in the room? How to retaliate? How do we lose our fear to feel secure in our abandonment? We create roles for each other grounded in shame, guilt, humiliation, and fear. Those who invent the harshest situations for their peers are the ones who feel most secure.

Barry Somer had a talent for making himself feel better. Our first week there, he convinced a slim, hairy kid, Arvid, to hand over his case of retainers. Barry quickly slipped them on his own teeth and sang a poor, but effective, rendition of *Happy Birthday*. The jokes weren't particularly clever, but they came from nowhere. It was his spontaneity that fascinated, which saw us waiting for the next prank as we dreaded his attention.

For the third lesson, Barry and I were paired up as floating partners. Jenny showed the group of us how we were to support each other under the lower back as we tried to relax, with our eyes closed, and float face up. Holding her whistle, Jenny explained, "Now the person standing will lower his arms when the floater says, 'Okay,' at which point the floater will be held on top of the water. It's real easy if you just relax."

My cousins had tried this trick with me a few times the previous summer. I wasn't expecting much.

"You ready?" Barry smiled at me. "You're first." His hand underwater absently toyed with the drawstring hanging out of his trunks.

Jenny walked towards us, stopping just to our left, checking to see if everyone was in place. "All set?" she asked, and blew her whistle.

As Barry extended his arms in front of him, I let my legs give way and was lifted into a cradled position next to his chest. He was warm. It wasn't what I expected it to be. It wasn't scary, it wasn't nerve-wracking, it wasn't exciting. With Barry's arms under me, I felt, oddly, safe. He was comfortable. I opened my eyes to see him looking at me, inches above my face.

"I got you," he said, so I closed them again, giving my okay and trusting my body to do what it had to. Barry let me go. My skin felt cold in two lines across my back where his arms had been.

The water gurgled in my ears and lapped loosely at my temples as my hair swirled about my head. The thick smell of chlorine settled in my nose. My arms and legs felt both heavy and light. The more I relaxed the

muscles, the more I could feel my own weight held atop the water. If I needed him, Barry was there to catch me before I sank. With the dead man's float, you face down, like you've given up, but with my face to the ceiling, I felt hopeful, like I was waiting for something, like at any moment I might rise up out of the water and fly.

With a sudden bleat of Jenny's whistle, time was up. "Good!" she called. I stood, feeling a little disoriented, carrying my weight. "Now let's switch places. The rest of you float."

Barry punched my shoulder. "You did good. Don't drop me," he said, and jumped into my arms with a splash of water. He hitched his arms around my neck so that even if I let him go, I'd still be supporting us both, then he proceeded to bounce. "Am I heavy? Heavy? Can you hold me?"

"That's enough, Barry, get ready," Jenny said, the whistle between her teeth. As she travelled the width of the pool again to ensure we were all set up, Barry stretched himself out.

"Ahhh," he sighed, and then smiled at me. He was heavier in the water than I thought he'd be. I was wondering how heavy I had been and was hoping, secretly, that he wouldn't float at all, when he whispered, "You wearing your blue underwear?"

I squinted at him, confused. "Not under my bathing suit."

"No, today. I want to know if you got them here today?"

"What for?" I asked.

"I want to try them on," he said as the whistle blew. He closed his eyes, stretched himself out and said, "Okay." I let him go and stepped back. He floated butt-heavy at first, then managed to relax into it more, though he took his breath in rapid gulps.

When the lesson came to a close, I headed for the change room. Barry was right behind me. Inside, I took my bag off the bench and walked into the bathroom area. Another kid, Stevie, with acne, changed in a stall too, which made me feel less like a freak, though Stevie raced to be the first kid in and out of the room. When I arrived each week, he was already in the pool, or waiting on the tiled deck, his swim trunks on and a towel wrapped around his shoulders.

Stevie was in the stall at the far end of the room when I walked in. I could hear him bumping around. I chose a stall mid-way, pushed the door open and entered. By the time I turned around, Barry was there. I just looked at him, my heart doing laps in my chest. "No," I said, barely even whispering.

He glanced from the doorway to the last stall where Stevie was still shuffling, and mouthed, "Come on," like he was about to get seriously caught, so I stepped back, letting Barry in.

As he pulled cotton boxers from his bag and held them out, he mo-

tioned with his free hand for me to give up my briefs. What was I supposed to do with the boxers? I wasn't putting on someone else's underwear. Barry bugged his eyes out, making a frustrated face, to hurry me up. Both of us were dripping wet. He was nearly standing on top of me, a towel around his neck and mine about my waist. If I couldn't talk to him, I didn't know how to get him out of the stall without giving him my briefs. And, yes, I wanted to see him do it; I wanted to see Barry Somer in my underwear.

I handed them over. Without hesitating, he dropped his swimsuit and stepped out of the legs. I caught sight of his dink, redder than mine, when he hunched over and slipped his first foot through the leg. I could smell the chlorine in his hair. He didn't bother to dry off.

We heard a metal door squeak open and Stevie pad by, in too much of a rush to notice the number of feet in our stall. Barry winked at me, grinning. "I like them," he said. I grimaced like I didn't know what he was talking about. He looked down at himself, packed into my underwear, with wet marks spotting the cloth. I was excited, and thankful to have the towel around my waist.

Motioning to the boxers in my hand, he coaxed, "Put them on."

I frowned, shaking my head. For one, I had an erection. And we'd taken long enough changing as it was. My mother wasn't going to wait forever. Somewhat irrational though it may have been, I was terrified she'd see me.

"You gotta do it sometime," he said, and then with a click of the lock, he stepped out of the stall, snatched up his swim trunks, and added, "See ya next week." He toweled his hair, pushing the door closed in my face. A few seconds later, I heard him say as he entered the change room, "That was the longest dump of my life." Somebody laughed.

Meanwhile, I had Barry Somer's underwear in my hand and none of my own to put on. I was late. And felt freaked out. I stuffed his boxers in my bag, dried myself, and dressed, without underwear. I'd get a fresh pair when I got home.

Safely in my room, I closed the door, dropped the knapsack on my bed, and grabbed yesterday's briefs off the floor to put them on. I'd no sooner picked up my pants again when there was a knock-knock on the door and dad came directly in.

"Your mother wanted your wet things," he explained. He looked uncomfortable. I held my pants in front of me. "You forgot to drop them in the tub."

"I'll bring them," I said.

"Just give it here, I already made the trip," he answered, sounding like he wanted to be nice but was really feeling impatient. "Are they in here?" he asked. He took hold of my bag. "I've got them."

With that, Barry's grey cotton boxers left the safety of my bedroom. I

whipped my pants on, visualizing my father holding up a foreign pair of boy's undies and asking me questions I couldn't answer. I had only been seconds behind him, but already Dad was in the bathroom with my mother. When I reached the door, he was just exiting.

The wet swim trunks dropped in the tub as I stepped around Dad. The towel was in Mom's hands, with the boxers lying plainly on top. "What's this?" she asked. She knew I only had briefs; she'd bought every pair I owned.

Dad turned around. I froze. Mom caught my terrified look and turned her back.

"Mom, I said I'll *do* it." I tried to sound thoughtfully exasperated.

"What's what?" Dad asked.

"His underwear's wet too, that's all." Mom hung them over the shower curtain rod, then threw the towel up too. She made a point of not looking at me.

"We were joking around in the change room," I said, trying to sound normal.

"And you got your clothes wet?" Dad asked.

I shrugged. "Boys were throwing water. I was getting dressed."

"Well, that's not such a big deal," he said. Then, as an afterthought, he asked, "How many laps did you do this week?"

I told him fifteen. Last week I'd said ten.

"Good," he said, and I followed him out. If Mom didn't get me alone right then, I was hoping she'd never come back to ask.

The next week I missed class because my dad had to drive to Caledon to help a guy from work fix his refrigerator. My mom wouldn't take me on the bus, or let me go alone. I didn't think it was in my own best interests to debate; she hadn't confronted me about the boxers. I'd taken them down that night and hung them to dry on the door handle inside my closet, safely out of sight. For two weeks, they were stored between my mattress and box spring, except for the odd time when I took them out to look at. When the time came, I slipped the boxers inside my swim trunks and folded the whole thing over, just in case someone looked in my bag.

Though I insisted I could at least take the bus there, Mom was firmly determined to drive me. Since she'd decided to act like nothing was wrong, I had taken her lead, but the tension only made her petty.

Barry was waiting outside the community centre, doing his best to look nonchalant as he leaned against a concrete post, scratching a rock against the wall. Right away, Mom scowled. "Look at that kid. Be lucky you don't have his parents," she said, pulling our rusty Acadian up to the curb.

I jumped out immediately before Barry could make any move towards me. "Bye, see ya later," I said cheerily to my mother, then slammed the

door shut and jogged past Barry to the entrance.

He followed me inside. Safely through the doors and out of sight of my mother, I turned to Barry. "Do you have them?" He smiled, patting the side of his leg. "Give them to me," I ordered, thinking they were in his pocket.

Taking me by the wrist, he led us across the hall into the girl's change room, which was empty, and into one of their bathroom stalls. There were two rows of them, instead of a wall of urinals. It was a weird feeling, like being in a world gone wrong. "How are we going to get out?" I asked.

Barry giggled. "Through the door."

"What about Jenny? She's gonna change here."

"She's in the pool already."

My stomach was in knots. Barry was breathing heavy enough for me to feel his warm air against my skin. He stood inches away from me. The girl's stalls, painted light green, had an extra dispenser on the wall beside the toilet paper. I felt crowded. "I brought yours," I said. "Let's trade."

As I pulled my bag open, Barry undid the button on his jeans and unzipped them. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I have them on."

For a second, I had the impression he'd worn them the whole two weeks, but then realized he must not have wanted to carry an extra pair with him, which I thought was smart, though I wasn't able to put his pair on, even with my parents out of the house. "Okay," I said. I turned more towards the back of the stall to give him privacy. Though I wanted to see his dink again, I couldn't bring myself to look. There was some general shuffling. I could see him bend over in my peripheral vision and then he stood, silent. It occurred to me that now was the time to turn and hand him the boxers, giving me a chance to peek, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. My stomach roiled and burned in my belly. Taking his boxers, I held them out at my side, waiting. He didn't take them. There was a silence in the bathroom that made me crazy; only the low hum of the pool's filtering system travelled through the walls.

Then he touched me. He set a finger against my arm. I turned, with my heart pounding, afraid of what he might make me do. He was still in my briefs, with his pants on the floor beside him. "I like you," he said. There was an awkward smile on his face. As I stood there, unmoving, he played with his belly button. He was trying to explain something neither of us understood. "I think you're pretty," he continued. "My brother has a girlfriend and they make out. I kissed this girl on the bus once, with everyone watching. She gave me the tongue. She didn't really like me though. You have nice eyes. Sometimes my mother wears make-up on her eyes, but my dad doesn't like it. Do you have a brother? Or a sister?"

I couldn't stop myself from sounding belligerent. "No," I snapped, un-

nerving him.

And he said again, "You're pretty," which made me angry. We were eleven—we knew we could lie to each other to get what we wanted, but I didn't want to be talked into kissing him. I couldn't kiss a boy voluntarily. *Was he stupid?* I wondered. *Could he be that stupid?* I hated him offering me this in such a way that I wasn't allowed to accept. I hated the way he was so desperate to convince. Had he only humiliated me in private, had he insisted then, with force, with threatening intent, we'd have both been happy.

Three days later, with Barry's boxers out of my bedroom and my own underwear back in the dresser drawer—I hadn't put them in the wash, I couldn't yet—I felt my life was given back to me and I was safe. The only threat Barry posed was what trouble he might cause each Tuesday night and I intended to ignore him. I imagined how it would sting him, to see that I was uninterested. Done.

It was the weekend, late Friday afternoon. My mother had sent my Dad to buy two trees to plant along the back fence because she wanted something to look at from their bedroom window. Dad wanted dogwood he'd seen advertised in the paper, but Mom said no. When she heard the car pull up, the trunk door slam shut, and Dad didn't come in, she went to the window and called out, "What did you get?"

He said something that made her yell, "What the hell for?" and I heard him shout back, "They were on sale." That's when I figured I was better off at the park. I hung out on the monkey bars until some teenaged girls showed up with their boyfriends trailing behind.

I was gone an hour. When I got back, Mom was at the sink rinsing a shirt she'd stained at lunch. "Your friend was here on his bike," she said, very matter-of-fact.

I blinked. "Who?" I asked.

"That kid from swimming." Her tone said she wasn't impressed; it was obvious to her who was sending his underwear home with her son. "I told him you were at the park. He's coming back."

"He's not my friend," I said sourly.

Mom gave the shirt a twist and wrung out a stream of water. "Then how's he know where you live? You shouldn't tell just anybody our address. It isn't safe."

I shrugged.

"We're having supper in an hour; he's got to be gone by then," she said, turning on the tap to end the discussion.

Anxious, I decided to wait on the front lawn. He wasn't coming in my house. I wouldn't even let him on the property. When he pulled up on his bike, I'd tell him he had to go home because my grandmother was sick, or I hated him, or my parents didn't like me hanging out with losers. I was

busy devising the fastest way to get rid of him as my stomach lurched with anticipation. Barry Somer came to see me. *Me.*

At the end of the block, a bicycle came round the corner. There he was, Barry Somer, in his blue and green striped T-shirt and head phones stuck over his ears, biking down my street, passing along the sidewalk on the other side of the road. I called out to him, but he didn't hear me, so I waved. As he looked over, he grinned and my stomach clenched tighter.

Then, like careful planning, a dump truck turned the corner. Directly across from me, a moving van parked on the road at the Kennedy's blocked Barry's view of the street. And the thoughts ran through my head, the various feelings: this dump truck, that boy, this heartsickness, that bike, this hand of mine, that driver, that truck, that boy. I decided on impulse. If he made it across the road before the truck sped past, I would give in to what we wanted and be Barry's fair and hungry equal, or I could see it all go to pieces with one simple accident and never be plagued by Barry Somer again. I motioned him over.

For the split second of his impact, I froze, Barry and I both breathless. I didn't believe he'd be hit. I didn't believe it could happen until it did. For a second, he was a cartoon: arms splayed, his mouth a black spot, and one rubber leg swinging under the truck. The bike bent around the other leg.

Then, easily, Barry Somer was dead.

I bolted for the house just as my father raced out onto the porch. Behind me was the noise of squealing tires, the truck's horn and scraping metal. In my few seconds to the door, I tried to gauge by Dad's manner if he had witnessed me with Barry or just Barry getting hit. Remembering back, all I see is a man who would betray nothing. He was a grim, stone-faced father, with hands that shook, racing to the road where a boy lay broken. I ran into the house, and my room, and dove under the bed in a sweat.

From that day forward, I disappeared. I was free. My parents forgot me, what they wanted from me and what they wished I was. So I come forward now because I can, to tell you, I killed a boy. I live with that, with perhaps less difficulty than you might expect, because it's prepared me, hasn't it, for the way we love one another?

Rebecca Bengal

Catching On

I had spent the night down in the ravine over by the train tracks, a seedy marshy area where kudzu vine wrapped itself around the trash. A mattress flopped on the ground, stained and worn from being dragged, with coils poking through the cloth; a dresser stood there, a motel room nightmare, cheap Formica covering plywood, missing a drawer, its surface skimmed with bullets, its insides burned with cooked spoons. The ravine, it looked like a bedroom whose walls had been sucked into the night.

Prostitutes and shut-outs and furniture and dumpster trash came and went, but there was an old kitchen chair that had been down in the ravine for years, weathered lightning storms in the summer and blizzards in February. It had been down there for so long, the kudzu that had grown fast around it, clean tore it off the ground like a rope, and it hung suspenseful in the air there, just cresting the grass. But it was barely strong enough to hold a ghost, anything more than a squirrel would surely snap the vines. Those of us who frequented the ravine would sift through the contents of cardboard boxes that passing motorists tossed down there, the stray belongings that drifters left behind them when they moved on, but we let this chair alone. We watched it seem to slowly lift upward into the air as the months went on and the vines climbed, ever so gradually taking the chair with them. On cloudless fall nights when the taller trees had been picked clean, the moon shone down and glowed on that chair, yellow and cold.

I was staying down in the ravine when Viceroy come up and shoved me off the mattress in the morning. I fell on the ground like an animal. The chair seemed to swing, but everything did. His shoes were planted right by my forehead.

He looked down on me with malignant eyes and said nothing. Viceroy, he's forty, maybe fifty, a year or ten younger than me, but old enough to know better than most of the fools who find their way down here.

"Morning."

"It's past that now," he said curtly. He was so angry now, and I was trying to recall why. It was unlike him. In fact, it pleased me a little bit to see him riled up about anything.

It was later than I meant to wake, and the sun sliced into the cold air,

touched the top of my head. I looked up. Noon already or just past. The day was the twenty-fourth of the month, which meant just a few calendar squares left till the vet and disability cheques showed, and I would line up alongside the rest of the governmental casualties in month-worn pants and bottomed-out shoes.

I watched Viceroy now, feeling in his pocket for a smoke. "Let me get a drag off that."

He pretended to ignore my request. "You hungry, man? 'Cause I'm damn near starving. You still got some money? 'Cause you owe me." Viceroy had a habit of closing his eyes when he talked, like a little child trying to put all of his words together carefully.

My head thundered, and I got to my feet. We had worked the day before, side by side, *Manual Labor, Get Paid To-Day. Strong Men Needed*. Strong men, my ass. It was beaten-down men like ourselves alongside crackheads and any other desperate fool willing to break bricks all day for a few dollars. Tall tale tellers of who they had laid and who wanted to lay them, of thousands of dollars won, and had, and lost—the most unbelievable crap you ever heard. I got on with Viceroy because he mostly kept his mouth shut. We had busted up a walkway and shovelled the bricks into a wheelbarrow; we left behind a cement trace like a three-foot-wide eraser mark.

"Yes I am. Yes I have," I answered all at once. I hadn't really forgotten any part of this, but I wished it had conveniently, drunkenly, slipped away from me. It was still here this morning, though a little shattered and fuzzed at the edges, like I wasn't sure which songs had been playing on the jukebox at the time maybe, like maybe it had been someone else who left Viceroy. I wished it had. A few of us strong men had proceeded directly from *Get Paid To-Day* to a bar on the same street, where we then proceeded to drink the money we'd made. It hit Viceroy fast. One minute he was playing craps in the corner and the next he was slumped over the table. Someone sat him up in his chair, but he was still half passed-out, talking nonsensically. I looked at him and thought, that's me in an hour. I hated him then. I thought it would be a funny thing, at the time, to take the rest of his money, to leave him like that to settle his tab and his bets. When he started coming to, when the bartender started asking questions, I said I'd never seen the guy before today.

"You know I'm a drunk bastard," I said now, by way of apology.

"Believe me."

"You know I didn't mean anything by that." He didn't say anything. Brown and orange leaves covered the sidewalks; as we walked, a little rain fell on them, and the leaves became wet and slimy and stuck to pieces of newspaper. The air was changing, mercury plummeting in the store window thermometers.

"I should punch your face," he said.

"Yes," I agreed.

"I wish I was the kind of man who did things like that."

"Might make things easier," I said. "For both of us."

We moved on across past a nameless factory that crunched cedar wood into chips: trees on one end, bags going out the other.

"Smell like a gerbil around here," Viceroy said, closing his eyes and sniffing. He looked at me directly then. "You mean it might make things easier for *you*."

Downtown is a series of forlorn, muted neighbourhoods, each one identifiable by the decade in which it was built. Walk around for a while and you will literally move through time. The colours of the buildings bleed into one another like a Rothko painting, grey and brown and blue. One long boulevard of thrift stores, car washes, and Oriental massage parlours delineates downtown from the college district, where we spent most of our time.

We walked in silence. Already the street before us was filled with men and women hard at work. Bagging beer and soda cans, sidling up towards the Get Paid To-Day line, the plasma centre. Laying out curbside yard sales, the merchandise displayed on old towels: a forlorn ripped-off round-up of radios, blue jeans, television antennas, charred pots and pans. A guy named Donald I wished I didn't know walked towards the recyclers with a crowbar and a fourteen, fifteen-year-old screw-up I'd seen before; they'd spent last night prying sheets of aluminum siding off warehouses for dope money.

There was Esther, who sat on trashcans and yelled at kids across the street to come over and give her their change. She couldn't walk very well, she had a busted hip and a cane, but that hadn't diminished her voice.

"HEY," she yelled at a college boy in threadbare jeans and Desert Storm camouflage who had already begun shaking his head no. "YOU GOT A CIGARETTE FOR ME? HEY! YOU GOT A QUARTER? A DOLLAR?" The other kids around him scattered, looked down and away, crossed the street so she wouldn't confront them.

"Hello Esther," we said.

"Well hello, Gib. Hey, V-roy." And before she could beat me to it, I added, "No, I do not have a smoke for you." But Viceroy was already lighting her one of his.

"V-roy, you tell your buddy he could stand to be friendly once in his life." She looked at me contemptuously, shifting her enormous weight from side to side on her perch. Viceroy simply raised an eyebrow in my direction.

"We have things to do today," I reminded them both, staring hard at him. He stared back just as hard. As if to say, *I'm doing you a favour by*

keeping you company. As if to reiterate, you owe me.

It was a sorry thing when you considered yourself accustomed to a town because you knew everyone in the city jail, staff members included. That was no doubt a sign of growing overly intimate. We were too comfortable in our discomfort. Viceroy forgave too easily—not only others but, worse, himself. He and I differed ideologically on the nature of mankind. But I needed him to contradict me. I needed his stupid belief in humanity to counteract my own pure disgust with the human race. I was the guy who did bad things and he was the guy they happened to.

Down past Esther, we ran upon Terence, another cripple who was actually a liar. He'd sit on the corner by the Pizza and fake fits; if he saw a nice jacket strolling up he'd go all jittery and start to stuttering, shaking a dirty baseball cap in one hand till some coins strayed into it. Once he rounded up enough, he'd go buy a bottle of beer and stow it behind the stores, hide it under some trash while he went out front to jitter some more. The store owners got wise to him, they'd pay little kids a quarter to run out back and dump out the forty when he wasn't looking.

Just below him were the ones who parked themselves outside the gas station. Different people every day, same old fucking story—every blasted one of them trying to con a way back to the two-bit towns they came from: “Hey man, I was wondering if I could ask you a question. You see, I done broke down in my car nearby here and I was wondering if you could help me out a little, man. I got to get back to Reidsville, see? I just need a couple dollars, dollar or two, anything you think you might can spare.”

We strode past them unscathed—Viceroy with only two cigarettes stuck in his jacket, after all, and me feeling in my pocket for my last few dollars. We tried not to laugh. “Why in hell anybody would want to get BACK to Reidsville once they got out is past me,” Viceroy said. “That's the sign of a damn bullshit lie. But he broke down, all right. He broke down in *all kinds of ways.*”

“Right. ‘I got to get back to *Advance.*’ ‘I'm looking for some sponsorship to Fayette-Nam.’ ‘Can you float me back to Gold-boro?’”

“Toast. Climax. ‘Gold-boro.’” Viceroy laughing with his eyes shut. Those were the sorts of places we came from: ebbing like shoreline with their ghosted storefronts and emptied banks, towns that you hoped would eventually disappear altogether, right along with your memories of them.

“But hold up,” I said, “I got to stop in a minute.” Inside the Fresh-Up station I laid my six-pack selections on the counter in a row, and the clerk cut her eyes at me over her glasses.

“Starting so soon?” she said, trying at being disparaging.

It wasn't for me, but I didn't bother telling her so. “And a packet of Drum tobacco,” I said. “And a box to carry it all in.”

“I didn't realize you needed take-out,” she said, rolling her eyes some

more, motioning past the potato chips and the air fresheners. "There's boxes in the back."

We aimed for the diner, invigorated. You had to have an agenda, a mission, or the day would just eat at you. The Greensboro library wouldn't let me take any books outside their building, on account that I tend not to keep a permanent address, so I had a deal going with an underage kid I knew. I didn't charge Pete any extra for the alcohol I got him and he checked out whatever I asked for. We met up at his place of business.

The outside of the Beef Burger was a blinding yolky yellow surrounded by a bunch of crook used car lots. I'd illegally borrowed one of their cars once a couple years ago but that piece of shit didn't get me far as the Virginia line. It didn't break down, exactly, it just sort of *refused* to go on. That was the last time I'd driven an automobile.

There was a sign by the ordering window inside, *Now Hiring. No druggies, no drunks, no thieves*. They spelled it like that, *thiefs*. *Closed on Sunday for Church Going*, said another. The woman in the hairnet taking orders seemed as unhappy as the cashier at the Fresh-Up to see us.

"Fried zucchini sticks," said Viceroy, leaning down to talk through the hole in the window where you slid your money. "Fried okra. Fried onions. And fried...fries."

I stood at the counter and swirled milk and sugar together till it formed a gluey mixture, then I tasted it with my finger and poured coffee on top. All that bright yellow paint everywhere got me down and tired. Atrocious framed paintings of owls everywhere; apparently the owner's wife was obsessed with them. Particularly, it seemed, owls trapped within dense overgrowths of flowers. They stared at us through an ambush of begonias. Viceroy and I sat down at a booth by a broken fortune teller machine and another broke-down pinball machine. A woman glanced our way and moved herself and her little kid two tables over away from us.

We ate double-dipped burgers sloshing in orange-coloured sauce. The energy I'd mustered for the day seemed to fizzle right out of me. Viceroy babbled about missing his guitar—when he wasn't staying anywhere regular, he pawned it for safekeeping at a shop two miles up the road that never got much business.

"So go get it already."

"I *aim* to get it. I'm *planning* on getting it."

Pete's head popped up in the glass, motioned to me. He was eighteen but he looked younger than that, baby fat still plumping his cheeks. Out back he looked side to side and then lit up a half a joint and offered it. He opened the box I had boarded up for him, double-checked the contents.

"Cool," he said, "cool."

"Here's your change." I handed over a dollar. He put the box in back of his CRX and fished out some library books for me. *Wide Sargasso Sea. The*

Trial. The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. He hadn't been listening.

"I read all these, I told you. You couldn't get the *Blood in My Eye*?"

"No. I think it's stolen. It's never there."

"Well, all right," I said, minding more than I let on. "I'll take this one again for now and hand you the rest back. Read these yourself."

"What's *Blood in My Eye*?"

"Panther book. Black Panthers."

I saw Viceroy seize and roll his eyes. "You are one to talk, aren't you?" he said to me dryly.

"Who's your friend?" The kid looked suspiciously at Viceroy.

"We're not friends. Name's Fox. Bertrand Fox," V-roy said nastily.

"*Bertrand*?" The kid shook his head, disbelieving as he inhaled. He and Viceroy stared at one another.

"Hey," I cut in. "If you can get weed, what do you need me for?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, man. Who's going to get you your books?" He just wanted to say he knew a bum like me. It didn't matter though: I had read anything worth a damn in that library anyway. These were books for reminiscing about how I'd felt the first times I'd read them, when I still believed in the dark disordered worlds they described. I held out hope for the book that hadn't been written, the one that would make me feel as alive as I had the first time I'd read these.

Pete extended the roach to Viceroy who shook his head no. "I'm out of here," he announced suddenly, to show he didn't care to be lumped in with me. We watched him lope off, his pride still stung. "See you," I said to his back, figuring I wouldn't, likely, for the next few days.

"That guy your pal? You guys crash out at the Island Inn together?" There seemed no end to Pete's amusement in me. The Island Inn was a flophouse. Its name was a bad joke. If God hates you, he will desert you on the Island for eternity.

"All the time," I said flatly. I had a new headache starting from Pete's terrible pot. "Hey. Why don't you let me borrow your car?" The kid laughed.

"You can come too," I continued. "Back when I was in college, gas was so cheap we'd go to New York every single weekend, drive to New York City and back, high on all the speed we could find."

"*You* were in college?"

"I was for a while. I might be again. I'm working on it."

"Shit, man, I quit school."

"When?"

"I don't know. Tomorrow, probably."

"How come," I said, "so you can grow up to be a resourceful human being like me?" He shrugged. "Plant yourself forever in Greensboro, North Carolina?" His face changed. "Sorry, I forgot. You're different. You're

getting out. You've got your counterman job, your Velvet Underground albums, your *C-R-X*."

"And when did *you* decide to be such a resourceful human being?"

I looked at his glowering face; its pallor perfectly matched his dirty, sallow Beef Burger uniform. He was furious with me. There was nothing I saw fit to do in response but pocket my book and walk on.

"Hey!" he said, calling down the street. "You owe me eighty cents overdue charges."

I walked up and down the college strip to punish myself. The stores were the same ones that had existed here for the past twenty years, a fact that wrapped me in a simultaneous feeling of horror and comfort. To get warm, I made like I was shopping for birthday cards. I was in no mood for talking. I walked in another store and feigned interest in woven hippie belts. Fuck. I lost five dollars in pool to a girl named Francine at the Last Call. I rolled up a few extra Drums, for later. What a resourceful human being. I read near half of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, got to the part where the Creole woman is shut up in England and then Van jumped in and said it'd been over thirty minutes since I ordered a beer and if I wasn't going to have another I had to go. It wasn't his fault, the owner was standing right there, and angry. He'd watched me come out the bathroom—and if it's one thing he won't put up with, it's non-paying customers taking pisses on the premises.

"This is for you," I told Van, pressing a couple bills in his hand, and I came away with a handful of white tablets in mine.

"What are they?" I asked, and he shrugged.

"Good," he said.

It was by then four o'clock, I knew, as I saw the Industries for the Blind factory letting out up the street. It was a place where brooms, mops, cleaning supplies were made. No one who worked there could see. How did they know if things were clean or not? What did it matter? They knew. At four p.m. every day, vans started pulling up at the curb to take them all home.

"Hey, Charlie." Charlie had been wearing a path into the pavement between home and the factory for a good thirty years. "You making it all right today?"

You had to be a crazy motherfucker to walk that way alone, sightless, and looking the way Charlie did, with his thick, useless glasses and baggy brown pants and white shirts. Most of the blind people were pretty normal otherwise, but Charlie'd got his head banged good in a car wreck when he was a kid and I don't think he ever moved too far past that stage in life. He looked mad now.

"Of course I make it every day, Gib," he said, hearing my voice. "Don't you?"

Charlie had to pass under the bridge where often these crack heads Chesley and Warren crouched like a pair of trolls.

"Hey, blind man, you need a radio? I can get you a radio real cheap. Hey, blind man? You want to smoke something?"

"Chesley," I shot back. "Leave him alone, you fucks."

Charlie barely turned his head towards them, just went on down the other side.

"You don't have to do that, you know?" he said, feeling ahead with his guide-stick. "It's these potholes. And the sewer grates. *That's* what slows me."

Viceroy never meant to be drunk but he got that way fairly every day, least the ones I ran into him. I saw him a little later weaving down Lee.

"Did you get your guitar out?"

"Does it look like," he said, rolling back reddened eyes, breathing dragon fumes of alcohol and smoke, "that I got it?"

"It looks to me like you spent your money on the rotgut you knocked down your throat."

"Well then it looks to me," Viceroy said, "that you are right. Excepting this." He withdrew a clear packet of little wires from his pocket. "Strings for my guitar and liquor for my throat, ha ha. What am I going to do with these?"

"Let me have a little," I said. "To drink, I mean." We headed behind the record store, where he procured a dreggy bottle from within a tangle of weeds and briars. I lay back on the hood of a primer-ed, tire-less Corvair that was a permanent fixture of the parking lot. I felt good, lying on that car in the chilly sun. Long minutes passed. Nothing needed to be said.

"I didn't intend on this," Viceroy began, sobering already, swinging his legs over the side of the car. "I mean, I don't think I can *get* any more drunk tonight. I think if I was to fall asleep I'd die here, and I can't stand to die in this town. I got to *go* somewhere. I got to get *out*."

"Where you gonna go?" I pulled a rolled-up Drum out of my bag and lit it.

"Where you think I can go, man? 'Back to Reidsville?' I ain't got nowhere to go. I ain't got no money. It's three days till the end of the month and I got to wait on that cheque. I got maybe a couple dollars left rolled up in my shoe, same as you. It's the same damn bullshit every night."

"You sound like a college kid. 'Greensboro sucks, man.'"

"No, they starting to sound like me. I'm giving guitar lessons now, did you know that? They all want to play guitar down by the dumpster and drink like old men."

"We'll put up *punk rock* flyers," I said. "Drink Like An Old Bastard in

Two Weeks.”

“Shit.” He lay back again.

“I know,” I said. “It isn’t fair, is it? It took me thirty years.”

“Christ.” Viceroy opened his eyes then. “I wouldn’t mind going somewhere.”

Viceroy had never tried to catch on before, and it had been years since I had. I’d made it all the way to Philadelphia only to witness my girlfriend at the time fall for an ass-faced bartender with a store-bought winter sun-tan. He shaved off all the hair on his legs and arms, the better to see his muscle definition, my dear. That trip I mark as the beginning of my life now.

“You sure about this?” V-roy asked as we crossed the Kwik Wash parking lot and sighted the tracks.

“Of course.” We crept around the railyard hearing a spraying sound, metal rattling in a can. A runtish, fifteen-year-old girl and her little brother were tagging the side of a car; they turned to look in our direction.

Uniformed men walked briskly up and down the yard, administering to the trains, shouting into the walkie-talkies they carried on their belts. I picked a lean, tomato-faced railman to approach, Viceroy hanging a step behind me. I asked this railman would he mind checking on a delivery for me and the man did not blink, but radioed ahead to the switch dispatch and said into it all business-like, *it’s number seventeen that’s headed northeastways, correct?*

A truck started up behind us. I looked quickly over my shoulder.

“Seventeen is doubled up. Leaves at nineteen hours,” came the answer, cracked back.

The truck heaved forward over a scattering of gravel.

“You aiming to go anywhere special?” the rail asked. He nodded at the bottle Viceroy extended from behind my back, and took two drinks off of us.

“No, just different,” I told him. I thanked him then, and asked him would he mind looking towards the other way for a minute and he said that’d be fine by him, but he’d advise us to move on out of there if we meant to get anywhere.

I sighted the bull truck rumbling over the rocks. Shit. There was no time. It had to be now.

“Looks like we’re too late, I guess,” Viceroy said.

“Too late, nothing. We’re *right on* time.” I began to hustle across the yard.

“I don’t know, Gib. I think maybe you had better go on ahead without me.” I looked back over my shoulder to see what he was getting at. Vice-

roy stood still staring at the train tracks, and then down at a patch of brown grass dusting the ground. "I don't think I can do it."

"This isn't the fucking movies, my man. The train pulls up slow. Any old drunk can catch on to it."

"That's not what I mean. I mean, maybe that's part of it." Viceroy affected a clownish drunk walk; he weaved, staggered, and stopped—a drunk pretending to be drunk.

I didn't have time to, but I levelled with him. "Look, Viceroy. I'm here because of you. I'm here because this was your idea. Maybe you don't want to go with me. Fine. If this was some fancy plan to fool me out of town, then so be it. You don't have to fool me. I *want* to go. I'm *ready* to go. But if this is you chickenshitting out because *you're* too pus-filled to jump a train, or try your luck getting past city limits, then you're only fooling yourself, old man."

Viceroy seized and shut his eyes for a long minute. The bull truck neared. The train shuffled another step and stopped. The brother and sister attacked the cars viciously with their spray paint, a loud insistent *fwssshh*. At last Viceroy's eyes opened and looked straight into mine. "Take a rain-check, why don't I? I'm sorry, Gib. I just don't think I can do it right now."

"Suit yourself," I said, finished with him. I didn't have time to watch him walk away, the son of a bitch. It was just like him. It was just exactly like Viceroy to instigate an idea and then not carry through with it, leave the other guy holding the bag.

I dropped down to the ground like a shot-gunned man, ducked low and nearly crawled towards the freights. I clattered up into the only half-empty car I saw in range, bottles clanking inside my jacket, and waited in breathy quiet, watching the smoke curl out of my mouth and tangle itself in the fumes and the cold.

The pickup eased itself alongside the train—I could see it in my peripheral, the headlights shaking over the unsteady ground, flashing like a dangled lantern into the cars. Asshole-voices muttered to one another, *suspicious movement, check the piggybacks, check the grainer*. More flashlights spotted over the side yard, dove into shrubbery, lit up the shadowy figures of raccoons rustling through the trash, the metal litter of broken and rusted ties. I hid in a dunnage bag, paralyzed. I was hopping a train. I could have been robbing a damn *bank*, the way I felt.

By the standards of my peers, I was a lucky man: five years jail time I'd been sentenced to in my life, and only two and a half of that actually served. Still, times like this, you count heartbeats. You watch the cherry fall off your own cigarette. It's interminable. I didn't know precisely what was holding Viceroy back, but I had an idea. I wanted to see his faith tested outside of city limits. We were too comfortable in our discomfort. Men

like us lived just fine, according to Viceroy. We knew where to get a free meal, where to sleep, we had worked our way into the cracks and crevices of this town. Well, I was glad to leave it all behind.

I waited until the sound of the truck engine passed me by and fell away in the distance, and then I allowed myself to peek out of the bag into the dark car. I was cautious—I let my arm out of the bag and searched around on the floor until I found a railroad spike, and I was poised to jam it into the door slider, so I'd have a little air, when something beat against the door. I froze. The knocking came again. I tried to look around but it was too dark. There was nowhere for me to go. I could wait for them to find me or I could give myself up. The knocking came again; someone was trying to pry open the door. "I'm not bothering anyone!" I yelled as the door inched open. I heard laughter. Sure enough. "Let me in, you old bastard!" Viceroy said. "I got a train to catch."

I can't say I was sorry or glad to see him, but I didn't let on either way. He hoisted himself up and inside with no trouble, and I jammed the spike in the door slider and let out a breath at last.

"Just made it in the nick of time, didn't I?" Viceroy said. He stretched his hands over his head like you might do before you relaxed into your sofa for the night. "I thought about it, and I thought you might be right."

"I knew I was right," I said. I looked out the door. It was sundown. A lonesome whistle sounded, and the car began to urge itself forward.

"You know," said Viceroy. "I could have stood to have had a different travelling companion, but I suppose you'll do for now." We moved over a few tracks in awkward silence. I was still sitting in that bag. Then the train slowed and sat still for a second; coal burned in the air. "It has been *over a year* since I been out of this town."

"Two for me," I said. We shook our heads at each other, disbelieving. I remembered the pills then and stood up and handed half of them to Viceroy, a peace offering, you could say.

The train smacked against the tracks, barely moving at first. My body was already in motion from the liquor, so even this slight jolt made the train seem to lift and take off. I tried to sense whether it was east or west we were starting for, but I knew trains changed and lopped on other cars in the middle of the night and you never knew for sure. We had no clue where we were going—the end of the line, I hoped, some nameless, unfamiliar town. A place with no past. I couldn't wait to get there.

We looked around. There were only a few boxes in our car, banded together and labelled. Viceroy went to check out what was in them.

"Cedar chips," he said, sniffing.

The railroad spike afforded us a long sliver of a view, as wide as a person. Wires stretched like spaghetti noodles behind us, a streetlight flickered all wild-like over the Beef Burger and faded off, then, dead. A woman

and a man were fighting in the parking lot, their voices reverberating off the buildings around them, a milkshake spilled on the hood of their convertible, french fries raining onto the gravel. I didn't know them, but I felt as if I might. A string of blackbirds sailed past the open door and landed neatly in a row on a wire. That is what I saw.

"Things are looking better already," Viceroy said.

I looked past him where the birds rose from the wire in silent agreement and flew off in V formation. "I wish you had that guitar. We could do with some music, while we can still hear ourselves talk."

Pictures ticked by us like torn-off pages. The train jogged past the ravine and I saw two girls with long messy hair camped there on the mattress, napping I guessed, or passed out. Why did I miss out on all the right things?

"There's my coat," I said, seeing it hooked on a branch. "I wish they'd throw it up here. Themselves with it." I had on a thin army jacket I'd lifted out of the surplus dumpster; it was all moth-eat and thin and would be nothing against a strong railroad wind.

We killed that fifth and Viceroy produced something shaped like a mouthwash bottle with the label scratched off.

"Come from Donald," he said, and I didn't have to step close to him to smell it.

"Get on with it, then," I told him, and we did.

We were still in city limits, barely creeping. A guy clambered over the fence behind the Journey's End Motel, looking wild and wrong, stunned into stillness by the train. He was fucked-up on something. He sighted us and got the idea, ran for it, grabbing hard onto the bar. Jumping like that you can nearly wrench your arm off, even as slow as we were going.

"Goddammit, gimme a hand!" he hollered. Viceroy started for him.

"No," I said. "I don't want trouble."

"He's a *man*. He's *in* trouble," Viceroy protested, but didn't move. We just stood there and watched him fall away. We were two drunk old men refusing somebody a hand. But he'd be all right. I had a feeling he would be.

We moved on. At the crossing of Lee and Eugene, the three-piece suit-wearing hawkers of newspapers and perfume oils zig-zagged through honking traffic, red, green, yellow lights. It was rush-hour for some, frenzied and impatient and important. We felt a part of it for a change; we had a place to be, too. We curved behind the warehouses and came out over Elm, where a wreck stopped up all the lanes, a mini-van laying on its side next to a little hatchback and cop cars and ambulances squealing up to see what happened. But we passed right over them.

We crested over the bridge, and wind whipped through my gray head like a goddamn shampoo commercial.

"Never knew you were such a cover girl."

"How do you think," I said, "I get this natural lustrous shine?"

We were rolling by the old depot and next to it the warehouse where a woman I knew welded metal sculpture. She would offer tea or beer when I walked by. Lately she had been putting together a series of trees and six-foot-tall buildings. "You making a whole little town?" I asked her one time, and she answered, *piece by piece*.

I understood now why she had her place out here—besides that it was cheap, it was maybe the only edge of downtown where you could see the whole city. The presence of two hundred thousand people could be detected in a single glance. A webbing of streets lined with glassed twenty-story buildings, the curlicue tower of the J.P. bank building seeming stately. It was nothing, really, but it looked like something for a minute.

Viceroy bristled as he downed another taste of home-stilled liquor.

"Fools you into looking like a real city for once," he said, echoing what I was thinking.

"Yeah," I said. "It does when you get far away from it."

On the other side of our car, a band was playing. Right there, up against the tracks. They were kids I knew by face but now they were all dressed up in suits and playing a Creedence song. *I wanna know, have you ever seen the rain*. A whole gangful of other kids stood watching them, having a party, as we brushed behind them in the boxcar, sending wind blowing up through their jackets. Viceroy yelled out, and they toasted us as we chugged past. We were on our way to someplace. We were finally picking up some real speed. We were heroes.

"Whoooooooooooo-oooo," Viceroy hollered into the air. The door latches knocked against the sides of the cars as we hurtled forward, the connectors clanked, the walls rattled, a westward-bound train screamed shrilly in our direction. All together it was deafening, beautiful almost. We had to shout to be heard.

I was out of my mind, the pills melting up my spine. I felt like I hadn't felt in years. I shivered in my jacket and yelled at the top of my burned-out lungs as cities and cows and farmhouses and woods and starlight swam by us. There was a tunnel up ahead. Everything I could see before me flooded and dissolved in that dark vacuum and we with it.

We rode in dim green flashes, saw gardens appear suddenly, illuminated, and then fade like ghosts. A scarecrow nodded in the wind, presiding over rows and rows of corn that spiralled and then swam together. Towns were bubbles of streetlights separated by long hollow-sounding sweeps of darkness. Going sixty miles-an-hour it takes a train an entire minute to stop. A mile. How do you know to stop a mile ahead of time? I think we had entered a forest; it grew close around us. There was a window. Trees held out their long knobby arms to strangle us, to drown us in

their bark. *Watch out*, I said to them. Once I had a girlfriend who, every time she ate acid, imagined she was a tree. Her roots were so deep they choked the earth around them.

We passed through a silver wood, lidded and metallic. Tin flowers and copper leaves. The train stopped for what seemed like forever at a town whose name I forget, lulling and shuffling there, hitching on cars. People in long coats stood outside the station communicating in spirals of cold breath and lush, velvet voices. I wanted to keep riding, so we stayed and the train moved again and I looked at my book and thought about how I would never return it, how it would eventually be catalogued *assumed missing, lost*.

I wished we had a little fire. I watched Viceroy's tall body weaving like a prayer. *You are a damn hard man, even for an old man*, he said, but he was smiling. I hoped to lose him, too. It was really too bad about the guitar. Maybe he could have it sent. I went slowly along the corners of the car and watched the fog cover the sky like a bed sheet. Clouds weren't given names but stars were, just because they seemed to stay. And the cold, the cold was tremendous! I felt it move through my bloodstream, I was aware of the rivers in my body, how they coursed. What a wind! All the dreams I'd ever had were in it and they all came racing back to me at once.

I figured we woke as soon as the pills broke off, coming out on the other side of that same tunnel. It *felt* like that same tunnel. It was at least the next afternoon, but it was hard to tell, raining so hard all I could see was water gushing before my own face. I opened my mouth and drank it in; I was cold and thirsty. "I HOPE THIS TOWN HAS GOT DINNER WAITING ON US," I shouted over all the noise we'd gotten used to during the night. I'd put down *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Viceroy had started in on it, his lips mouthing the words as he read. I began to doze off again.

At last the train started to slow, a horrible screeching of brakes that sounded like shrieking rats, then eased back into a drawling, chugging rhythm. The doors ceased their rattling, only twanged softly here and there. The rain let up a bit, and soon a blurry wet skyline showed itself. A chair swung lightly in a green wood. A man painted price tags on the windshields of cars.

"Damn," I said, a familiar looking bright yellow rooftop catching my eye. "This town's got a Beef Burger too." I looked for Viceroy's confirmation but he had disappeared.

Tammy Armstrong

Where They Are Now

There are many ways to fall from a ladder. My grandfather fell as he did everything in life: with great theatrics that could now be thought of as presumption.

“He was too top-heavy to be gallivanting around on a ladder,” my mother had said shortly after he’d been pronounced dead.

An eighty-five year-old Humpty Dumpty, half-cut. The whiskey glass held to the light contained small droplets of Sea Foam latex paint. My grandfather had never been one for mixing.

Eulogies don’t work for everyone. Grandfather was neither a great nor well-known man. The neighbours only came to inquire out of fear of gas leaks—sudden early morning explosions igniting the seriousness of a winter sky. Sombre blue. A Sunday suit.

He’d told me only last week, while walking the perimeter of the property, ankle-brushing portulacas, knocking on sugar loaf squash, “I never expected to get old.” A simple sentence as though he’d commented on the lack of warmth in the air, a piece of lint in his salad. Resigned, contentious.

But old he got, his body bowing a little more each year until he walked as though balancing a book falling from his head. It was another one of those picnic games that only sounded fun during wartime: find the button, hot potato, musical chairs. All gone the way of Welk music, re-runs on PBS.

My name is Raddichio Paz Franklin. Although not named for a vegetable, but rather an unknown actor who had once promised to introduce my grandfather to Douglas Fairbanks. It was old world, he’d said, before gas-efficient cars and designer drugs for breakfast. My name is Raddichio Paz Franklin and I am, or was, Tony on “The Nat Tucker Show.” At one time, all of North America knew my name, my twisted face, as I said in my kid-lispy voice, “Hey, I’m no angel.” The line expected and executed each episode for five consecutive years. I had baby fat then. Viewers had loved the wattle, the cherubic face beneath a curly mane of hair. I looked like an overweight dandelion and was paid well for it.

But that’s twenty years ago. The baby fat stayed, layering into this wall of insulation I’ve come to depend on. I’m lucky now if I get asked to do a telethon once every few years. *And now, I’m pleased to introduce that lovable character from “The Nat Tucker Show.” All grown up now, Raddichio Paz Franklin.*

I know why they do it. There is something perverse and compelling about child actors. As adults, unknowns, addicts and diplomats from the by-gone days. Viewers compare how they've changed since they were kids lying belly down on shag carpets in living rooms around the globe watching little Tony...the pause...*Hey, I'm no angel* and that canned laughter we've all grown to depend on.

Puberty nipped me good. When my voice cracked at fourteen, so did the enviable bubble around me. Having rarely gone to public school or met anyone besides other child actors, my insulation grew. I returned to Vancouver and began to spend my time at the little shed at the bottom of the lane. Although neither a shed nor lane, rather a rancher on a cul-de-sac, my grandfather had notions of poetry, affecting a need for seclusion. This came from nothing he'd done in life but suited me fine, allowing my transition back into reality to be slow and gentle.

"He fancied himself Robert fucking Frost, Rad," my mother reminded me over coffee after the funeral service. "Salinger, Kipling, who knows." She dismissed it all with a wave of her cigarette, winging the air with blue-grey smoke. My mother blamed my grandfather for my acting, for where I've since gone with my life. Nowhere fast, as she says.

1977, Vancouver to Los Angeles in grandfather's Cutlass Supreme. My mother had packed us sandwiches. Peanut butter and banana. The grease had leaked through the bag, leaving my legs oily and the car too sweet to sit in for long without a window down. Before this enterprise Grandfather had been a gambler of sorts—long weekends in Reno, shovelling money from his pockets onto blackjack tables. His world was a spiral of red and black. Numbers were important, superior to all other notions of communication. In a sense, I became a number. I was his way out of debt and the sham family man he'd become.

"One word for you, Rad," Mother said, "mens rea." Those were two words but I didn't have the heart to correct her.

One mild day in Vancouver. We packed up the essentials, a pillow on my seat so I could see above the dash, and we bombed it down. Grandfather with a cup of coffee in his hand all those miles. Red eyes made with cola and coffee. Trucker drink, he called it. The smell, while I tried to sleep beside him, was gut flipping.

Why my mother allowed him to take me, I've never been able to determine. He was her father and provider as I have no father of my own, mine having jumped a boat to Scandinavia. A sudden passion for the military service. A chump, my mother said. Wonder where that chump is now? Although it was the late 1970s, she still used old words, words she would have heard grandfather use, hustler words. Saw backs and kibosh.

When we reached L.A. with its clover patch of overpasses and underpasses, I understood that it would be a very difficult place to leave. Grandfather nosed the Cutlass further into that interstitial heat and noise, glancing at the ratty road map between us on the seat. "Exit fucking 28 or 29?" he muttered, panic-stricken, chain-smoking. The butts toppled from the small ashtray and scattered below the gas peddle. Other cars honked as they flew pass us. "Bat out of hell," Grandfather yelled as he waved his fist out the window. I watched the faces as they passed: women in sharky cars with faces tanned as tiki totems, sunglasses shielding their faces from the afternoon sun. I was nine years old, never having left my small neighbourhood, never far from my school or ante bellum home with its moss-tinged stucco and the little faded Canadian flag fluttering from the porch gable. I'd never slept in a car.

We slept four nights in the Cutlass. Grandfather insured my silence in a convenience store parking lot with a handful of cinnamon fireballs and lemon drops. "The world is full of crooks and shysters, Rad," he said, prostate on the front seat that first night, his feet resting on the steering wheel, a cigarette in his fist.

I peeked over the seats to see him. He'd made a bed for me in the back. Flannel pyjamas and a sheet. I was dewy with heat.

"Why we here then?" I asked, peering through the steamed windows for signs of crooks and shysters. But there was only the slow cruise of teenagers buying bags of beers, drinking Slush Puppies and Bacardis on car hoods as they talked in the dim corners of the lot.

"We're here, my good man, to make you famous." He'd butted out the smoke then and rolled his denim jacket up to pillow his head. "Get some sleep, you're gonna be busy for years."

I never asked Grandfather how he came to be so certain about my statured rise and it's of course too late now. But the next morning, after washing up in a diner bathroom, me holding the tap on while he washed the hot cinnamon stains off my cheeks with a paper napkin, we went to an audition.

Hundreds of kids. Nobody looking as I did with the clothes my mother had carefully ordered from the Sears catalogue, determining sizes only from the incongruent images of strange children standing and floating on their white backgrounds, glancing toward some spot just beyond the camera eye. Something wonderful there, the look said so. I sat beside other boys my age in squeaking loafers, new pennies actually shoved into the small flaps at the top of each shoe. They studied scripts, practiced strange noises I would later learn were voice exercises. Their mothers sat beside them, constantly wetting their fingers and smoothing down rebellious sprouts of hair. Grandfather plunked me into a plastic chair near the stairwell and washrooms and spoke with the receptionist. From across the room

he motioned two fingers toward his mouth. Five minutes. Wait. I nodded. Studied the other kids as their parents reminded them to smile, to cock their heads as they said the line.

I knew the line, had practiced it with various inflections and intonations the entire trip down. *Hey, I'm no angel.* No problem. What I didn't understand was how many variations there were for this line. How would they choose one kid from another. Why not take the first kid you find and train him to say it how you want? Which is what they essentially do in the end anyway.

My audition lasted all of five minutes. I spoke about my neighbourhood, my favourite class and of course, I said the line. The casting director shook his foot while listening. A clean white leather sandal balanced on the curl of his toes, never quite slipping to the floor. Behind him was a billboard-sized poster of Munchie, the star of "The Nat Tucker Show." Blue, and with the look of mange about him, he waved from a perch on the edge of a sofa, sneakered feet crossed lightly at the ankles. Over his shoulder, Nat Tucker smiled, his arm on Munchie's shoulder. A reassurance. This was the newest addition to sitcoms in the late seventies, alien creatures with tender hearts.

"How do you feel about working with puppets?" He asked, leaning in close.

I shrugged. "I think that I would treat Munchie as I would any other member of the show: with respect and dignity."

He smiled, jotted something with a scratchy pen and waved me away. Next.

Back in the lobby, the kids were rapidly shifting seats as each in turn was ejected from the casting room. Mothers in spitty whispers bitched. *You shoulda done that. Why didja say that for Christ's sake?* Grandfather wasn't there though.

How he managed such a persuasion in less than twenty minutes I'll never know but as I moved through the room and then into the stairwell with its pale yellow walls, I found him with whom I would later learn to be Samantha Hudson, producer of all those family/variety shows of the late 1970s. Grandfather had her balanced, quite precariously, I'll admit now, on the handrail between the fifteenth and sixteenth floors. Skirt wrapped high on her waist, legs around his hips, she was pressing into him as though he were sustaining her oxygen level. As their noises grew, he moved her over to the wall where her hair caught on the stucco—a bottle blond halo of a sparrow's nest. *Yeah Daddy, yeah Daddy,* she moaned.

Grandfather, pants twisted around his fish belly white legs, lifted her over and over. A large groan, his hand slapped the wall until the sounds subsided.

Where was I while all this occurred? Hiding one floor above so that I

could lean over the space they were rapidly steaming up.

Finished, Samantha smoothed down her tailored skirt and adjusted her V-neck sweater so the blush over her chest was not so prominent. Grandfather hiked up his pants and made some joke that made Samantha titter. Fluffing her hair, she sashayed back up the stairs and was gone through the door into the frenzy of the casting call.

Grandfather sat down on the step he'd just used for leverage and lit a cigarette. His face pale. "Sorry you had to see that, Rad," he said, not turning around. "Nice piece comes along you gotta..." unable or unwilling to finish he only turned and smiled. "You'll know someday kid, someday."

"He was a goddamn stereotype," Mother has reminded me on more than one occasion.

And even laid out in his coffin, Grandfather was still handsome in a Cool Hand Luke, Rhett Butler sort of way. Right angle sideburns, rugged complexion. An amateur boxer in his teens, he still had the physique, although shrunken and no longer straight. A playboy, womanizer, Mother called him. I never told her about the stairwell affair but to this day pale yellow makes my stomach hurt and a small kernel of guilt burn down further into my brain. A goddamn stereotype.

My exodus out of Hollywood. Grandfather of course had some misgivings. I'd paid down most of his debts and no longer heard of Finger Fred or Lyncher Lenny. These I've later learned were never real characters. Vancouver is too much of a Shirley Temple cowgirl in shiny red boots kind of town for such characters. Instead, while cleaning out his desk in the kitchen I found a pile of letters from one Lois Clarence. Baton Rouge. They thanked him for the money, the La-Z-Boy, apartment, small trinkets that dazzled her friends. His lover. Her life padded with my line for years. Grandfather with a mistress he rarely saw. Hey I'm no angel, he would have said, mocking that child-lisp and high voice.

I've now spent twenty years inside reality or some relatively innocuous version of it. I've worked as a short-order cook, a desk clerk at a motor inn, and I've slept with one woman since I was fourteen. As Grandfather grew more concerned with his limited time here on our wisecracker planet and less time on women and his waning need for them, it was easy to maintain a hint of successfulness concerning them. He only half-listened to my stories, the other ear, internal, concentrated on the mechanical timbre of his organs, listening like a car owner for that persistent yet weak click that occurs when the engine warms.

Living in the shed at the end of the lane gave me the best excuse for not

bringing around lady friends. Grandfather's house was dark, masculine, with nudie beer mugs and acetate images on lampshades of World War II pin-ups. It was a place concerned with men, there was no room for lavender and lace.

Five years running. "The Nat Tucker Show" was the prime time equivalent to "Hockey Night in Canada." And although Nat himself had a Molotov temper and was more apt to bear paw one of us kids across the head just before the camera rolled, his smile for the audience made the housewives of North America wet as they yearned for husbands half as suave. It was in this last year that I was seduced. Grandfather and I were living in a two-bedroom bungalow off of Vine then. Mother came for sporadic visits but complained most of the time about the heat. We lived modestly so that we could bank the pay cheques and also because that weasel of an agent Grandfather had found in the yellow pages was embezzling before the ink was dry. The woman was actually an eighteen-year-old extra from Wisconsin. Her parents, owners of a hard cheese plant, had allowed her to head west on the ruse of being an au pair for a semester. She was here for The Discovery, as they call it in showbiz. The other great word was cutting room floor, but that's a different story. I was fourteen and she was eighteen. She hunted me, Grandfather commented later, because she thought I could slingshot her like a satellite into that small, fragile, carnivorous world which is Hollywood. I, of course, thought we were in love.

It was this misconception which prompted my pages of loose-leaf poetry and bad sketches that never captured her eyes nor lips but rendered her animalistic and bloated like a road-killed badger. I was, as Grandfather said after too many ryes one night, a chump.

Having a hard-on was not a problem but sustaining one while a very voluptuous (lard-ass Grandfather said) woman attempted to ride over my flabby frame was another matter. Although I was of medium height, my weight had already started to swell. After rummaging around between my legs, pulling back creases of flesh, she found me ready and fired to go. And we did it in the damp evening scrub of grass behind the studio, a place where coy-dogs were said to roam after hours. I was flattened into the earth, watching in amazement as that woman pistoned on top of me, pulling me in and out, in and out, until everything began to feel contrived and surreal. She rolled her head, stroked her breasts and huffed like a stallion. She scared me so badly that I misfired over her thighs and the rolled-down edges of her extremely tight jeans. Reaching down between my thighs, she felt around for the flaccid remains of my one chance—withered, ashamed in its little fleshy hood.

"Thanks for nothing, big boy." A shimmy into her jeans, one look in a little compact mirror on her key chain, and gone over the moist ground. I

don't like to think now how long I stayed there on my back watching the mist of the L.A. skyline taint the sky apricot behind the haze of smog. That part of the story doesn't matter.

Behind quitting show biz We were filming before a live studio audience. Outside the set, dark bobbing heads, the pong of heat, bodies and overly applied perfumes and colognes. Grandfather was off in the right wing, doing a crossword puzzle book, the kind you buy at airports and hospital gift shops. I stood on my mark, concentrated on ignoring the lights that bit at the skin near my hairline. Nat was talking. *But Tony, why'd you flush that little goldfish down? He was a perfectly good goldfish.*

Laughter.

The audience shifted as that moment of truth, my line lingered above the boom. I toed the tape.

Why'd you do it, hmmm? Nat prodded. Cheshire shit grin as he glanced toward the producer, looking for the prompt cards. How can this goddamn kid forget the line?

The line.

My throat felt stripped—a ribbon of back bacon.

Tony?

Something was wrong.

And then I said it.

But my voice was a tsunami of sounds, a steel girder tumbling from a height onto a scrap yard. There was nothing cute, endearing about it. *Hey, I'm no angel.*

This is the truth. There was an intake of breath through the studio. Solidarity. Phones were picked up, deals cancelled, lawyers called to find loopholes in my contract. Get that kid out of here. Panic around the studio. Samantha was already heading for the CEO's office to explain, agree, kiss ass, who knew? All I knew was that I would not be the new face of Chex cereal, no promotional Pumas or Pong games. That voice coming out of me like some pissed off banshee ended it all.

In Hollywood children don't grow the same as in the rest of the country. We're expected to stay stunted, cute, and, above all else, oblivious to that which is occurring around us. Between takes I was given barrels of strong coffee but only in my dressing room so that no tour groups or investors saw that I, as the small child I was scripted to be, drank coffee. I was smoking two packs of Marlboroughs a day by the time I was thirteen. And these were provided in my room so long as I stood on a recliner and smoked upwards toward the ventilation shaft. Even my clothing was meticulously chosen by wardrobe to remind the audience that I was young in my elastic waist dungarees and polo shirts. I was paid well to remain always ten years old.

Spin-offs. Grandfather hated those typically sappy shows where the children move out, go to university, and make only guest appearances with their television family. He had assured me on many occasions that this would not happen, that I would slip through the transition easily and quite possibly make a splash on a new cop show as a tough New York rookie. There would be no typecasting. But I did not give Hollywood the chance to prove this could be done. Instead, my traitorous voice and I, unsure what to do next as the whispers rolled through the studio, waited for Grandfather to get to his feet. His face smouldered below the arc lamps. I marched over to Munchie in all his matted fur and glory and punched him square in his phallic nose. The puppeteer, speechless for once, jumped from behind the blind to block the windmilling assault. I punched once more but felt only the thin bones of the puppeteer's hand.

"Fuck you, Munchie."

The voice behaved as it should have in the beginning. And then in front of a live studio audience who had paid thirty dollars each to witness *The Nat Tucker Show* and all of its charm, who expected to return to their suburban lives in dairy and potato states across the country raving about their glimpse with fame, instead, they received the bird. My arm flew up high and furious so that those in the cheap seats could see.

"You'll never work in this town again, Franklin!" Tucker spat, his mesh shoes squeaking as he bee-lined toward his dressing room where, it was well known, he'd do several transcontinental rail lines of coke to calm down. And, like Grandfather before me, I became nothing more than a stereotype. Washed up, rinsed out at fourteen.

Mother said come home, for Christ's sake. She later confessed her fear of finding me a strip mall security guard, self-help guru on late night infomercials, or a porn star. Obviously, she hadn't been following the navicular girth I was developing.

So we packed up the few belongings accumulated during our sojourn in Tinsletown. Grandfather refused to return the calls from talk and entertainment shows. We were already deep in the tabloid smut. While buying milk and Little Debbie snack cakes at the A&P the week following what we would proverbially refer to as the Munch Punch, I saw the checkout girl eyeing me as she pecked the prices into the machine.

"Aren't you Tony?"

I have learned that there is no difference between television persona and person after awhile. There were even times when I wasn't sure if what I was saying was typical of Rad or of Tony.

"Yeah," I said, expecting the usual fawn over.

"You got a drug problem. That's why they fired ya."

Her nametag said Vera. The oblong breast it rested on suggested many milk babies at home in various degrees of unkemptness, a house smelling of canned spaghetti and drug store perfume.

"Wrong guy." I mumbled, scanning the rack of magazines for the article. And there it was: a blurry photo of me, waddling out of some nondescript office building, lawyer and producer flanking me. I suppose at the right angle I might have looked stoned. The more realistic conclusions were smoke in my eyes, an attack of hypoglycemia.

"Nope, it's you." She poked her tongue, wrapped in green gum, out of her mouth then snapped it loudly against the front of her teeth. Satisfied. "Suppose you could always work here." She narrowed her hamster eyes on me. "Honest living and all."

Face like a knuckle, Grandfather came from around the magazine display. "You shut your yap. If I offered you twenty bucks you'd be in the can in a minute with me."

She swallowed the gum. A loud thunk in her throat. Handed me the change and engrossed herself in the cuticles on her left hand.

Out through the Muzak and air-conditioning back into that wall of L.A. heat that sucker punches you and leaves you for dead. We were on our way home.

Desert nights. We drove silently in our velour-upholstered bullet. Grandfather rested the LA phone book on the gas peddle for the long stretches when I was almost sure I could see the thin lights of Vancouver ahead. Straight as those lines I'd so carefully written my poetry on, as the cross-hatched design on the bottle of Wild Turkey Grandfather sipped from all that first night.

I'd tried to say it several times while emptying the ashtray out my window, watching the pale filters float and finally fall onto the macadam, while frigging with the radio for a station just to reassure myself that there were towns ahead, that it wouldn't always be the rusty fields and Joshua trees. Our landscape together. The credits crept unseen across the windshield, marking the ending. Not even a hint toward a re-run. Just that deep bowl of sky with its smattering of stars, escapees from the city's glow. That skyline snagged everything in its wake, trawled up the bottom feeders and let them breathe if only momentarily on the surface. We were lost together in a sea of sand. I tried to apologize.

"Listen, Gran—"

"Save it, Rad." He took another haul off the bottle, glancing in the rear-view for signs of highway patrol. "Best to just save it."

He was right. That apology was maybe all I had left to call my own. A black licorice baby beneath my tongue slowly disintegrating, turning my

mouth sour and black.

In 1984, Indira Gandhi was murdered. The car radio kept us from unhinging, focused on that defeated trip home. Phil Collins's song, *Against All Odds*, must have been played a thousand times. *Take a look at me now*, he moaned, demanded. A broken man, I thought, urging the lyrics to say something about me as we passed Tex-mex restaurants with smiling cactus characters on their roofs. A blur. Grandfather only stopped for gas, coffee and to piss, usually on the side of the highway.

By day two, I'd taken to singing along with Phil. *There's just an empty space, la, la, la.*

"You got to play that song again, Rad?" He was concentrating on the truck in front. Tailgating, swerving out to get a look for a passable strip. The truck was loaded with chickens. Rotten shit saturated the air, tangled in the air vents. Feathers, speckled with filth showered down over our hood and windshield.

"Hey, I'm no angel." I ventured, my head knocking into the doorframe as he pulled out fast, jamming the gas down, past the truck's whining tires—liquid leaked and spun into the dry air.

Stoned in Grandfather's yard. I apologized to the rhododendrons for running out on his dream. Mother shook her head, paused at the hatchback's open trunk, boxes of clothes in her arms for the Sally Ann. "That's not going to fix things."

I raised the joint in a toast to her then turned away, listening as her shoes crackled back over the drive into the house. I don't know why he was re-painting the kitchen. Mother suspected a lady friend. I suspected the colour was just fine for watching the kinetic flow of life, birds darkening that clean space from time to time with their shadows. It was a good colour to sit and watch the sun go down by. A good colour to watch time pussy foot on by after the tubes blew out in the television.

Heather Birrell

White Bread Fiction

George O'Malley was short, stretched tight and skinny like a rubber band, and impossible to interrupt. He mostly showed up on Sundays at around breakfast time, then blustered around on the porch for ten minutes before Dad invited him in to eat.

"I tell ya Gordon, I get some doozies in this job. The other day I got this fella come in he sez to me, he sez, sir, I just don't know what to do. I'm depressed, he sez, I can't find a job no matter how hard I try. And I look down at his form and I see he's got a goddamn degree plus *more*. He started some other goddamn graduate program out at some other university. He's a pretty big fella with some meat on him and one of those pale unused faces if you know what I mean, so I sez, well Ken—Ken was his name—what are you interested in doing? Ken sez, I dunno sir but lately I'm too much in my head, lately I'm thinking I'd really like to work with my hands to really—*build* something. And he's waving his hands in the air like he's *excited* or something. Then he sits down. Even though I don't recall asking him to sit."

And that's when George seemed to be winding down a bit so Dad took the opportunity to shove a cup of coffee into his hand which George gripped for a moment then put down on the step beside him untasted. When George started talking again, you moved the mug towards the geranium planter so he wouldn't knock it over.

I've been thinking about you and George O'Malley lately, wondering if you remember that Sunday. But that's not the only reason I was thinking about you. You see, I've learned it's important that there's some sort of incentive for telling a story, and equally important to recognize your intended audience.

I got a letter from Mum the other day, and in it she enclosed this clipping from the newspaper about Richie, which is what made me want to tell this story, although George O'Malley is also part of it, and there are, of course, other issues. But let's just say, for the purposes of clarity, that Richie was the inciting incident, the spark behind this. The article wasn't very long. There wasn't much to tell—a bit about the murder, the arrests, how it shocked the community. And then the punch line, like something from a

TV movie: Richie, two months short of a chance at parole, had hung himself in his cell. I wanted to call Mum to talk to her about it, but I didn't because she doesn't know I dropped out. I wanted to call you to talk about it, but we don't talk. So I started thinking maybe this was a story.

It happened in High Park, at nighttime, and there were three of them with baseball bats. When you think about it, you might think of a crack, wood on bone, something clear and conclusive. But it was a thud, soft and stupid. Spiro was kicking him and yelling something about one less faggot, and looking at Richie like he was chicken shit, so he took the bat and brought it down on his chest, and then he couldn't stop himself; he just kept swinging until he stopped the *ouf*noise. It was then he noticed the lines of blood streaming out of the ears like two solemn ant processions. But Joey still went at it, even after Richie and Spiro had backed off. When Joey finally stopped, it was like the guy on the ground wasn't even a person anymore. He was just this mess of rags and blood and arms and legs all quiet like sleeping animals, so they ran back to the car and they drove away. On the back seat was a two-four of empties Richie meant to return for the deposit money the night before, and on the dashboard an old air freshener Lori had bought him. *Spring Rain*. Fucking hell, said Spiro. That thing smells like shit.

Richie's life had always run alongside ours, like a wild horse next to a train. We were steady, on schedule, simply because he was not.

It doesn't feel as if I've dropped out really. I still have library privileges and the seventy-five dollar cheques from Mum (for *sundries* she actually wrote in one of her cards) keep coming every month, or more often if she can manage it. Now I'm taking this evening course, a writing workshop, so that one day, if I have what it takes, I will be a real writer. My instructor has the best posture I have ever seen. Everyday I watch her riding her bike away from the recreation centre, and am convinced that there is nothing but willpower and gravity anchoring her bum to the broad, black re-upholstered seat. She scares me a bit, like helium balloons. Our last assignment was to choose a clear, quirky, luminous incident from our childhoods and to build a story from there....

But the kingdom of children is closed to me now. Not a kingdom really, but serfdom. The other day I was walking past a schoolyard, and I saw them in clusters and singles, trading insults, passing around secrets like coins. What did they *know*? What leavings and keepings were rattling at the bottom of their bright oversized knapsacks? It began to rain, as it often does here, and a teacher who looked far too young for the job began herding them all up the steps and into the school. When they turned to-

wards her, their eyes looked pale and intent, as if they had been woken suddenly and violently from sleep.

The thing is, Richie was your story, and to put myself there.... Well, I'm just a beginner. I'm afraid I would be tempted into machismo and melodrama; a scene in the bathroom, gazes exchanged in a cracked mirror over urinals. The cowboy stances, the dainty tip-tapping to shake the drops free, the post-pee shudder. How you would have had something, a yearning or a yen, for what Richie had, his assurance, an innate sexual power that emanated from his crotch and collar, which was denim, worn soft and grimy. Frayed: tiny extra hairs rubbing against his neck. And maybe in the story, if I were you, I would recall the time when you were eleven and expanding into your boy-self, an innocent to Richie's thirteen. You rode your bikes down to the river, through back streets, over kerbs, along Bloor Street, that border of traffic, thighs pumping strong, then slack, coasting on your banana seat, overweening child/man. Down then, into Etienne Brulé Park, the river valley named after a French scallywag and *coureur-de-bois*.

("Beaver pelts, that's what this country is built on," Dad once said, so that for years I envisioned the sleek skins buried under the foundations of factories and apartment complexes, mixed in with bones and concrete, lost nickels, and root systems. You hid your face behind your elbow every time Dad said *beaver* and Mum stuck her front teeth over her bottom lip, but quickly, without sound, as if acting out a charade for herself only.)

Then through the ravines to where the brush is thick on the bank and there is an eerie privacy for a place so close to the well-tended public path. Beaten down reeds and crayfish; a stink like breeding. Joe Louis' wrappers and torn magazines, the brown murk of river rushing shallow over rocks and man-made waterfalls. You would sit there on stumps and skip stones, smoke cigarettes. Conjecture. A weeping willow would trail its bowed leaves to the ground. And maybe you would take them out, small, tender and whole, and hold them in your hands, in each other's hands, like delicate pink cigars. Maybe they would grow and swell, reach for some knowledge. You would have loved Richie then.

In any case, it's just a scene isn't it? One that's been played out thousands of times. Boys in secret places with their pants down.

Still I understand that sometimes people have to go off slyly, on their own or with someone else. It's what we need; little amulets of time and space. It's what Dad did in his workshop with the two-by-fours and piles of screws and sawdust, the tape player pumping out Tom Paxton tunes.

What I imagine is myself, bigger, barging in on your little scene in the park and saying something cop-like: "Where's your father young man?" But then I remember Dad was having his gall bladder out at the time, and

that gets me thinking about how he gave them to you, his gallstones, to keep. They floated—imperfect mustard-coloured eggs—in a large Mason jar you had placed on your dresser. It sat next to an old piece of hockey net and a silver cardboard box with a condom nestled in it—out of its package but unused—like an alien finger left to dry in the earth’s unfamiliar atmosphere. I know this because often, when you were out, I would roam your room like an African cat, padding and predatorial. Sometimes I watched you in the mornings, still sleeping, lips loose, cheeks puffing out with stale nighttime breath.

My instructor gave us some stories to read. She said she tried to stay away from too much white bread fiction while selecting the readings. It saturates the canon already, she said. People have had enough of it.

Lord Love A Duck

We are all on our way to a picnic in the old Dodge Dart, only there are more people in the car than could possibly fit, a real crowd, and we are our grown selves, but Mum and Dad are their selves from when we were small. There’s some kind of leak in the bottom of the car, and although it’s not raining, there are deep puddles in the streets, so that every time Dad slows down or turns, water sloshes up onto our feet. Anyway, things get rolling for me because I realize there’s something missing. I don’t have my sunhat or bug spray; I forgot to pack properly. We’re in the suburbs; strip malls and gas stations with glamorous convenience stores attached.

Then Mum says, “Oh, Gord, could we stop right up here, right up here, next to Miss Hennessey’s, because I really could use some new sunglasses.” Which is unlike her since normally she is the most practical and prepared of us all.

Someone else—my husband?—says, “Don’t forget we have to drop off that fitness video in Montreal for Rachel.” Which is impossible since we are on our way to Mara Provincial Park two hours north of Toronto. But Dad doesn’t seem to mind and I can’t understand why, if we can detour to Montreal, it would be too much trouble to backtrack ten minutes so I can get my hat.

Anyway, we pull into a parking lot and Dad says, “Here you go Reenie, let’s get you those sunglasses,” and opens the door so we all pour out onto the asphalt. Then he notices she has a pair of sunglasses sitting on the floor in front of the seat and points at them. “What about those? What’s wrong with those?”

“Can’t wear those Gord, they make me look like a bug.” Mum is being more bustling and officious than usual, like an American 1950s *Ma-awm*, but Dad says okay, and they start walking towards one of the big box

stores. I decide I should probably follow because they might have some sunhats. So I'm hurrying to catch up to Dad, and we both notice this thing lying on the ground at the same time. It's a piece of ham, a pink cold cut folded up and sitting pretty next to one of the parking lot lines.

"Well, would you look at that," says Dad.

"It's a piece of ham, Dad," I say.

"Look again," he says, and I do. "It's a duck," he adds.

And it is.

The ham is a duck. A pink, fleshy duck, crouching low and sneaky in a poor attempt at camouflage, its tail feathers trailing on the ground.

"It's a goddamn tiny ham mallard." Dad sighs, pleased.

We look at each other and I look back at you, leaning against the car. Mum is trundling up ahead, and across the parking lot I can see Lori with a tiny magenta purse dangling from one shoulder. I watch you straining towards her, lifting a hand to wave, but she doesn't notice. Then Dad and I both call your name at the same time, at the top of our lungs. Because more than anything we wish you could see this goddamn duck.

The group wasn't sure what to make of that story. Someone ventured that it wasn't *really* about childhood. Someone else said it was a form of slightly surrealist postcard fiction, but she was picking at a hangnail while she said it. Actually, it is a dream I had the other night that I keep hoping will happen again.

When I first moved here I imagined the mountains might inspire me, or act as as a kind of landscape tonic, wake me up a bit like a good aftershave should. It made me understand why you had to get away, find a spot of your own, even if it is just an hour outside of Toronto, and instead of mountains you got smokestacks. It's overwhelming though, the brand of beauty here. All that water and land and sky give me a heady feeling, which is not the same as a smart feeling. The people wear nice clothes though, surf-like and active, and they all have travel mugs and snappy gear with fastenings and paddings, although I'm not sure they ever travel very far, really. I started running because everyone else does, and I think it was a good idea. It forces me to measure out my life in the distance between telephone poles, which is okay. Setting small goals like that. When I went to buy new shoes, the sales person, a man with shaved legs and busy tendons in his calves, made me test them on the street outside. I had to run up and down the sidewalk with the glowing sides and stripes of the things calling attention to my stride.

I miss the subway and the lake. I miss High Park with its autumn colours, mulch, and long, long memory. I miss you like I've been missing you my entire life.

Anyway, you're probably not interested in hearing about George O'Malley these days. And George O'Malley was really only interested in himself; the powerful wax and wane of his very own worldview. Still, I can recall what he said as if it were yesterday. He had picked up the coffee mug and seemed to be warming his hands on its steamy sides.

"Oooh, getting a little nippy," he said, and we all agreed, although the morning had dawned bright and sunny, and you still insisted on wearing your long Tom Sawyer jean shorts. George O'Malley sighed and still did not drink his coffee.

"And he sez, he sez to me, you see I've thought about it, how I would do it. Long faced drinkin' buddy look. Do what, sez I. Kill myself, he sez. And he looks at his hands like he's shy after he come bustin' into my office with this cockamamie story. He didn't need George O'Malley. He needed a head doctor!" George O'Malley paused, but not for long.

"Then he just sits there waiting, *goddamn grad student*, so I sez, well, I think you picked the wrong office buddy cause we're only on the second floor and you wouldn't have far to fall." Another sigh.

"Not sure we could help you much in that endeavour," George O'Malley said.

So Richie is gone. The guy he killed was gay. And we didn't know any gay people then.

The thing with teenagers is they transfer all the affection they might have had for their family as children to relative strangers as soon as they hit puberty, and the trail the love leaves moving over wags behind them like a vestigial tail. It's what makes them move so awkwardly. Lori was thin with chunky thighs and the kind of jeans you had to lie like an acrobat on the bed to zip up. She sometimes crimped or teased her shoulder-length brown hair into mini fountains at the front, and her eyeliner matched the blue of her eyes exactly. Once I helped her pick up the insides of her purse when it fell open and spilled in the parking lot: a red glossy compact, two hard tampons, wrapped tight and pointed like bullets, wallet-sized photos of her and Richie where she has him in a headlock and they are both laughing. On her key ring: a rabbit's foot dyed orange, plus a little plastic tag that read *Sarasota* in swirly writing over a picture of the setting sun. For some reason her voice always sounded slightly asphyxiated, unsure, although she herself never seemed so. In her last year of high school she got braces, which added to her mystique, made her more closed-mouthed, so that when she did speak her words seemed loaded, cryptic. We all loved her.

I wish I could say I was born a writer. In grade seven I wrote a story for Mr. Lara about a post-nuclear war world where wraiths with black oblong

pancakes for eyes trailed mournfully along the earth's decimated surface. He gave me a B-. "He's not even English," my best friend Julie hissed. "He's from *Trinidad*." But I still felt sorry when someone wrote *Dirty Packi* on his blackboard.

"I'm sorry," I said, when I arrived early one morning and found him leaning up against one of the desks contemplating the message.

"It's okay." He erased the "c" in *Packi*, then wiped off the entire thing. "I'm not even a Paki. You will encounter this often in the world, Maddie. Carelessness and hate in combination. Strange that what bothers me most is the inaccuracy of it all."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"It's not your job to be sorry. Just know exactly who you are. Name your fortunes and misfortunes and live your life."

There was the day I overheard Mum talking to Aunt May on the phone, deeming you dyslexic. The glee I felt printing it in blue felt pen across your pink Hilroy notebooks. Dick-Sex-Lick. Dick-Sex-Lick. Until the only space left was a small, unsullied triangle in the corner only big enough for one word, and which to choose from amongst the three? A bad word was a bad word.

When we got a bit older we didn't talk to Richie much at school. He hung out near the senior doors, but didn't go inside much. There was a covered pathway leading up to the door where kids slouched to smoke, lining the narrow passage like mould. Richie had a coveted spot on the step leading up to the door, close to the warmth of the foyer in winter. He wore sleeveless T-shirts in the warmer months so that you could see the cigarette burns—tiny, puckered blooms in the skin—on the tops of his wiry arms. *Stepfather* was the story. Lori was often by his side. Someone said she refused to see him after what happened. Still, I used to imagine her sometimes, waiting outside of the prison in the spring rain, her hair shorter, maybe streaked.

You were always accident prone, loose like an animal with your body. I spent a whole summer trying to break my wrist, bending it back, testing it against the plywood headboard of my bed for pain. Why? Someone long-suffering in a book. Beth from *Little Women* with her sickbed lethargy and loveliness. I longed for it. You once came shuffling into my room, smiling, blood streaming from your mouth. You had bitten clear through your tongue when you fell off a swing. "I almost made it over the top," you mumbled like a drunk. That was the same summer you got the pink pear-shaped scar on your chest. You and Richie had been burning bugs with your magnifying glass when you caught fire. He had to put you out with a hug.

Richie's car was parked in the driveway when I came home the day of the barbecue in the backyard. When I walked around the side of the house I could hear your voices and smell the meat cooking. It was only April, too early, really, to be eating outside. But when I walked up beside the porch, there you were.

"C'mon Maddie, pull up a chair." Richie was smiling, brandishing a pair of tongs.

I sat down on the step. "Hi."

"How do you like it?" He flipped open the barbecue lid and peered inside.

You were wearing an apron, one of Mum's plasticized ones with a picture of Oxo cubes on the front. "She likes hers practically still alive."

"Rare, eh? Some rare meat for a rare girl."

Was this an insult? I didn't care. I took the steak.

Richie closed the lid, sat next to me and tapped out a smoke. "How do you think you'll die?"

"From death," you said, even though there was a possibility the question was directed at me.

"No, really."

"Dunno. Cancer. Falling piano. You?" You lit his smoke for him.

"Not sure, but I sure hope I lose my marbles first."

We all laughed at that because it sounded like something our Mums or an old timer like George O'Malley might say.

When Dad died in the backyard of a brain aneurism two years after Richie's arrest, Richie's mum came to the door with a bundle of chrysanthemums and a supermarket strudel. This was when we were still allowed to coast around inside our shock, buffeted by its outsides, glad to be sad. Dad was gone, but we were the most *there* we had ever been, weren't we? Loving each other purely, distractedly, all aglow, like a family of defeated angels. I was in a state. Still, I noticed when you cleared a space on the mantel for the sympathy card she brought.

There was a phone call deep during the night of the murder. It rang one, two, three, almost four times. Then it stopped. Later, Dad said that was around the time you went off the rails. There are times I want to believe you picked it up, then spoke, low and comforting, into the receiver, but mostly I hope whoever it was gave up and left you to your own depths and devices.

I didn't really mean to drop out of school. When I started at the university

I thought learning how to name and explain things might bring me purpose, lucidity. I attended lectures and turned my papers in on time. I stood dead in the centre of the swirl and storm of theory. I applied myself. But then I started going to the student-operated pub between—and sometimes during, classes. The pub was difficult to find; it was located in a catacomb next to the cafeteria, and if you weren't careful you could end up in the boiler room, or the yearbook office. Still, it was worth it once I arrived. I spent whole days sitting in one of the vinyl chairs, their shiny purple backs stapled like patchwork beetles. I went into the pub with every intention of leaving, my time parcelled out efficiently, a half-pint of beer resting modestly on the rickety wooden table in front of me. But, when the time came for me to get up and walk the short distance up the stairs, out the door and across the quadrangle, I stayed sitting, less paralyzed than somehow anchored to my surroundings. And then it always seemed too late. Too late to do things properly. Too late to do anything but wait for the next song to come on the radio. Sometimes a voice less disapproving than bewildered would intrude on my whiling away of the hours. *What are you doing here*, it would ask, then wait patiently. *I'm biding my time*, I'd reply softly, humbly, *I'm biding my time*.

Sometimes my instructor is tender with our work, handles it with kid gloves, italics and acronyms. "The *pee-oh-vee* is just a *little* bit too *oh-tee-tee*."

At other times she is masochistic, unsparing. "A family of defeated *angels*? Come on. We're trying to create *literature* here."

The group as a whole doesn't really approve of thinly veiled autobiographical fiction, although they recognize it's necessary sometimes.

"After all, there isn't a person in the world who isn't sunk deep into the story of themselves, whether they know it or not. Still, these things have to be purged before you get on to the *real* work."

I wish you could hear her yammering on.

It is possible I made up the late night phone call. Writing is supposed to be the ultimate act of empathy, but it's not. It's forgery; the ultimate act of a mooch.

I think George O'Malley was working in a cushy job as a counsellor around that time. For the labour board, I'm pretty sure, because sometimes he'd come over for a beer in the evenings to talk to Dad about this new transitions program he'd been working on where he had to help UI guys find new jobs. Sometimes he brought us cow candies from the Polish deli. If they were fresh the waxy paper peeled off easy and the fudgy shell gave way to soft, grainy sweetness in my mouth.

One summer we rented a cottage in Bracebridge, and you invited Richie up for the weekend. I was eleven and beginning to chub out in the places that would eventually become curves. I wasn't sure how to dress or what stance I should adopt while discussing things. There were certain phrases I felt certain I should commit to memory. *Smooth move X-Lax. Yeah, you and what army?* Even, *Why don't you go fuck yourself?* I noted all of these diligently, then was silent and dry-mouthed when it came time for *the come-back*. I was mortified with my entire self. I lay on the floating dock and waited for my skin to be brown, but not blemished, my hair to be blonde but not brassy, my brain to be bold, never bossy. You and Richie practiced ass crackers off the side, and once, when you thought I was asleep, aquashat next to the reeds near the shore. "It's a floater," I heard you say. "Don't let it follow you man," from Richie.

Sunday morning we all three went out, breast-stroking sloppily to the raft.

"What's with the pudge, Maddie?" You said when I stopped to recline and bob around on my back.

"Yeah. Pudgeville, Arizona," said Richie, and splashed me.

"Nothing," I said, when I should have said nothing.

"Nothing," you said.

"Nothing," Richie said.

"Nothing," you said again.

"Nothing like a little pork on your fork," said Richie.

"Put pork on your fork," you sang.

"In Ontario!" Richie continued. "Put pork on your fork!"

We reached the raft and hauled ourselves up onto the dry warm boards. I lay down on my stomach and was silent, watching you both. You took two heavy-footed strides then straddled the air before the splash. Richie paused, shook his head to free the clumps of wet hair at the back of his neck, then smoothed the clumps back down behind his ears. That's when I noticed. He was still wearing his watch. I took a second to rehearse, then realized there was no time. I wanted more than anything to be helpful.

"Hey," I hollered, as he was preparing to jump. "Hey, you're still wearing your watch!"

Richie looked at me, then lifted his wrist in the air before speaking. "It's waterproof." There was scorn, and something else in his demeanour. Pity? He made a splash that put yours to shame and you swam off together to a distant rock. At no time since have I felt the intense humiliation of those moments as I observed the watch glinting in the sunlight at the apex of Richie's every arcing stroke.

After all this, what you felt for me, what you might feel for me now, is still only an amalgam, a layering of what I think I know, what I seem to re-

member, what I observed. What still knocks me out is that this huge incident, *murder* for God's sake, seems to have gotten lost in the hazy scrabble of those years. Was it hidden from us? Partly, but we didn't ask. Richie was one of the killers, which was unfathomable. The dead guy was gay, and like I said, we didn't know any gay people then.

It's not exactly a full or bristling moment I would choose to write about. It's something more static, a slowing down after all the action. And it's not exactly from childhood either, but for some reason it reminds me of the corner of my grade three pillow slip, where the sateen was worn from the hours I spent rubbing it against my cheek and between my fingers.

It was a night three days after Dad died, when old snapshots still lay like bits of discarded gift wrap on the living room floor, and we were clean from the inside with grief. I found you sitting like an Indian chief on the landing, stuck between upstairs and down, and when I asked you what you were doing you said, "I can't decide." So I sat with you until Mum woke up and found us.

"We can't decide," I told her. You were wedged into the corner and I was kneeling by the banister, so Mum took the bottom step and settled in with her cotton nightie pushed to one side over her knees.

"Go get the sleeping pills, Jeremy," she said, after a while. More than a few minutes of nothing together was more than any of us could bear.

You came back with the bottle wedged showily between your thumb and pointer finger and held it aloft, staring at Mum. "We could take them all," you said, and shook the bottle appraisingly.

I shifted my bum to the side and sat with one leg stretched out like a ballet dancer. I watched you and Mum watching each other.

"I would never do that," Mum said. "Never." On the outside of you and Mum was me. I waited.

"Okay," you said, "but one extra." You shook the pills out like candy and we swallowed without water. The next day, after the funeral, you were gone.

(One of the important rules when you're writing a story is to carefully choose your moment. You should have one—and one only—pivotal, astonishing instance from which the story hangs and balances. This moment should reverberate and resonate throughout the story; it should shine. Also, more than one death is not a good idea. It's more weight than the story can bear.

But the problem with deaths is that they line up like dominoes in the heart. Nudge at one, they all come clattering down.)

"That guy sure didn't need George O'Malley," George O'Malley said that day, which was a warmish October day. (I remember this because I'd

had some time back at school to brush up on my vocabulary.)

“Is he talking about *suicide*?” I said.

“No flies on that kid,” said George O’Malley.

“No bees either,” you said.

“No bees either,” Dad repeated, nodding approvingly in your direction.

A white van went by with the words *Cosmos Produce* and a shooting star painted on the side. Then we all went inside for some fried eggs.

Contributors

Tammy Armstrong's writing has appeared in literary magazines and anthologies in Canada, US and the UK. She has a BFA and MFA in Creative Writing from UBC. Her first novel is *Translations: Aistreann*. Her first collection of poetry, *Bogman's Music*, was nominated for the Governor General's Award last year. She is currently home renovating and working on a new novel and poetry collection.

Rebecca Bengal but currently lives in Austin, Texas, where she just completed her MFA in fiction with a James A. Michener fellowship. Her work has appeared in the *Oxford American*, *Tank*, the *Greensboro Review*, and elsewhere. She is at work on a collection and a novel.

Heather Birrell's fiction has most recently appeared in *Descant* and *The New Quarterly*, as well as issues 38:4 and 40:1 of PRISM. "White Bread Fiction" is part of a collection-in-progress tentatively titled *I Know You Are But What Am I?* She writes and teaches in Toronto.

Jane Eaton Hamilton is the author of six books, most recently a collection of short stories, *Hunger*, nominated for the prestigious Ferro-Grumley Award in the US. Her stories have won many awards, including the Grand Prize for the 1998 PRISM Short Fiction Contest ("Goombay Smash"). Her stories have appeared in the *Journey Prize* anthologies, *Best Canadian Short Stories*, and have been cited as distinguished in *Best American Short Stories*. Her work recently appeared in *The Writer's Presence 4e* (Bedford/St.Martin's) and *The Spirit of Writing* (Penguin Canada). She is working on a novel, *Wild Mare*. Her web address is www.janeatonhamilton.com.

Nancy Lee currently teaches at the Simon Fraser University Writing and Publishing Program. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, as well as in the 2001 *Toronto Life Magazine* Summer Fiction issue. Her collection of short fiction, *Dead Girls*, was published by McClelland & Stewart in the spring of 2002 and was nominated for a BC Book Prize and shortlisted for the Writers' Trust Danuta Gleed Award. It will be released in 2003 by Faber & Faber in the UK and Ambo Anthos in the Netherlands.

Will Munro is a Toronto-based artist, director, DJ, and promoter. His art has appeared in numerous publications and exhibitions, most recently in Los Angeles, Toronto, and New York. For more information on his work and upcoming events check out willmunro.com.

Michael V. Smith performs stand-up improv audience participation nudist drag as Miss Cookie LaWhore, writes a sex column, *Blush*, in *XtraWest*, has written, performed and produced videos with Nickolaos Stagias, and freelances for the *Globe and Mail*. Smith's novel, *Cumberland*, is nominated for the Amazon.ca/Books in Canada First Novel Award. Check out www.michaelvsmith.com.

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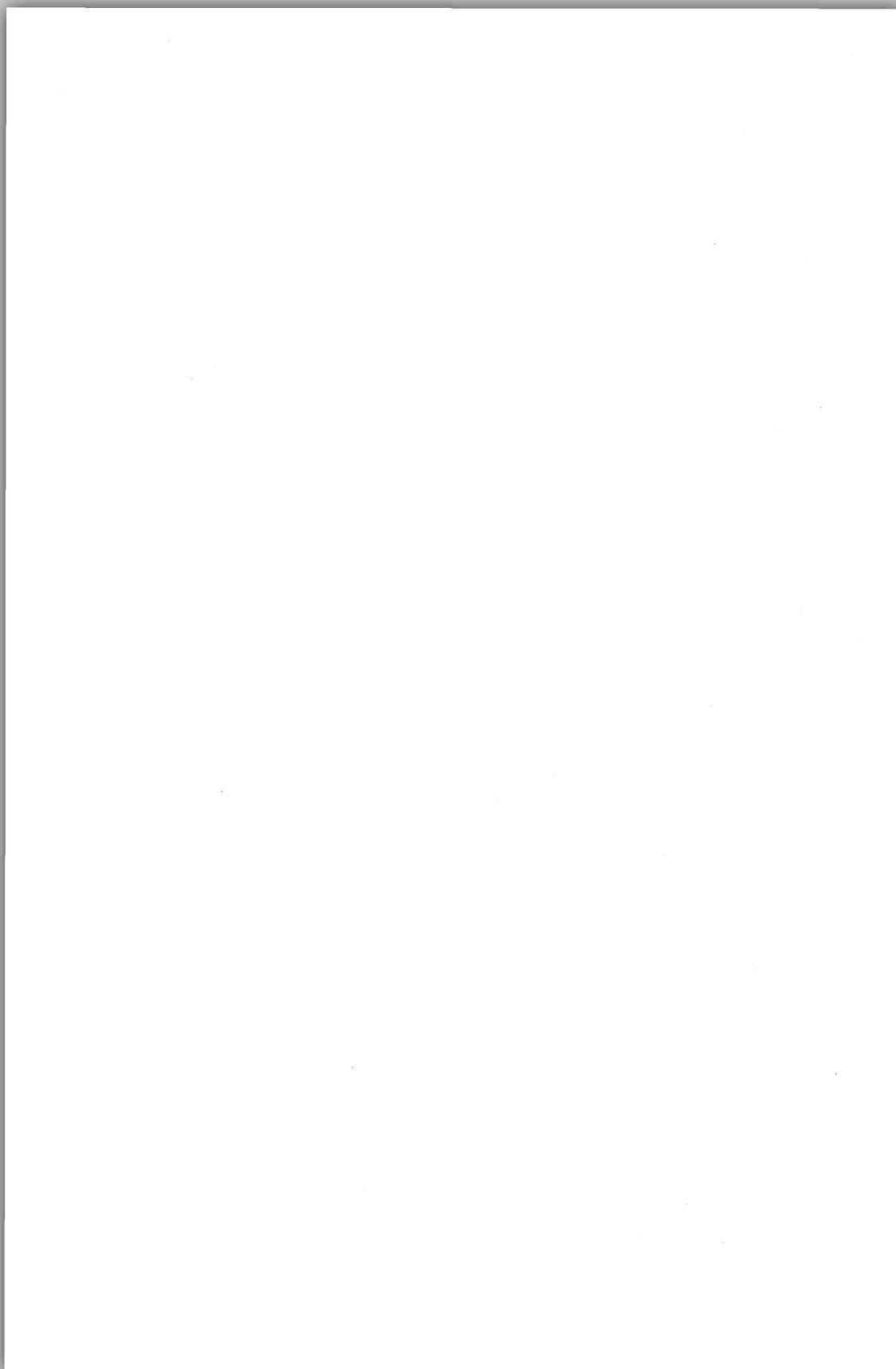
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"He had ham-steak hands, a beefy head—hell, he was big all over."

—Jane Eaton Hamilton, Page 9

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