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Twenty-nine short stories and threat, invasion and dread : the short story and the home

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Twenty-nine Short Stories

Summary

The first section of this thesis consists of a collect of original short fictions which encompass a variety of themes and modes. Amongst other concerns, these stories probe ideas of safety, threat and invasion originating from both outside and inside of the home thereby questioning assumptions of the home as a secure and safe place. A criticism in the second section examines five short stories, from a variety of influential writers, to compare and demonstrate the development of states of high anxiety through the use of the reader's knowledge and experiences of cultural or community identity and the home. Impressions of the uncanny are invariably involved.

Twenty-nine Short Stories

and

Threat, invasion and dread: the
short story and the home

by

Terri Lee Hackman

A thesis of
Creative and Critical Writing
submitted to
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Ian Gregson's good humour and thoughtful and pertinent suggestions have taken me through to the end of this project. His generosity with his time and genuine interest in my work are greatly appreciated. I am fortunate and grateful to have such a supportive and enthusiastic doctoral supervisor.

When things have been particularly stressful I have taken courage from the sound of my Claire's ebullient laughter.

Two degrees ago Craig Hackman, bless him, agreed that I should go back to university and get my degree. He had no idea what he was getting into! For all of the years since then he has been my cherished proof-reader, invaluable morale booster, and beloved friend and companion. I could not have done this degree without him.

The stories:

Too Many Words

424 words. That was the word count and it exceeded her minimum count for the day. Lucy rubbed her eyes and wondered if she should press on, maybe stockpile the words for the future - build a word bank where she would deposit her words. If she needed a few words to top off a bad writing day she could make a withdrawal from her word bank.

Could there be a way to make interest? If she didn't make a withdrawal and the words sat unmolested and secure in their account, would more words be credited to her? Who would pay the interest? Who would write the extra words? Words didn't write themselves; at least that had been her experience. The time she had sat staring at the monitor, wishing some words would just appear, added up to quite a lot of empty space.

Lucy rubbed her eyes again, and sat at her monitor in front of the blank 'piece of paper' where she was meant to write more words. She was just staring, with her fingers drooping over the keyboard, when a word wrote. It formed on her 'paper' without her typing it.

She thought it was some kind of trick. She thought her partner Jake, who was very clever with computers, was goofing around on her piece of paper through the alchemy of software. She watched more words write. If this was Jake writing then he had acquired some new way of thinking that she had never heard him speak or seen him write before. The words had to do with common writing mistakes and stylistic errors writers make. They were matter-of-fact and dull.

Lucy rubbed her eyes one more time, and putting her glasses on, watched the words through eyes that were slow to focus. The words stopped writing, and she was glad of it, because it was unnatural for words to write themselves like that, and she was uncomfortable with their continuing appearance.

But now she had a whole lot of words that she didn't know what to do with. She didn't want to include them with her words, and she wondered if there was a word etiquette - good manners or appropriate rules - for dealing with words that have just appeared.

She Googled it.

In the process she wrote even more words that she didn't want to add to her own words. This is what she found: 'Weird Random Words Appearing...' Oh-oh! So she wasn't the only person experiencing words that were writing themselves. Only, her words weren't random. They seemed to belong together - they were related to themselves.

She rubbed her eyes and scratched her head and was standing to go get a cup of coffee when the screen went grey. A blank 'piece of paper' appeared and words started writing away. This time it was a Christmas menu (it wrote 'Christmas Fayre' in fancy font) and a restaurant review. This was more interesting than the dull stuff that had come through before.

Lucy put on her glasses and leaned toward the monitor to have a little read...hmm, Chicken Liver Parfait - what the hell is THAT? - when the words changed size, font and went bright

red.

Are you Eavesdropping? they wrote.

“What?” she said to the screen. “My monitor, my desk, my house.” Are you Trespassing? she wrote back.

Then you *are* eavesdropping!

It’s not eavesdropping if I’m reading words on my own monitor!

You are writing on our page.

I’m writing on MY page. Who Are You?

There seemed to be a scuffle going on: letters flew around arranging themselves into words and then flew apart again. The screen went grey. Lucy’s blank page came up white and ready for her words. She rocked in her chair and stared at the screen. Her pencils and pens needed rearranging, and her stapler was askew. She found her whole desk needed tidying.

She tidied while staring at the monitor. She stood slowly, watching the screen, removed her glasses and backed into the kitchen to get a coffee.

She phoned Jake. He said he had never heard of such a thing and thought maybe someone had hacked into her computer. But then he said “No wait, maybe your email has somehow crossed with your word processor.” And then he said “No wait! Maybe it’s...” and then “...maybe it’s...”

“Okay,” she said. “I think I’ll take a shower and call it quits for the day. You can figure it out when you get home.” But she had to walk past the computer on the way to the shower. She sat awhile at the kitchen table with her coffee going cold and a small stack of trash mail standing by.

“Time to go,” she said to the table and casually walked to the next room.

The screen was filling fast. Her glasses were beside the keyboard. Crawling to them seemed her best approach.

This can confuse the search for dark matter, as the same particles are produced when cosmic rays smash into interstellar dust. Take the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer (AMS), which flew on NASA’s space shuttle Discovery in 1998. It detected more positrons in space than were expected from...Oh, there you are!

“Shit!” she hissed. She held very still.

More words wrote: We know you are there. Words are sensitive, you know.

She was about to click the **X** in the corner when she noticed the white bar with ‘Type a question for help’ written across it.

She wrote, What am I to do if unwanted words write themselves on my screen? and she clicked the arrow beside it. Her question went blue and disappeared. No answer arrived. She tried again. She wrote, Is there such a thing as too many words? That question vanished, too. Where are these questions going? she wrote.

The words continued to write. We think it's important that you're always fully informed, so we'd like to tell you about some changes that will affect the conditions of your saving account(s) from 1st November 2009. There is no need to do anything as a result of these changes.

She stood up and looked at the back of her monitor. She went behind her desk and inspected the dusty cables that ran like IV tubes from the extension cord to her monitor's nape.

But it isn't only connections between project members that have proved exciting this year. There is a strong element of partnership which has been built into almost every funded research programme. At last count...the words kept growing.

Lucy was cold and went to put on her worn denim jacket that hung in the kitchen. While she was there, she grabbed the metal flashlight she kept by the door. She flicked the light on and walked quickly to her desk. She knelt beside it and inspected the underside where her legs normally rested. She looked at the underside of her swivel chair too.

Experiment with not listening! Notice the effect it has on others. Do this in face-to-face conversations as well as on the telephone. Notice also what takes place when you revert to active listening; what effect it has on the speaker.

"Stop it!" she shouted. But the words didn't stop. STOP IT! she wrote.

Pardon?

She wrote, I don't know who you are or what you are playing at, but if you don't cease and desist this instant, I'm calling the police.

HA! Some scientists believe that memories are stored in pieces rather than as a whole, and this might have something to do with déjà vu. Ordinarily, you take an experience (like something you've seen, heard or felt) and store it as a memory.

Lucy sat in her swivel chair and watched the words write. Page upon page they wrote, haphazardly switching subjects before completing analyses, stories, articles or reports. She took her mouse and moved the cursor to the **X**. The words were still writing when she clicked it.

In the evening Jake turned the computer on and the words weren't there. "I can't fix it if there's nothing to fix," he said as she looked over his shoulder. "Show me what you did."

"I didn't do anything I don't usually do," she said. "But, if you think it will help..."

The words didn't come.

They didn't come the next day either, until a week had past and then two weeks. Lucy wondered if she had dreamed the words and she gave the incident a title, 'Wayward Words.' She wondered where they had gone, if they were off to some other people's computers running along filling their empty pages with unfinished word business.

She Googled it.

'Where have the words gone?' She found people who were missing words, who were missing writing words, and who were collecting words that had been lost and found. But no one was talking about words that had coherently written themselves, into large groups, and then vanished.

Lucy wondered if the words had actually written themselves because, the more she thought about it, she realized that the words had originally been written by someone else. They had been excerpts of letters and bits of book reports. There had been pieces of science manuals, TV listings, self-help books; they had just gone on like that.

She wondered if the words were re-writing themselves. Lucy wished she had taken a closer look at the way the words had grouped themselves. She wished she had noted their sequence, and she wondered why they had been so pushy and inconsiderate.

She lay awake in the night, while her partner muttered incomprehensibly in his sleep, and thought of the words in their individual state. She knew that the words had not written themselves at all. The problem was the fact of their appearance without her having been involved.

"Wake up," she said as she shoved Jake in the back. "Wake up! Those words are connected to someone and we have to find out who. Someone has been messing around in my computer; you have to help me find them."

"Oh Lucy," Jake said. But when he saw her face in the light of the bedside lamp, he knew he had seen the last of sleep for the night.

Lucy was making coffee and turning on her computer when he stumbled from the bathroom.

"How will you find them?" he asked.

"I don't know. But you drink this coffee and I'll see if I can lure them – that person – out."

Lucy stared at her screen. She thought of words and word counts and word banks. She wondered why in the world she had even had such ridiculous thoughts, and as she mused on her insipidity, with her fingers drooped across the keyboard, she saw this:

So you want us back after all.

"Jake," she whispered. "They're back."

Jake stood behind her with his coffee close to his chest. "Ok. Now what?" he said.

She wrote, Not necessarily. I think I may have missed you a little.

Just a little? Were we not informative enough for you? Or entertaining enough? Were you not intrigued?

You alarmed me, Lucy wrote. There are so many of you and you were going on and on.

“Wow!” said Jake. “It’s really real. I thought you were coming down with something...”

We are legion, it is true. We arrive, by necessity, in large numbers.

Lucy wrote, But why did you come to me?

You were yearning. We are sensitive to yearnings for words. We respond wherever possible.

“Lucy! Ask them where they are,” Jake said. “Maybe you can get them – I mean the hacker – to slip and we can report this.”

Where do you come from? Is there a place where you live or stay while you’re waiting to respond? Lucy wrote. She put her glasses on and leaned back in her chair.

“I feel funny,” she said to Jake. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“You said you wanted to catch them,” he said.

“I said I wanted to find them; that’s different from catching.”

Where we come from does not matter. That we came is the important thing.

“Ask them...” but Jake didn’t finish. Lucy had put her fingers to the keyboard and was typing frantically, but nothing was coming up on the screen. “Help,” she said weakly. “...help. help.”

Jake dropped his empty coffee mug and grabbed the back of Lucy’s swivel chair. He couldn’t disconnect Lucy’s hands from the vicinity of her keyboard. She was stretched forward, bent at the waist, still typing at top speed. He tipped the chair and Lucy fell over but her hands stayed attached to the keyboard. Her fingers still typed though her body was sprawled on the floor.

Jake ran round to the back of the computer and yanked out all of the cables. The computer screen darkened. Lucy’s hands dropped to the floor; her fingers twitched while her head rocked jerkily side-to-side as if she were trying to avoid a persistent wasp.

“Lucy! It was like it was shocking you. I couldn’t get you loose!” Jake caressed her forehead. “Can you understand me, baby?”

“I understand,” she said. “Yes, Jake. I understand now.

Please note: The origins of some of the ‘unsolicited’ words in this story are acknowledged below:

Ananthaswamy, Anil: ‘A bizarre universe may be lurking in the shadows.’ *New Scientist*; 4 March 2009; Issue 2698.

Welch, Evelyn. *Podium: Beyond Text*. 19 October 2009. www.beyondtext.ac.uk/podiumnews

Storey, Richard. Perfect Persuasion. London: Random House, 2009. 52.

Murphy, Glenn. How Loud Can You Burp? London: Macmillan Limited, 2008. 216.

When They Found Uncle John in the Spring Thaw

He wasn't too far off from the train stop - just far enough away to have gotten lost, and frozen, and covered in snow until the spring thaw. They found Uncle John early, before he'd warmed up, so he wasn't rotten yet. His eyes were open enough so's you could see they were pale blue and the whites yellow; his mouth was open enough so's you could see he was missing his front teeth - the uppers and lowers. His lips were purple. His hands were tucked under his armpits and on the frayed edges of his shirt-sleeves were delicate ruffled ice crystals.

The sheriff wasn't looking for him. He was chasing fugitives from the law, and though Uncle John was a drunk, and most everyone thought he was a mostly useless character, he wasn't a fugitive.

It was the dogs that found him. And after the sheriff realized that Uncle John wasn't one of the fugitives he was after, he told his men to set the noisy hounds on the chase again. He radioed the coroner and left Uncle John to be looked after by some folks who had wandered over to see what the ruckus was about. A woman said, I thought I hadn't seen him around in awhile. A boy poked Uncle John's frozen ear with a stick.

The fugitives had escaped from the county jail. They were two men who had been caught standing over the dead body of an old lady. One of the men held a knife covered in blood. The old lady's name was Eleanor Jonas and she taught in the Sherwood Elementary School all of her life until she retired. That was 27 years before they found Uncle John.

Miss Eleanor had fed the men sandwiches after they had jumped out of a boxcar of a train that passed the edge of town. They walked into town, and down a friendly looking street, and they saw her sweeping her front porch. They said they were hungry. She said, Sweep, and handed them each a broom. But after they had swept and eaten they decided to kill her for fun, and to steal the little bit of money they suspected she had. That's what Mrs Norrison said.

The men told the sheriffs that they just found her dead like that.

But Mrs. Norrison, from two houses down, had peered over her tidy fence, and across her neighbours' shabby ones, and seen them there, standing over Miss Eleanor, she suspected. She snuck around to get a better look and caught them. They looked surprised and guilty when Mrs Norrison shrieked and screamed Murder! Murderers! That's what she said.

They were put in the county jail where they told the sheriff that they hadn't killed nobody.

The sheriff said, We'll see about that.

Two days later, in the early morning before breakfast, the two men escaped. There was a freezing fog pressing close to the ground and they must have run right by Uncle John without seeing him. For if they had seen him, and not stopped to help, their callousness in this regard would have lain heavy against them, confirming they were just a couple of no good drifters like Mrs Norrison said they were.

But, you see, the reason the sheriff was chasing the men was to tell them that they were free to go. They hadn't killed Miss Eleanor and the blood on the knife was chicken blood; it was confirmed by the coroner. Miss Eleanor had asked them to do the honours to a couple of her chickens. She told them they could keep one for their travels.

She was a delicate and shrunken old woman. She fell off her porch as the men were gutting the chickens. They'd had their backs to her and hadn't realized she was falling until they heard the quiet thump of her when she landed in the fine dust they had just swept off her porch. The coroner said she was probably dead before she hit the ground: her stroke was just that thorough.

Mrs Norrison stayed at home for a few days after that. She had her shopping delivered from Sage's on main street, didn't answer her phone because nobody called, listened to the Sunday sermon on the radio, and she did not attend Miss Eleanor's funeral. Most of the town showed up for that funeral because most everyone grown had had Miss Eleanor for a teacher, and those not grown had known her kindness. Even Mrs. Norrison; even Uncle John.

Mrs Norrison finally came out of her seclusion to make her weekly visit to her sister's in the city. (The sister with the husband.)

Uncle John and Mrs Norrison were habitual people. Mrs Norrison habitually visited her sister on Wednesday and went to church on Sunday. Uncle John habitually started drinking on Wednesday and continued on with it until Sunday noontime. Monday and Tuesday were his sober days when he bathed and shaved and ate. By Wednesday nights he was forgetful and talkative again. He was eager for a chuckle and a sympathetic word, and was slurred and repetitious as he kidded with the passengers on his way home from Brownsville. That's where he always started his drinking week: in Brownsville in the low light of the Gentleman's Bar and Lounge.

One cold Wednesday the train slowly cleared its passengers at stop after stop as it swayed through the dark night. In the end car there was left only Uncle John and Mrs Norrison together. Uncle John knew better than to talk to Mrs Norrison; this was not a habit, but a lesson he had learned when they were young. He snoozed with his overcoat rolled up under his head. But tonight, before he snoozed, he said, Why you always look at me with those Shame-on-you eyes? Where's your husband, Delilah?

Next thing he knew someone said, John! This is your stop!

Someone shoved his shoulder so he pulled himself upright, groggily, and staggered down the aisle rubbing his eyes. He stumbled on the metal edge of the train's door and plopped out onto the platform, tilting and swaying. The vacant space in his mouth, where there used to be teeth, made a black square in his grin as he waved at the departing train. But his grin went limp and he shouted, Hey! What you still doin' on the train?

He shivered and slapped his sides and thighs when the train was out of sight.

The fields all around the neglected station were crisp and white. There was a single light shining from under the low eaves of the platform. The station door was locked; the windows bolted and dark. Clumps of snowflakes dropped through the solitary beam, while Uncle John stumbled off the steps of the vacant platform. Wrong stop, he mumbled and trudged carelessly across the field in the direction he thought was home.

When the train eased into town, Uncle John's old worn overcoat was stuffed tightly under a seat. Mrs Norrison stepped from the train onto the platform of the well-lit station. She took a warm taxi cab to her home, paid the exact fare, and was careful not to slip on the snow that was gathering on her doorstep. She made steamy cocoa after she slipped a hot water bottle into her bed, and, as she sipped the cocoa, she thought of her sister's husband's generous shoulders

The sheriff caught up with the escapees, though the hounds got there first. The dogs were trained not to bite with undue force so's the men's clothing was only partially shredded but not their bodies. The men were in a state, covered in mud and cut up, bruised, scared. The sheriff loaded them into a car and took them for a hot shower, clean clothes, and beef sandwiches and potato soup. He drove them to the edge of town and left them by the train track where they hopped the train in the direction of home.

The sheriff took no notice when he drove past the field where Uncle John had been found in the spring thaw. Not when he took the men out to the train tracks, and not when he

drove back to town.

The Saved

I was nine. I stood in the dust beside the quietly lapping lake on that sunny day and watched nearly every kid I knew, and some of their grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles get baptised. And then, Surprise! My dad appeared among the group wearing baptismal robes. He walked into the water wearing newly polished church shoes. He stood beside the preacher and witnessed and repented; he cried and called upon the Saving Grace of Jesus. There were others waiting to be saved but my father continued on witnessing. The preacher got hold of him and plunged my struggling father, who was still speaking, into the lake. It looked more like a wrestling match than a baptism.

When my father came up out of the water, he was a quieter man. He kept his joy low-key but indulged himself by weeping silently. This was his second baptism. What does it feel like to be saved twice?

The sparkles, riding along the gentle splashes and ripples of the water around the saved, transfixed me. My eyes locked in a stare; I saw the activities of the lake while simultaneously watching a future event: My own plunge into the dark waters to rise and take my place among the saved. Dad had said I was too young to make the decision to be saved. I thought he was kidding himself by getting baptised again.

I was twelve when I was baptised. In our church, twelve was a Reasonable age to be baptised. It followed along with the idea that Jesus reasoned with the elders in the temple when he was twelve. Though, come to think of it, he wasn't baptised until he was a full grown man. Maybe 'reason' and 'baptism' just don't go together.

My baptism did not follow on the heels of a revival meeting in the summertime, like the one at the lake. It came after a series of weekly meetings with our church pastor that were meant to prepare me for my entry into the fellowship of the saved.

The deacons got to church early and lifted away a square of the floor at the front of the church. The head deaconess brought clean, lightly starched linen and someone flipped a switch that heated the square of water that would wash my sins away.

My black baptismal gown ballooned up around my chest even though the hem was weighted with lead. Our pastor said some nice things about having watched me grow into a fine young lady. He held a hankie above us and blessed me and asked God to bless me and called on the congregation to witness my commitment to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

All I could think about was how the gown was lifting, buoyant around me, and that

under my gown was a bright orange and florescent yellow bathing suit.

My feet came out from under me when he laid me back into the water, and I gasped. He pressed the hankie tight over my nose and mouth and water still found a way in. The pastor scooped me up, and steadied me by the elbow. He said something playful but I was choking too hard to understand it and my ears were full of water. Afterwards, when I was dry and combed and recovering from being washed of my sins, I was given a brand new Holy Bible with a black leather cover on which my name was engraved in gold. I signed a book that registered me officially as one of the congregation, and signed a pledge to never smoke, drink or take illegal drugs. Some of the old ladies in the congregation gave me congratulation cards with dimes and quarters taped inside.

And that was it, I was saved until nine months later when Jason Albright got into my handbag during choir practice and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. The teacher saw them and grabbed them. She grabbed me, too, and I spent the rest of the afternoon in the office with the principle, his secretary, a sick kid from the lower grades who was laying on a cot in the shadows, and a delivery man who was waiting to get paid.

He and I were sat side-by-side on plastic chairs in the antechamber to the principal's office. He said 'What're you in for?' I said, 'I don't know.' It wasn't any of his business anyway.

Neither was the pack of smokes. It wasn't anybody's business, jumbled up as it was in the dark suede of my handbag with an empty coin purse, sticky strawberry flavoured lip-gloss, contraband mascara, hairbrush, file, Juicy Fruit and Band-Aids. There weren't even any matches. There wasn't even a lighter. There were only two cigarettes in that pack, and one of them was split nearly in half. They weren't anyone's business until they were yanked into the light of the choir room where their appearance caused strains of 'If We Could Talk to the Animals' to fade into whispering and snickering.

The choir teacher's grip was tight. She left three fingertip-sized bruises on the inside of my forearm.

The principal was severe. Had I been in public school, he might have been less severe. The kids in public school came from parents who smoked - even their principle smoked - so surely the kids in public school were cut some slack.

It was right there, in the principal's office, as I faced him across that heavy wood composite desk with the school bell ringing the class breaks, as I listened to the saved students shuffling from their classrooms and knew with my whole heart that my parents were

going to kill me, right then I decided that I really needed to find a way to get out of that Godforsaken church school and get myself where I belonged: in public school with the unsaved.

My agreement with the principal was that when I had given my parents the news, they were to call him to discuss the situation. But my parents were so overwrought they could not get themselves out of my bedroom and over to the telephone. They paced my floor and gesticulated, gnashed their teeth, groaned a little. All that melodrama tightly enclosed in my little bedroom.

My parents were devout Protestants who didn't even dance. With sorrowful faces they interrogated my motives. They pleaded with my conscience. They reminded me of our relatives, who had suffered terrible fates because of tobacco, and then I was threatened and grounded forever, or until I reached adulthood, whichever came first.

The principal called and said it was getting towards suppertime and had they heard the news? My parents asked him to expel me. He said he thought that was too severe. They asked him to suspend me. He said that was too much. He said, 'I think she's been through enough. She seems to understand the seriousness of what she's done.' My parents pleaded for suspension again, to 'make an example' of me to the whole school. The principal said he would give me detention for two weeks if that would make them feel any better. They said they would settle for a month.

We went back to my room where they told God all about it in a long explanatory prayer, detailing what I had done and how terrible they felt, how they were frightened for my salvation and embarrassed by my behaviour, until I was just too tired to keep it up. I slumped forward against my bed, on my knees, and relaxed; my stomach gurgled after they left. I wanted to run away from home.

Unlike my parents, my principal wanted to keep the situation low key. He decided to hold my detention in the school library during study hall. The librarian had a desk carried in especially for my punishment. She put it directly in front of her desk so that their edges touched. As she moved around the library she kept me in her encompassing peripheral vision.

I had to be silent, so I sat, face down, with my nose buried in the centre parting of a huge old Holy Bible. The rich, musty smell of its aging pages sustained me. The odour of its ink consoled me. Its worn leather cover soothed me, with its deeply impressed lettering and ridged, ribbed spine. And its few illustrations inspired daydreams.

There was a vivid etching of the Children of Israel having a wild dance around their

Golden Calf. They looked to be playing a kind of a ring-around-the-rosy that had gone quite wrong. Moses was skidding down down down Mount Sinai, already losing his grip on his newly acquired stone tablets. There's a delicate puff of dust at the heels of his sandals. While up there on the top of the mount, God is having a tizzy fit. You can tell because the cloud he hides in up there is smouldering and erupting lightning bolts; it rumbles restlessly - cannot evaporate or go ethereal - from the heaviness of God's emotion.

The ink on that etching was particularly aromatic and exciting.

The other students in the library were not allowed to signal me or even look at me. As we crossed the threshold of the library together we fell silent, and they turned their faces away from me; they moved from me as if I smelled rotten.

It was soon after this that my father got baptised for the third time. He went to another church, found another pastor and had a private family baptism that we were all invited to attend. My uncles and aunts, grandmas and grandpas and cousins dutifully attended, as did the head deacon who was there to put the lid back on the tank after my father's sins were washed clean.

Dad entered the church from a special door that was hidden in mahogany panelling. He wore white robes and black socks and climbed the steps to the tank where the pastor stood waiting. He turned and spoke over the heads of the family. 'Christina, will you rededicate your life to God with me?'

My face must have flushed shocking pink, because he retracted his extended hand. My lips must have gone black, and my eyes turned to flames because he could not look at me any longer. In that instant I understood what was going on up there in God's hiding cloud. Only, I didn't have a Moses to speak to interpret my thunder. Over the pews a voice shot loud. It shot right at my father's head. It said, 'You Stupid Idiot!'

Even I was shocked at that one. Those are not church words and for a second it felt like the church was trembling, that those words that still bounced around up in the domed ceiling were causing the whole building to vibrate. But it wasn't the church that was shaking: it was me.

And lest you think I would have said something like that in a church, though I might very well have thought it, just like all my relatives were thinking it, and probably the head deacon, too, let me make this clear: It wasn't me.

Two of my uncles started laughing. My mother looked scandalized. The pastor and the deacon were scanning the church for the owner of the voice. My grandmothers rose up

and looked behind them, my cousins started snickering and kicking their feet against the pews in front of them. My aunts got busy shushing the kids, but they were having a hard time doing it as they were so involved in trying to disguise their own merriment.

In that moment of my salvation, when a disembodied voice deflected and erased my humiliation and anger, my father sagged and swayed. He toppled into the baptismal tank and appeared to baptize himself, head first.

The moment congealed into a jelly-like instant of mystery and revelation. I was transfixed, my eyes held open by some paralyzing activity of my brain. And I saw the movement of my family and my father's big splash. But it felt like I was nine again and at the lake, and the sparkles riding along the splashes and ripples of the water set me free.

Father's Boots Are Walking

Fragmented sketchy ragged, my memories move through me. I cannot connect many of them. I'm sure I've forgotten so much. One in particular comes and goes. Comes again. It doesn't linger. It isn't painful. It's the fact that it keeps coming back that intrigues me. The memory itself is lacklustre, like life before it is given a storyline; before someone points out the connections, the peculiar coincidences, or the wrongs that finally go right at the end.

The memory runs like this: My father's boots are walking before me. They are worn at the heels and dusty. They move over the path, his feet putting them down in the right spots to avoid roots or rocks protruding in the way. Light sprays of dirt shoot back at me as he presses forward, and I look at my ankle where bits of grit collect in the folds of my socks. I glance at my other ankle and notice fine dust has gathered along the golden hairs of my leg.

My father slows and I look up at his bare shoulders. They arch back, making a deep pit under the sharp scapula, and in the recess, in the deep shadow, I see where sweat had begun to run but then evaporated leaving streaks edged with dust. And then he reaches back, and slows even more, opens his hand to me and says, 'Come on, Maggie. Come on.' I reach to grab his fingers and trip.

That is all. The next time that fragment moves across me, my father's boots will walk before me. I wait, on occasion, for more: an earlier start or whatever happens after I trip, but nothing comes. Though, today I heard something. I never thought of hearing a memory with your own ears. I heard Dad say, 'Stay put, Maggie.'

He sounded near me, as if he was leaning over me. He sounded so stern and alive that I answered before I realized what I was doing, speaking to the air. And I heard him say, 'You stay right here.' It scared me. I sat right down and my heart pounded right into my head. But there wasn't any more talking and now, as I move about my house, it is quiet.

My son knocks on my door. 'Mom, I'm taking the kids to The Ridge. Thought we'd have a little look around. You want to come along?' His kids bounce around in the back of the car; they kick the back of my seat. At The Ridge they push and pull each other to get out of the car, and run away before closing the doors.

It's a very warm day. We walk along the path, my son ahead of me, his kids ahead of him and my fragment starts up again. My father's boots are walking before me... 'Come on, Maggie.' ... I trip.

He catches me. He says 'Ally-oo!' and swings me onto his shoulders. I hold onto his forehead with palms and flattened fingers. His sweat is slick. He's trotting now, holding my calves very tight, and I laugh. He stops and stands still. 'What is that Daddy?' but he just slides me down his back and I drop on my tailbone. He leans over me and says, 'Stay put, Maggie. You stay right there!' He runs away shouting, 'Oh lord, oh lord, oh lord!' and fades across the valley. I think I see the shadow of him running on the ridge where the flames burn higher than a house. Burning higher than our little house where my mother is.

The Cool Dark Groves in Summer

Shelly stands at the end of the dusty road, right at the edge where the orange groves begin. It's a very hot day. Salty sweat seeps from her forehead, and stings her eyes, but Shelly stands in the fine dust of her neighbourhood road and peers into the dark shade of the trees. She is not allowed to go there. Her mother says so. All the grown-up women in her neighbourhood say so. The orange groves, with all of their deep shade, are forbidden.

Shelly thinks she sees the edge of a flaming sword like the one the Angel brandished to keep Adam and Eve from ever entering Eden again. But the Angel must be behind a tree, or invisible, because she can't see him anywhere. There's just the sword.

'Why can't I come in?' she shouts. That's all she says out loud because she remembers that her mother might hear her and come out of the house to check. So she tries to send the Angel thoughts, even though her Pastor says angels can't read thoughts. Thoughts are just for God's perusal; angels don't get that privilege. But Shelly thinks that angels can maybe read signals and smells, and they must be able to read lips, so she makes slight jerking movements with her fingers to highlight her thoughts. She blinks in a rhythm to emphasize what she's thinking, and she moves her lips subtly because she's afraid someone in her neighbourhood might be watching.

Shelly squarely faces the orange grove. She holds one hip with her tanned fingers, and balances in the dust on one bare foot. She's wearing her favourite red shorts and a hand-me-down red and blue striped t-shirt that was her cousin Larry's. She didn't get it until his brothers had also outgrown it. This has made it very soft.

The sun moves a little and the flaming sword disappears, goes invisible, like the Angel. The shade deepens. Shelly looks over her shoulder at her house which is three houses down from the end of the road. She listens for her mother but all she hears is the low drone of a small plane a long way off. She places her foot on the edge of the ditch that dips into the grove, and leans forward, hands sheltering eyes from the sun. Sweat cools in the creases of her hands, and trickles down her neck from her hairline. The edges of her brown hair just brush the sharp edges of her shoulders.

She thinks she sees something move. It looks big enough to be an angel, but it's obscured by mounds of tree foliage. Shelly mouths 'Are you there? Are you the Angel?' As it stops moving it coalesces with the trees.

There's activity in the last house on her road. Its door knob rattles around, agitated in its loose socket. She can't see the door through the dark patina of the old bulging screen door in front of it. She can't see who's opening the door. Shelly turns from the ditch and skips toward the house as the door swings on strident hinges. 'Shelly girl, is that you out there?'

'Yes Auntie Joyce, it's me.'

'Shelly girl, would you like some canned peaches and cream?'

'Yes Auntie. My baby brother's napping and Mama wants me out of the house for a while.'

The old auntie pushes the screen door aside to let the little girl pass. 'Go on back to the bathroom and wash your hands and feet. I'll go down to the cellar and get the peaches.'

The woman steps away from her home into the summer heat. She peers at the orange groves, examines their sullen shadows, and mouths something, gestures something, shakes her head and clinches her fists.

In the grove something moves. It's bigger than a man and darker than the shadows. It realizes the old woman and turns away, to go deeper into the groves, to sniff out other prey.

The Hatford House

(a house, two sisters, a daughter and the dog)

In the 1950s my parents built a house. They built it on a hill after they swept the top off using tractors, and a small amount of explosives. The house caps the hill and is perched like a weird hat. It is in view of several other houses reclining on their own hills, but the Hatford is multi-storeyed; this sets it apart from the sprawling Ranch styles it looks down on.

We weren't born yet, when the house was built. We think now, when we reminisce, that the house was a kind of child to our parents. And quite naturally, after we were born, the house developed sibling rivalry, an inextricable kind, that leeches into its foundations and seeped into the bedrock beneath.

Now let's not get too Edgar Allen Poe-ish about it. It is just a house, Mary Louise.

And of course you are right, Louisa Marie. It certainly isn't a knock-off of the House of Usher. It is a Frank Lloyd Wright knock-off drawn-up by an architect named Samuel Kitzinger, and it isn't clever. It is a big chunk of a thing built from grey brick. It lacks something essential.

A talented architect, perhaps.

This is an example of the writing I found in the basement, under the rubble, of Hatford House. This particular entry appears to be an exercise in reminiscing. There were stacks of wooden crates. They were the kind of crates the orange pickers filled full of oranges at picking time when the two sisters were children; but when I found the crates they were full of notebooks.

It was something my mother and aunt did. They wrote to each other in notebooks. No matter where they were, if they were together, they wrote. It was an early version of emailing friends, or a lover, or co-workers, as they sit beside or nearby also involved in other activities.

You've heard of long ago couples, parted, writing to each other throughout the day, who would mail letter after letter in an effort to breach the distance? The sisters never wrote like that. They didn't write to each other when they were apart, except once. And that was when I was born. My mother wrote: **Louisa Marie, come quickly if you are able.**

My father says she went into labour abruptly and arrived at the hospital screaming. She screamed all the way to the delivery room. Just as I was about to enter the world she struggled to lean on her elbows and pushed herself into an upright position. She asked for pencil and paper. She wrote a note on the back of a prescription pad and folded it and put it between her teeth. She bit it like they do in movies about the Wild West or the American Civil War, when a bullet has to be removed, or a leg needs to be amputated, and there is no

anaesthetic. The note was her bit of rawhide to help her bare the pain.

You have brought your new daughter to The Hat for formal introductions?

Yes, and for Mom and Dad. They didn't make it to the hospital. And I see here that *you* have brought a dog.

Technically, she's a bitch.

She's kind of odd looking, don't you think?

Mary Louise, she's no more odd looking than your baby.

She pants too much. What's she looking so worried for?

There's some exaggerated scribbling that I can't make out except for these five words: **Holy Cow, look at that!** and that's in my father's hand.

The next line is written in bold commanding capitals: **LOU.YOU GET THAT DOG AND HER PUPPY OUT OF HERE THIS MINUTE. AND I'M NOT just WHISSLING DIXIE!**

It was because of this line that the puppy was named Whissle (to my grandmother's chagrin). I am named Melody. I never learned how to whistle and I cannot carry a tune, but I always loved that dog. I was never sure how I felt about the house until I was nearly grown up.

(the house makes up its mind)

We were very young when we started writing. Mom kept some of the pages but she neglected to label them so I don't know whose is whose. It looks like typical kiddie writing: lacks control, out of shape and off the lines. All in crayon.

What is not typical is that we were both only four when we started. And Lou, even though you are ten months older, I started writing when you did. You were intrigued with the letters in one of our story books. It was one of those Dr. Seuss books, wasn't it?

Yes. It was Green Eggs and Ham that caught my attention.

You liked the letters better than the illustrations.

I like how blocks of type form on some of the pages.

**I could not, would not, on a boat.
I will not, will not, with a goat.
I will not eat them in the rain.
I will not eat them on a train.
Not in the dark! Not in a tree!
Not in a car! You let me be!**

See! They're like a big chunk, solid, systematic and repetitious. But I wasn't thinking that at the time. I liked the way they looked, is all. I had the book memorized by the shapes of the blocks.

But then we got into trouble. All those walls in our capacious Hatford, like sheets of blank paper, only solid and repetitious (as you said), and everywhere. What we did wasn't all that unusual. Don't most kids write on walls? Melody had her hand in it once or twice.

Mary-Mary, you will never feel remorse, will you? You always try to rationalize. What we did went beyond drawing a few doodles or scribbles on the wall. We covered all of them as high as we could reach as we stood on chairs and tables, and as low as when we knelt. We did all the rooms except for Mom's and Dad's room, and the kitchen.

This is when the House began to really hate us, isn't it?

Yes, I think so. The actual moment was probably when Mom came in from the garden and shrieked, and then cried. She went into the study, closed the door and turned on 'Ozzie and Harriet'. The House seemed to get cold, even though I remember it being a warm, sunny day.

There were long shafts of light across the floor on the part with the 'imported' slate. We stood in the beams to warm our legs. And - do you remember? - the writing on the walls seemed to expand and contract as if the house was living and breathing, and our writing was on its skin.

Mom's crying somehow fit in with the gaps in the canned laughter on that TV show.

Until she went quiet. That was almost as spooky as the house's breathing.

I've always thought it was strange that she didn't yell at us; that she just got the house to scare us half to death.

I wonder...do you think that, maybe, the house scared Mom too? She never talked

to Dad about what we had done. She simply got the paint from the shed and started covering all our work, all our precious writing. She sealed it between layers of paint, hid it in the skin of the house.

This particular notebook is damaged. The next part of their conversation was destroyed. If you'll look here, you'll notice that it's not until two pages later, at the bottom of this ripped and water damaged page, that I'm able to make out one last line: **It's as if she sealed our fate.** This scares me half to death.

(growing up with writing)

The thing about my mother and her sister that intrigues me is not that they had this weird need to write to each other even as they spoke, but that they never felt awkward about doing it in front of anyone and at anytime. When I was little I used to get hold of their notebooks and draw in them with crayons. I have found that the sisters made notations regarding my scribbles. They dated each one and commented on them in the margins of their own writing.

These notebooks weren't precious to them, unlike the writing they had done on the house. And when occasionally someone else writes in them the sisters seem to take the new voice as just another in their conversation, which outside of the books was exactly what was going on. The words they wrote were about as permanent, in their minds, as the words they spoke. They weren't writing to keep a record or to make their mark; they were just talking in an extended, tactile way. When they dated and commented on my scribbles it might seem that they ascribed more importance to my self expression than they did to their own. But I understand now that they were acknowledging what they viewed as my attempt to join in with them, even though I couldn't write. Until I could write for myself they would write for me by writing around, and along, the lines I drew all over their pages of words.

June 5, Your Melody is at it again, Mary Louise. These are particularly thick, dark lines of red. Do you think they represent anything? Anger, perhaps?

More likely a bent for flamboyance. I understand anger, as represented through colour or art, to be the result of a more deliberate ability. When M's angry she scrunches her face and makes fists and cries. That doesn't leave much room for choosing a colour, clutching a fat crayon, opening a book, and making wide open spirals. (This is written in tiny letters and spirals within my huge red spiral.)

August 1, Do you think this resembles a dog? These flaps at the side look like Whissle's ears.

A green dog, you think?

Do toddlers care what colours they use to draw with? Or, maybe she simply couldn't find the brown.

Maybe those aren't Whissle's ears

August 5, The copious use of black crayon on this page has nearly obliterated our conversation, as has Melody's behaviour this afternoon.

She's teething. I told you that, but I'm sure it was hard to concentrate over the howling. You shouldn't complain about the black. It kept her quiet for a little while.

Medicate her!

I have!

Take her home. Even Whistle is beside himself with this.

I will. And your patience and support have been overwhelmingly underwhelming.

See how this page is uncharacteristically signed off in black crayon no less: **THE END!** But a few days later we are back at it, and this time the conversation starts with three pages, fronts and backs, of intense multicoloured scribbling without the words of the sisters. Something has changed. I have affected a change in their conversational style, a shift in their tempo. But there's something more than just a toddler's influence here.

Do you really think Mom will get her to sleep? She seems beyond tired! How long and hard can a kid keep going like that? It's like she can't bear to rest, like it will kill her to relax.

She's just wound up. She's not used to Hatford yet.

Mom took her into the study, you know? Do you think that's a good idea? The study: the place where Mom and The Hat share thoughts and make plans. The place we don't go unless invited.

Mom's not going to punish M for being tired and out-of-sorts. The Hat can't have a problem with her either, because Mom's now The Grandma, and you know she wants to spoil. M hasn't done anything untoward, she's innocent. She's too little to understand. They have to leave her alone. You're scaring me Lou!

I'm not the one scaring you! It's the house, you dolt. The house won't go for Melody; it will go for you. Just like Mom will go for you if she thinks you're raising M wrong.

I can't come here anymore. I can't let this happen any longer!

How? The longer you stay away the worse it will be when you return; and you know

you will return. It's like when we were kids and Mom said if we ever ran away from her when she was coming for us, she would slap us twice as hard when she got hold of us. And if we ever jerked away while she was spanking, she'd spank us twice as long. If you run she will eventually get a hold of you. And you had better clench your teeth and calm down now because you look suspiciously close to jerking.

Does that mean I'm in the middle of a metaphorical spanking?

Your baby's in the study with Mom and the door is closed. What do you think?

The next three pages, fronts and backs, are multicoloured scribbles in crayon. At the bottom of the third page there is written: "Oh Melody, my darling baby. " And on the same line: **It's not her you have to worry about.**

(the day the doors slammed)

My grandmother wrote this line in what appears to be a leisurely weekend afternoon conversation: **HAVE YOU GIRLS SEEN YOUR FATHER AROUND?**

I've seen that he's round.

I've noticed that he's hard to see around.

What's she in such a huff about?

We are getting on her nerves, I think.

I mean beyond the obvious. We always get on her nerves. Why did she slam the door when she left the room?

The door slammed alright, but are you sure that was Mom slamming it?

Who else, Lou? Who would slam the door? The wind? It's not even breezy today. Dad? He's outside goofing around in his shed.

What's that? Is that Mom shouting? Are they fighting again?

Let's go see!

My mother *told* me the rest of this story. You will notice that I have been unable to locate any other conversations relating to this incident and, in fact, even this text might not be connected. But it sounds like the build up to my mother's story.

You see, they were having a lazy afternoon hanging around the house listening to their transistor radios. They were trying to create a stereo effect with very low tech equipment. My

mother said that a door slammed suddenly while they were listening to Stevie Wonder's 'Superstition', which spooked her. Later, it spooked my auntie, too. In retrospect, it seemed to them that the song had agitated something in the house; that Hatford suddenly needed to prove a point.

My grandmother went outside looking for my grandfather. There was a loud argument and the girls got up to sneak outside to get a view of it. But as they moved through the house, the doors started slamming, as if a big wind was blowing through, only there wasn't any wind. It was a hot, windless day. The girls seemed to be just ahead of the non-existent wind, and what had started out as a stealthy sneak-to-peek became a mini-stampede. They struggled with the back door even though it was slightly ajar. Mary got a gash on her forehead from ramming into it; Lou's fingers were smashed terribly when the door spontaneously slammed as the girls were passing through it.

Once outside they were halted by the overbearing brightness and heat of the summer sun, and once they regained their sight and had caught their breath, they realized that their parents weren't fighting anymore. All they heard was the singular voice of their mother screaming in the shed.

They couldn't move. My mother said she felt 'glued to the spot' which seems to me to be a typical way of describing one way of reacting in fear. You either run away from it, run toward it, or stand dead still like a baby deer.

When their mother came out of the shed she stopped screaming. She ran past them and into the house. They could hear her shouting "Send an ambulance! Send an ambulance!" And she had to give the address of Hatford and directions on how to get there, and her phone number which she kept forgetting half way through.

Their mother ran back past them to the shed. The girls were released from their immobility and followed her. But when they got to the door she started yelling at them to get out of the way, even though they were nowhere near her. She was kneeling in the grime tugging at her non-responsive husband, who seemed to my mother to be covered in oil or dark paint.

When my mother tells this story there is a point where everything that happens seems to have been felt and watched by only one person. Their experience was fused and fluid. It isn't as if it passed between them; it was more like they had melded. Everything they saw, they saw from the same angle and with the same understanding. They felt each other's injuries and responded to them as if they were their own. Lou felt something warm and thick flooding into her eyes, which she tried to wipe away. Mary held her hand away from her body to avoid brushing throbbing fingers against anything. They knew that their father wasn't covered in oil. And they staggered together, and fell to their knees together. They crawled away from the shed and wailed with one voice until they heard the ambulance.

'Holy Moses!' one ambulance attendant said. 'What's going on here?' When he understood the extent of things, he called for another ambulance and started working on my grandfather.

The whole family was transported to the hospital. As the sisters' ambulance moved down the drive they saw the house from the little window in the ambulance door. Looking like a solid block of impenetrable grey concrete, rather than a place for a family to live, the girls saw its

wide front doors opening and closing is if it was yawning repeatedly.

The hospital crew pumped blood into my grandfather until they were able to repair the place where the handsaw had slashed him. He said the saw had come loose from its hooks in the low rafters of the shed. They stitched up my grandmother's arm. She didn't remember how she or my grandfather got injured. They set Lou's fingers: the middle three were broken. They sewed up Mary's forehead.

My grandfather had to stay in the hospital but the girls and their mother went home that night.

When they got there the house was locked-up tight. The outside nightlights glowed up through the shrubbery that grew against the walls and lit the underside of the eaves. There were papery wasps' nests up there, but the wasps were quiet, like they were sleeping.

My grandmother unlocked the door and flipped on the hall lights. The girls held back at the doorway, the darkness behind them and the lighted house before them. Their mother said, 'Come in girls and get ready for bed. This day has gone on far too long. All of this has gone on far too long.' They did as they were told. In their room they found their radios as they had left them, propped up facing each other. The batteries were nearly flat. My auntie picked the radios up and heard James Taylor singing through the scratchy transistors, 'How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)'. The sisters could hear their mother in the kitchen making Ovaltine. She was quietly humming 'Love Me Tender'.

(Whistle, and the rainy day)

This afternoon I pulled this notebook out of the crates. It's rumpled; the pages have gone wavy from damp weather. It is covered with muddy paw prints and long, golden retriever hair. After a few pages I enter the conversation:

I'm tired of this rain, Mom.

Why don't you take Whistle out for a walk? You both seem restless.

Yes, take yourselves out. The rain won't hurt either of you.

I remember this day: I did as my mother and aunt suggested. It doesn't rain all that often in that part of the country, and people aren't used to going on with their business in spite of the rain. They drive slower, and stay indoors longer. They run from place to place trying to avoid getting wet, and have problems deciding what to wear when they're going out. Dark skies are inscrutable. From the window they make the world look cold and menacing, but outside it could be warm and sticky.

It's about time she went outside!

Are you talking about Melody or Whistle? Because Whistle seemed more antsy to me than Melody. Or maybe it's you who are antsy? Why did you call us over? We could have talked on the phone and saved me the trouble of having to drive in this muggy rain

I need to write.

You need to write? Then just write. You can write without me.

I need a conversation. A full one.

Okay. What's on your mind?

It 's Mom and The Hat.

So?

I think since Dad died something funny is happening between her and that house.

There's always been something funny between her and that house. Dad was part of it, too, at first. Didn't you feel that? That Dad was part of it too?

Yes, a little at first. But he didn't have as much pull, and it changed. We were part of it, too. The despised siblings or something.

A strange kind of sibling rivalry.

It's still there.

What's still there?

The rivalry. The Hat is still connected with us. I was there the other day, about the time this rain started. I was driving up the street and when the house came into view a huge bolt of lightning cracked across the front and ricocheted across the drive. It made an arch. A crazy flashing arch. And when I started to go up the drive the thunder smashed out of the clouds. It felt like being crushed by sound! It was indescribably awful.

So you got there when the storm started and it made you think the house still has a problem with you? Lou, I don't get the connection? The House has never controlled the weather.

There's more. (And next time don't wrestle the book from me!) Just as I opened the car door the rain poured. It wasn't 'rain', do you know what I mean? It was beyond 'cats and dogs'; it was beyond torrential or monsoon. It was Niagara Falls at the peak of its flow and in a very bad mood.

What did you do?

I fell back into the car. I couldn't walk forward, the flow was so strong. It slammed the door shut! After waiting five minutes I eased the car as close as I could to the front of the house and I honked the horn. Mom finally opened the door, and as she did, the water changed to a light floating mist.

Did you get into the house?

Yes. Mom didn't know what had just happened. She was irritated that I'd been honking the horn. And she was unhappy that I was standing there dripping all over her entry hall. She said she hadn't seen the lightning or heard the thunder. She pooh-poohed me and said that if it had been raining that hard she surely would have heard it. I want you to come to the house with me.

When?

Now. This afternoon. And I want to bring your Melody and Whistle, because the house doesn't care about them.

If the house has a problem, would it not be better to get the whole un-tempered experience? I mean, it might not expose itself with M and Whistle there.

It will. I know it will. I told you: something has changed. Since Dad died, it cannot restrain itself.

My auntie drove, and the car smelled of damp dog and mud. The closer we got to Hatford House, the tenser Lou was. It's Lou's way to be slightly edgy, but she snapped at Whistle for being too rowdy in the backseat with me; and then she snapped at me. Lou's not that kind of edgy.

A wind kicked up as we started up the drive. A sheet of newspaper flew up and plastered onto the windshield in front of Lou. My mother started and squealed lightly, but Whistle was clearly alarmed and barked with his fullest voice. Lou kept driving. She peered around the newspaper with her head resting against the side window. The condensation all around her head looked like a washed-out halo.

Grandma must have seen us coming because she opened the door before we were out of the car. Whistle ran straight for her. I ran for her too, but Whistle suddenly turned and stopped to look at Lou and Mary who were still at the car, and writing.

Grandma said 'What a nice surprise! Hasn't the weather been miserable? Melody darling, come inside.' She yelled, 'You two girls should come out of the rain!' She cooed at Whistle

and tried to coax him in, but Whissle was intent on Lou.

My mother closed the notebook and yelled back, 'Hi Mom. Everything okay?' It wasn't until Lou linked arms with Mary, and the two of them were making their way over the walkway, that Whissle turned back to us and came inside.

Everything seems fine here. Mom looks healthy. The rain is light. No lightning, Lou.

But look at Whissle. Why's he staring at us like that? Why hasn't he run inside?

Maybe he senses you're uptight.

Inside the house, Whissle kept an eye on Lou. He followed Lou down the hall to the bathroom and insisted on going in with her. He became her shadow, even shifting his weight when Lou shifted hers, and shifting his gaze to look at whatever Lou was looking at. And I kept my eye on Whissle. I had never seen him act like that before.

But the weirdest thing going on was that the sisters weren't writing. My mother kept the notebook tucked under her arm. She didn't even put it down when Grandma brought coffee and cookies.

'What's the matter with this dog?' Grandma asked. 'And what's the matter with you three? You're making me uncomfortable.'

Later, Lou would say that it was the house that was making her uncomfortable, that the house was trying to turn Grandma against us. At the time, I thought Lou had lost her mind a little, but I'd never had any quarrel with the house. It always felt like a secure place to me. Something akin to the safety of a bank vault. Perhaps that was because it actually had the look of a vault about it: impenetrable, solid, thick and grey.

The visit was uneventful, I thought. The conversation from the sisters ran along the lines of: Are you very lonely without Dad? Are you seeing your friends? Do you need help with anything – the house - perhaps?

From my grandmother it was: I'm fine. Everyone is fine. The house is fine. Melody, how are you doing in school?

From me it was just: Fine.

The rain started to clear as we left. But the change from rain to sun made the air unbearably heavy and immobile. The car felt swampy, and we lugged home in dog smells and the sisters' silently thickening mood.

(what the sisters did)

The conversation continues:

You saw it. I know you saw it.

Even the dog saw it! M seems to be the only one who didn't see that.

Mom's seen it. She has to have. We should have offered to paint the house.

I asked if she needed help with the house! What more could I do? If you wanted to make her acknowledge the writing, you could have asked her point-blank yourself. How could all of those words start seeping through after all of these years? It seems impossible

You could have commented on it.

YOU could have commented on it! You're the one who dragged us out to visit her. You're the one who thinks the house has gotten funny! You should have said something. I was just along for the ride.

Things didn't seem odd to you? You didn't notice anything stranger than usual?

You were so tense it was hard to notice anything else.

You're lying. Your writing has taken on that slant. You really are lying!

I think we should leave Mom alone.

I don't.

It's her life and it's her house.

You're still lying.

We can't do anything about it Lou. If Mom wants writing all over her walls, that's her business. The house is hers and she can do what she likes with it. She clearly hasn't lost her mind. She's taking care of herself. There's nothing we can do!

We should go there more often.

I won't.

I can't go by myself. I'm afraid I'll get hurt.

Then don't go. It's that simple.

But Lou couldn't leave it alone. She visited my grandmother regularly despite deepening

apprehension. She always took Whistle and sometimes I went along. My mother stayed away most of the time, which wasn't unusual, but it necessitated regular updating by my auntie.

Mom's talking about the writing on the walls. She mentioned it on her own this afternoon. In fact, she brought it up abruptly as I was getting ready to leave.

Are you happy now?

Aren't you curious as to what she said?

Probably something like: isn't it strange how the writing came back after all these years?

Yes. And when I offered to repaint it, she said she'd rather I didn't. She said it was as if the house had held onto this memory and saved it for her to remind her of other times, funnier times, when we were all still a family living together in the house.

That sounds good enough. It's nicely nostalgic.

It wasn't a memory to get nostalgic about. We hurt her. In a way, we hurt the house.

Maybe it is a pleasant memory in retrospect. Things look different from a distance.

The house holds grudges. It means to get back at us. It's taking Mom away.

Lou! We are grown women. We moved away a long time ago. The house can't come between us anymore than it already has. The house - you - - you are exasperating!

It's getting to Melody, you know. It hasn't got to Whistle but Melody is changing.

As you can see, there is no more writing to this conversation. My mother and auntie spoke and wrote less and less, and my father said it was a shame because they had always been so close. He told my mother that he thought Lou needed a shrink (he said this to her in a low voice but I was listening outside the door) and he suggested she talk to my grandmother about it. When my mother said she would rather stay out of it I decided to talk to Grandma myself. A couple of days later, on a clear hot day, I was pushing my bike up the steep driveway to Hatford House. Bits of loose gravel crunched under the tires and it seemed this was the only sound there was, besides my heavy breathing. The tips of my long hair brushed the handlebars and my hands sweated on the grips. As I stood alone outside the front door, in the

shade of the eaves, I wondered what I would say.

(what I said and what Lou did before I could say it)

My grandmother didn't answer the door. Lou did. She stood there looking me from top to bottom, and didn't seem too friendly about it either. Grandma called from the kitchen 'Who is it?' When I said, 'It's Me Grandma,' Lou swung the door to let me in. The entry was full of cardboard boxes and wooden crates. Whissle was standing between Lou and the kitchen, as if on guard, but he left his post and loped to me.

Lou was moving in. We will probably never know how she convinced my grandmother that she needed to move back home. She had a steady job and she owned her own house. When I told my mother that Lou was living with Grandma, she got in her car, notebook in hand, and drove off grinding her gears as she tried to rush her car along the street.

What is WRONG with you? Why can't you just leave Mom alone?

She needs protecting.

You said you were afraid of the house. Why would you move into a house you're afraid of? I swear Lou, I think you've lost your marbles. You've gone over the edge.

It is the house that has gone over the edge. You haven't been here.

Get your things out of here.

Look at the walls.

Next there is illegible scribbling, much like the day Whissle was born, except the pen's indentation is very deep. The impression is so deep it extends seven pages underneath.

That's what I mean. Something has gone very wrong here.

We can plaster over it. We can paint it.

We cannot do anything about it. That is why I have moved back.

This problem with the walls was something I hadn't noticed until my visit on my bike. And I realize now that I was just too interested in Whissle and my grandmother's affectionate distractions to really look around. Maybe I was just too used to viewing life through myriads of written words to think that thousands of them written on the walls unusual. But that last time when I visited on my own, I saw them, and they were everywhere.

Those sisters had used every available writing utensil and medium. When one instrument ran

out it was immediately replaced by another. One scribbled line would taper and become weak from depleting ink and would become strong again with china marker, or coloured pencil, there was even chalk. There was a section that seemed to be made entirely of mascara, eye shadow, lipstick, foundation and blusher. Another section looked like shoe polish and that eventually ran into tempera paint. It was all entirely clear, as if it had been written that very day. And it must have taken hours to accomplish. How had they gotten away with it?

Now Lou, who had been watching the writing seeping through the paint for weeks, was absolutely convinced that the house was up to no good. My mother couldn't convince her to leave the place without my grandmother.

When my mother got back home, my father helped her out of the car and propped her up as she walked to the door. I carried the notebook. She said, 'There's something terribly wrong. We have to get Lou out of the house. It's not what she thinks.'

My father said of course it wasn't what Lou thought, because Lou was crazy. But I had had my say with my grandmother while Lou was moving some of the crates and boxes into the basement, and I was starting to think that Lou wasn't crazy after all. I was suspicious of the house, and when I got on my bike to cycle home I had the creepy feeling that I was being watched. A hot wind stirred up and pushed close at my back until I had peddled clear of the drive.

(the last stand and the letters)

My parents discussed it for days and nights. My mother started calling her sister several times a day, and while they talked she made doodles out of the fragments of the things she wrote. She couldn't seem to write full sentences. Without Lou there to respond, her written conversation was not only one-sided, it was incomprehensible.

Another storm came up and something between my mother and her sister became desperate. The rain was non-stop, the wind was terrifically hot, and the sisters stayed on the line from early afternoon until late evening, when the line went dead. My mother started yelling into the phone. She threw it down and grabbed my father shouting that we had to get to the Hat Right Now. He moved around thoughtfully collecting flashlights and his tool box, trying to reason her out of it, but she got her keys and ran from the house. We followed and jumped into her car as she was pulling out of the driveway. She was grinding the gears again and my father said he would drive but she ignored him and carried on.

The electricity was out. We sped along the road without street lights in the rain. We couldn't see The Hatford from the road. We didn't see it until the headlights skimmed across it as my mother rounded the top of the drive. She started shouting before her door was even open and then she pushed it so hard it seemed to crack at the hinges.

The front door was open. Whistle flashed through the entry hall and we heard Lou screaming 'Mom! Mom! We have to go NOW!' Everyone one was in an uproar yelling, shouting, screaming, and barking; the wind slammed and the rain hammered. Even the Hat seemed to be grumbling low and deep from the depths of the ground it was embedded in.

In my flashlight beam I saw Whistle frantic, running back and forth from my grandmother's study to the front door. The sisters were pulling their mother from her study but she seemed to be fighting them. My father stood stock-still running his beam over all of the walls, over all the writing. He looked at me and flashed his light on the sisters struggling with their mother. He pointed at the front door and shouted 'OUT OF HERE!' And as I turned to go he shouted 'RUN MELODY!'

Outside the ground had become a saturated mess of mud and gravel that had started to flow. The house seemed to shutter and then it moved in the slush like a huge grey ocean cruiser. It seemed to teeter on the edge of the hill. Whistle came out of the door tugging Lou by the leg. My father tripped forward wrestling with my screaming mother. As his foot left the threshold the house fell over into the dark as if his weight had been the only thing balancing it from falling. The ground gave way with the house and we clawed and scrambled to keep from being pulled down, too. But The Hatford had my grandmother, and it didn't let her go.

They dug her out the next day. Her arms crossed her chest as if she had died hugging something. We found a packet of letters tucked inside her blouse that were wrapped in what looked to be the original concept sketches for the Hatford House. They were signed by the architect Sam Kitzyng. The individual letters spanned many years and were signed: *Forever yours, Sam.*

**That Sam I am
That Sam I am
I do not like
That Sam I am**

I know, Mary Louise, but for Mom's memory's sake you could at least try to muster a bit of remorse for having so wholeheartedly defaced all of those walls.

You could at least try.

*Seuss, Dr. *Green Eggs and Ham*. New York: Random House, 1960.

A story cycle:

The Last Story

I

The kitchen was steamy.

Marta had been cooking rice when the first wave of attacks started. The cupboard doors had popped open, simultaneously, and all the cups, saucers and plates inside had leapt out and crashed. It was as if someone had gathered them up by the armloads and thrown them down en masse.

Marta jerked when the doors popped, and she flung a large ladle's worth of red sauce with mushrooms at the ceiling. When the crockery smashed, Marta hooked her gaze on the empty space above the mess and waved her ladle in the form of a cross. Then she shouted and ran from the room. Please note: Marta did not scream.

She had heard of this sort of thing before, from her grandmother. She did what her grandmother said she should do if such a thing happened; she did it without terror.

As she ran into the dining room, Marta heard the sound of cascading cutlery. It was exactly as her grandmother had predicted. First crockery, then cutlery; the pots and pans would be next. There was a pause in the cacophony in the kitchen as Marta ran through the living room. She grabbed the phone as she slid down the polished floor of the long hall and started searching her speed dial as she shot out the back door. As she rounded the corner of her pink adobe house, she heard pots and pans pounding against the inside walls of her kitchen. Her phone began to ring at the other end of the line. She peeped in the window. Pans were flying across the kitchen, one-by-one.

'Mama? Mama, the visitor has arrived! Yes - and now the pans are flying.' She ducked away from the window as a small skillet slammed into the window. The ancient wood held, but one of the little panes cracked.

'You heard that? It saw me through the window! Yes, I will wait outside. Yes, yes, I promise!'

She moved back around the house and waited under the red cascading flowers of the bougainvillea vine. This had been her 'safe' place since she was a toddler.

The pounding in the kitchen slowly subsided. Marta wondered if the visitor had run out of pots and pans to throw. She put her head against the wall, pressed her ear against the smooth adobe. No sounds. She crept along the wall toward the corner, but every footfall caused a quiet crunching in the dirt. She listened to the house between steps. A trickle of

sweat crept down her leg and tickled the backside of her knee.

At the corner of the house Marta paused again, reluctant to step around. She had handled the initial encounter calmly, but the shock of the attack had finally settled in to her body. She trembled a little as she tried to build up the courage to proceed.

‘Marta!’

The girl jerked away from the wall and fell into the arms of two women as they rounded the corner.

‘Darling! You are alright? It has not hurt you? Oh, baby...’ The women crossed themselves and crossed Marta’s forehead with three tiny crosses each. Her mother pushed the sweaty bangs off Marta’s forehead and lifted her long black hair off her back and shoulders. As Marta’s grandmother fanned her back she whispered Christian prayers and the ancient prayers of her family.

Marta’s mother said, ‘Now we are together we must enter our kitchen again.’

Grandmother said, ‘Now, and for some time to come, we will always enter together. The visitor will be intolerable otherwise.’

They walked beside the walls of their house and around to the front where they had left the car haphazardly parked. They gathered up their groceries from the backseat and floor, and from under the seats where things had rolled and lodged. When the things were all replaced in the shopping bags, the three women turned to their house. They studied the electric blue front door hung on heavy rusting hinges; the black iron doorknob with its key skirting; and the deep cool shadow in which the door was set.

‘Home,’ the grandmother said.

The two older women and the girl on the threshold of womanhood straightened themselves, and moved toward their door.

II

Only girls in Marta’s family who lived in the house were subjected to the visits, and the house had been in the family for a very long time. There were stories. So many stories! In one olden times family there had been five daughters who had been born eleven months apart each one. As they matured the kitchen had to be enlarged as none of them could enter alone or without the other once the visitor arrived. At one point, the father and brothers had taken over the kitchen tasks as it was becoming near impossible to keep the women assembled.

In Marta’s grandmother’s time, one forward thinking father had built a kitchen on the

other side of the house. The family slowly and casually moved the contents of the old kitchen to the new, taking a pot here, some knives there, the occasional spoon. They had done it at a time when the visitor was quiet, before any of the sisters had come to that age.

And then one afternoon, while the oldest sister was stirring the beans, the doors of the new cupboard popped open and all of the crockery zoomed through the kitchen and through the house and landed in a heap on the old kitchen floor. The frightened girl ran out of the new kitchen pursued by cutlery of all sorts. She ducked to the floor in the living room, hands shielding the back of her head, while all the forks and knives and spoons, the spatulas, ladles and tongs flew over and into the old kitchen. They cascaded to the floor as if they were being poured from a vat. You can guess what happened with the pots and pans.

The new kitchen was changed to a laundry and bathroom because this was the first room in the house to have running water.

Yes, Marta knew the stories.’ The Unsuccessful Exorcism’: It had not been fully supported by several of the elderly family members. In their view, the church was successful in ministering to certain needs, but the older ways were more suited to caring for others. They said the church was too young to deal with the ways of the visitor. ‘The Decoy Cousins’: Why anyone thought this would work still baffled most who knew the story. ‘The Dogs in Heat’; ‘The Gypsy Afternoon’; ‘The Night the Men Stood Their Ground’ ...Marta knew them as if they were her own memories.

Whenever Marta watched the images of the stories in her mind – this happened when she was chopping things in the kitchen, or riding in the car on the long highway through the desert – she thought she saw edges of something familiar. They were like frayed edges where something had worn away or unravelled. They were soft, pale, and caress-able, like the down of the ring-neck dove.

She was intrigued.

III

Marta stood in the living room, alone, looking into the kitchen. She had not gone in the kitchen alone since the first attack three weeks ago. The visitor had been quiet when all three women were together, but there were other times when it paced the kitchen, shifting things lightly: a salt shaker, the sugar bowl, the hem of the orange and blue table cloth. On the pale orange walls and across the sage green cupboards Marta saw a wan shadow moving, a smudge of restlessness. She leaned slightly, as if to take a step forward, but then looked away

from the kitchen and steadied herself. Marta didn't see the shadow sink from the wall and sidle across the cool tiles of the kitchen floor.

It formed a dusky line on the floor across the doorway and settled there quietly.

Marta folded her arms across her small breasts and gazed into the kitchen again. She twisted strands of her soft black hair with the one hand that hung under her arm. Two fingers on the other hand tapped a rhythm as regular as a heartbeat. She searched the outside of her house through every window pane in the living room, and listened to the tiny noises in the ceiling.

And she stepped to the left where she could see the refrigerator and the Kitchen Aid mixer that had been a fixture in the kitchen since her grandmother's wedding day. She stepped to the right two steps and leaned so she could see the covered table and the old chairs that received a new coat of turquoise blue paint every few years.

Marta sighed and looked at the tips of her worn-out canvas shoes. They had been white once. She raised one leg in a silly goose step and as she replaced it on the floor, she took a tiny step toward the kitchen door.

The shadow's flutter was subtle. It settled back into position in a whisper's breeze.

Marta watched the strip on the floor unabashedly. She shook her head slowly and crossed the underside of her arm three times with her thumb, swivelled on the balls of her grey canvas shoes, and left the house through the heavy front door. As she walked from the door she heard crockery dropping on the tiles. It dropped singly, one cup or salad plate at a time.

She kept to her usual pace as she walked past the house. She had a gentle gait: a steady, straight-on form of walking with little hip movement because she would let her legs swing forward instead of forcing them ahead. She wondered if her mother and grandmother might be wiser to get some of the brightly patterned plastic picnic sets she had seen at the Supermart. Or perhaps they were afraid it might be torched like the paper plates in that funny, although alarming, story: 'When Uncle Hermes Got a Bright Idea'.

Marta chuckled as she walked to the bus stop. Uncle Hermes had died before Marta was born, yet her mind was full of images of flaming plates flying around the kitchen. She watched Uncle Hermes and some of the women darting, ducking and screeching around the fiery projectiles. In the story, two of the old aunties had waddled in with buckets of water and soaked everything and everyone. But even with the fires out and everybody giddy from the excitement, the kitchen drawers slid open and all of the silverware poured out onto the floor;

everyone ran out because they knew the pot-and-pans were next.

‘What does it want?’ Marta whispered as she climbed into the bus. Back in the kitchen the table cloth wafted; the house was breezeless.

IV

The visitor stayed unusually long with Marta. Sometimes the visitor would leave a girl in a week or two, and with another it would stay for a month or two. With Marta, it had an extended visit, and was still fluttering around the kitchen after four months.

It had been a problem at Christmas. In their excitement at greeting friends and relatives, the women would forget that they needed to keep together in the kitchen. Other family members got involved in keeping the kitchen running, which was a full time job at the holidays. But there was still the occasional incident. With all of the chatting and cooking instructions, the jostling and bumping around the kitchen door, one or the other of them would slip a foot cross the threshold and the cupboard doors would pop open.

Marta stood against the Christmas tree watching the activity. She moved restlessly around the house, trying to avoid her cousins. She slinked around the halls and rooms, taking the long way around the house, to keep away from the teasing men in her family.

Her aunties were harder to get away from. “Oh, Marta baby!” they said. “Look how beautiful. You are becoming a woman! It seems like only yesterday...” They rubbed her arms or played with the tendrils that twisted along the edges of her face. They kissed her forehead or her cheeks.

When they were finished Marta sought the shadowy parts of the house and tried to hide there by pretending to read a book or by seeming to be listening to her music player. What she wanted to do was to sit perfectly still, like a statue, until she couldn’t feel herself anymore. So still that her heart slowed so she wouldn’t notice it and so she did not feel where her feet were tucked under her, or the place where her eyelids came together or where her lips met.

She had discovered that when she sat like this, until her body didn’t feel anymore, that something inside her - Was it her spirit? – would loosen and shift. She felt a slow, ruffling that did not seem to be a part of her, but that spread through and across the space of her body. When it touched the very tip of her head and the tip of her nose (always simultaneously) she would become a vibrating tingling object. Had her body not previously become so relaxed, or ridged – for she was never sure which it was – she would have

collapsed.

It was under the bougainvillea vine that she had discovered this. Resting from the heat, as a tiny child, the shifting would start and she would sit, transfixed, until her mother came to find her.

But it wasn't until the visitor had arrived and stayed so long that she had started cultivating it. She found being with her mother and grandmother stifling; being without them felt perilous. As long as the visitor was around, not one of them could enter the kitchen without the other. And being in the kitchen all together with the visitor was oppressive for Marta. But her mother and grandmother seemed to have hit upon a rhythm moving in and out, the three of them as one, and were content to wait.

V

It was the fifth month and Marta was lounging under the bougainvillea. Her head rested against the ancient twisted vine, and red flowers poured down in front of her. The sun illuminated certain petals with such intensity that they made Marta's eyes water. She played a game to see how long she could stare at them without blinking. She sat quietly with her eyelids half closed and water trickling down her cheeks.

The familiar ruffling started; the tingling became intense and just as Marta felt lulled she heard a rap in the adobe wall. She jerked upright and turned her ear to the wall.

Another rap.

Marta looked out from her flowers. Her mother was at the other end of the house, where the 'new' kitchen had been built. She was hanging sheets in the breeze. Her grandmother was working in the garden tying up drooping tomato plants. Three speckled chickens rooted in the weeds at the edge of the garden.

Marta leaned back against her vine and listened.

Two raps, and then another.

She touched the wall and felt a rap at her fingertips. She crawled out from underneath the flowers and made a little stretch as she stood up. She put her hands on her hips and looked around at the bright day as if she had been napping and lost track of time. And then, in her straight steady way, she casually walked around the corner of the house where she could not be seen by the women working in the yard.

She touched the window where five months before the skillet had cracked a pane, but she kept to the side, against the wall. Her shoulders pressed against the wall, and she slowly

rotated her scapula to scratch her back. She heard the rap again. It was by her neck, and immediately after was another under her fingers on the window frame.

She pulled her hand back slightly, and replaced it a little higher on the frame. There was a gentle tapping under her fingertips, and as she pressed the palm of her hand against the wood the tapping spread. The window vibrated lightly and steadily, then more heavily and it was like the waves of an earthquake shaking the window, but it did not break. The window's vibration sped up and buzzed and Marta's hand tingled. The tingling spread down her arm and across her chest. It went up to her head and down to her belly before she pulled away from the house and stood before the window.

There was a crash in the kitchen.

By the time her mother and grandmother got to her, Marta was climbing back under her bougainvillea vine.

She was smiling.

VI

Marta stepped out of the kitchen with one foot. Her mother was cooking and her grandmother was setting the kitchen table for supper. The visitor hung quietly on the wall beside the refrigerator until Marta's foot left the kitchen. It rose up to the ceiling and slid along the top of the wall until it reached the doorway where it seemed to balance on top of the door frame. Marta lifted her arms and the visitor seemed to lean down and touch her fingertips.

"Marta!" said the grandmother.

Marta was slow to lower her arms and the grandmother slammed the silverware in the middle of the table.

Marta turned and faced her grandmother. Her mother had stopped stirring the soup, and was looking at her with the spoon suspended over the stove as if she wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

"Don't encourage it!" But as the grandmother spoke the shadow sank lower until it seemed to be resting on Marta's head. Her mother shrieked and lunged toward the girl. The grandmother batted the air as the two older women pushed Marta away from the kitchen, and pulled her into the living room.

"What do you think you're doing?" the grandmother said roughly. "This is not to be taken lightly" She pinched Marta's arm and gave the skin a little twist before she let go.

"But why can't I touch it? If we all have to be together in there, why can't we try to

talk with it?"

"Have you tried to talk to it before?" her mother asked.

"Not with my voice," Marta rubbed her arm.

Oh, Saints Preserve Us! What have you been up too?" The older women crossed themselves.

"It's living in our house. Why don't we speak with it?"

"The soup!" Marta's mother said. "We have to turn off the fire!"

They held Marta's hands as if she were a little child that needed to be guided along a precarious pathway. Things had gone on after they had left the kitchen. The silverware was separated: forks with forks, and spoons with spoons. Paper napkins were fluttering in the air above the table. All the chairs had been pulled away from the table as if someone were offering the women seats.

"Now this is getting spooky," the mother whispered. She turned off the gas and the three women left the kitchen again.

"I think we had better call the family," said the grandmother. "I don't remember any stories like this. Maybe one of the others remembers something that could explain this."

VII

The family started arriving within the half hour. Those who drove approached the house slowly and parked carefully as they contemplated what they might see. The others walked in the twilight and, as they approached the house, their excited chatter seemed to be subdued by the approaching darkness.

The family entered the house in single file, some of the older members pushed through in wheelchairs. Marta's mother and grandmother met each one inside the front door with a kiss and a blessing. The entry hall was lit with several large candles. As each family member rounding the corner into the living room, they saw a pathway of candles leading to the open kitchen door.

Marta stood in the corner nearest the kitchen in the shadows. She watched her family file up to the kitchen looking as if they were approaching a casket to view a corpse, doing the right thing – the supportive thing – but only because they were family.

One old grandpa in a wheelchair was eager to see. As he was wheeled forward he tried to speed his approach by pushing the wheels himself and running into the person ahead of him. This slowed the progress of the line as the woman he ran into was clipped on the

backs of her legs by the wheelchair's metal foot support. The line moved nervously forward.

Each one peeked into the kitchen, crossed themselves, and looked around at the others who were gathering along the sides of the candle path. When it was done, when the whole line had seen the mundane domesticity of the visitor in the kitchen, they stood in the glowing candle light whispering. The grandpa in the wheelchair continued to sit at the kitchen door watching the shadow gliding along cupboards and the ceiling. He said loudly, "This is not right! This is not the creature of this house."

"Papa! What are you talking about?" someone said. "What else would it be?"

But it was what they were all thinking and the old man's words brought out their words. The house was suddenly filled with words as they recalled the stories and argued over them. Some said they should call a priest; others said they should board up the kitchen as that had never been tried before; some just wanted to go home.

While they talked, Marta pressed into the corner. The familiar ruffling started and spread until she was awash with tingling. She slid passively to the floor as wave upon wave of sensation enthralled her. She watched the flickers in the candles and floated along on the swaying, waving pressure of all the sounds of the thousands of words.

"Marta," her mother said softly. "Can you hear me?"

Marta looked up and saw her mother's dark eyes looking at her from an awkward angle

"Can you move, Marta?" She lifted an elbow.

Her mother pointed to Marta's legs. "Marta, it is you that has to let go."

The dusky shadow was stretched around through the kitchen doorway, and along the floor. It clung to Marta's legs. Her mother was braced over her against the wall, arching carefully so as not to touch Marta or the visitor.

Marta sighed. She ran her fingertips through the hazy edges of the shadow and watched it quiver. She moved her legs away and it was gone.

VIII

So, that is the story that Marta added to the list of stories. When she was grown she moved from the house and had three sons. After she moved from the family home no girls from her family line moved back. Hers was the last of the stories. The old ways lost their meaning, the stories lost their coherence and the visitor found rest in the twisting vines of the ancient bougainvillea.

On the edge of the village over by the Red Hills there is an adobe house with a vivid blue door. It is a house that, as far back as anyone can remember, has always been full of families and full of stories.

This is one of those stories:

The Gypsy Morning

Carla jumped away from the table where the gypsy was singing.

This is what I remember first when I think of this story, but this is not where this story starts. This is the part in the story when Carla realizes that the spirit, that has just recently made its appearance in her family's kitchen, is now hovering behind her and seems to be trying to touch her shoulder. This spirit had arrived with violence some few days before and, alarmingly, it continued to move around restlessly in the kitchen. It was fascinated with Carla but would not allow her into the kitchen unless her mother was present. Neither was the mother allowed in without Carla.

It was an eccentric, moody spirit, but the family needed their meals and since no one knew how long the spirit – or, The Visitor, as many in the extended family called it – would stay, the girl and her mother worked together, as never before, to coordinate their timing and their movements.

In the early mornings before it was hot, after the men were off with the cattle and the younger children off to school, Carla helped her mother wrap her squirming baby brother in a long shawl. She was slender and strong and carried her brother to market on her back as if he were her own baby. She carried the shopping on the way home.

But this day, the day this story occurs, was hot before the sun had even risen. Carla stayed home to care for her brother who was feverish with his teeth, and too grumpy and unsettled to go out into the heat on the trip for the daily food.

Carla rocked and cradled her brother; she sang songs and rubbed his gums and as he grumped and cried she wore him out with affection, so he fell to sleep. She laid him on a cot in a cool place in the big room in the centre of the house. As she stood over him, caressing his thick black hair, there was a faint knocking at the door

Carla had to stand on the tips of her toes to peek through the little spy door to see who was there. A dark man, a man whose face had seen too much sun mischief, looked at Carla

through the grate in the spy door. 'Is your mother at home, little sister?' he asked.

Carla shyly closed the spy door and twisted the little knob. She stood away from the door and watched it.

The knock came again. Carla stood on tip-toe again and opened the spy door. The man was standing farther away from the door. She saw his scruffy beard. He wore a loose red vest with grease marks and fraying, tarnished gold braid over a white shirt. 'Little sister, I have heard in the village that you have an uninvited guest in your house. I am Spiro Smith,' he lifted his arms and spun around for her to see, 'and I am here to help you.'

She did not like what she saw. She did not like the golden ring he wore on his forefinger or the rings he wore in his ears. She closed the little spy door and walked away into the big room to her sleeping brother.

As she leaned close over the baby to listen to his restless breathing, she heard a shuffle in the back hallway and startled, looked up to Spiro Smith coming into the other side of the big room. 'The door at the back is open,' he shrugged. 'It seems I can come inside.' He looked around the room, then at the sleeping baby and then at the size of the girl. He glanced at her face but lingered on her neck and her wrists and ankles.

'Do not be afraid. I am from a tribe that knows the ways of spirits,' he said. 'I will help you rid of it.'

'You are a gypsy,' Carla said. 'My mother will be home soon.'

'Where is this spirit, little sister?' He moved toward her and she jerked against her brother's cot. The baby whimpered in his sleep, and Carla panicked – pointed to the kitchen.

'Come with me,' he said.

'I cannot,' Carla said. 'I cannot go in without my mother or the spirit will do me harm.'

He went into the kitchen and Carla left the cot and stood by the doorway watching.

'Ooooo, I see what you mean little sister,' he said as he faced the wall opposite the shadow. 'There is something in this kitchen that should not be here,' he said as he scanned the tops of the cupboards where the finest ceramics were kept.

He spun around the room gracefully, his black and grey hair flipping from his back like the finger-feathers of a raven's wing. He saw everything as he spun. He was reaching high, as if to touch the beams, when his hands brushed through the shadow and he jerked; he stopped spinning. Turning to Carla and said 'Help me with this table.'

'I cannot. I have told you that I may not enter,' Carla whispered. 'My mother will be home soon...'

The man clicked his tongue as he shook his head at Carla, but then he glanced where the shadow had been and quickly dragged the table through the doorway. He took two chairs and then gathered things from the kitchen as he looked through drawers and cupboards. 'I will rid your house of this bothersome creature,' he said.

'My mother will be back soon...'

The table's whitewash was chipped, and it was just outside of the kitchen door where he had dragged it to sit and sing. He placed four red candles, an ornate silver crucifix with a heavy silver chain, a chipped shot glass full to the brim with fine whisky, a substantial piece of goat cheese, a small green crystal bowl of salt and three large orange marigold blossoms on a rumpled square sky-blue kerchief in the middle of the table. The candles were at the four corners of the kerchief. The marigolds were bunched in the middle.

The chipped shot glass and the kerchief belonged to the gypsy.

Spiro Smith gazed at Carla's face but she averted her hazel eyes and tucked her neck in her shoulders like a frightened turtle. 'Come. Sit here little sister,' he said as he motioned to the chair across from his. She stared at the chair as if she had never seen anything like it before in her life. 'Sit!' he commanded.

She sat stiff-backed. Spiro sat across from her, facing the kitchen door, and as he lit the candles he started to sing a slow song that was nearly a chant brimming with rich sounding words from many languages. His cadence dropped and rose with his arms as he circled them in front of him and over the objects on the table. He pinched salt and tossed it around the table and into Carla's hair. He stopped suddenly, and stood abruptly, knocking his chair backwards to the ground. As it banged onto the tile floor, he grabbed the whisky and opened his throat.

Carla felt a twitching breath at her shoulder and turned to see the faintest shadow hovering behind her on the inside edges of the doorframe. Spiro Smith's singing lowered and sped up he levelled; his eyes at Carla. Carla jumped away from the table and away from the spirit behind her, trying to get around to the front door away from the man in front, but Spiro Smith grabbed her arm. His song had become a guttural rapid chant.

Carla struggled. The man was stronger. He lowered his face to her young slender face, and she grimaced and closed her eyes. But as his lips met hers she opened her eyes, drew her head back and clamped her teeth on his sweaty nose.

He roared and released her. She twitched like an indecisive squirrel, her bony elbows leading her half this way, half that, her full white skirts swishing like suds in the Saturday

washtubs.

Spiro Smith saw blood on his hands and he roared again. He lifted his bloody palms at Carla and knocked the table aside. He grabbed for her, but she stepped back and back again until she was on the threshold of the kitchen. The shadow drew back.

Spiro Smith lunged after Carla as she ran into the kitchen – and then it all happened like it had always happened before. The cupboards popped open and crockery flew out at Spiro Smith and crashed around him. Next the drawers pulled out and forks, spoons, spatulas, and knives flew across the room and cascaded around him. The startled man swatted at the airborne utensils.

The baby screamed.

Carla pressed down in a corner sheltering her head in her arms. Pots and pans flew straight across the room as Spiro Smith hollered. Each metal frying pan and copper saucepan found its mark as the man wailed and screamed, crumpling under each blow, until a small skillet landed on his head and he lay unconscious on the floor.

Carla crawled from the corner of the kitchen as pieces of crockery and cutlery twitched and bounced around the floor. As she stood, a wooden ladle flew at her which she dodged as she dashed through the door to her crying brother.

She was shaking but she lifted the frightened baby to her chest and, kissing his forehead, fled for the blue door and the hot sunlight beyond it.

The news spread quickly and soon Spiro Smith was driven from the village. In the late morning everyone in the market place ran to Carla's house and with machetes and hoes, rocks, clubs and dogs, they knocked and pursued the dazed man past the edge of the village, along the dusty track and into the quivery heat waves of the Red Hills.

This is nearly the end of the story. After all of the excitement, who would want to hear more? But, my memory takes me back once again to that moment when Carla jumps away from the table. I see her in my storyteller's mind: a skinny girl on the verge of growing-up with a shadowy threat behind her, and a solid threat in front of her - a baby in his cot, her mother trudging home with the shopping, her father and uncles and older brothers working the ranch, her other siblings soon home from school but yet not there. Not yet.

When the villagers ran Spiro Smith out of the village, Carla's whole family was there, the great-aunties and second cousins, even the babies, though Carla was at home. She stood outside the kitchen against the door frame and looked at the mess on the kitchen floor, the blood smears on the whitewashed table blood smears on the whitewashed table and the

droplets across the floor. And she saw the finest crockery, the few pieces of porcelain and crystal her family saved for the holiday's celebrations, still carefully balanced on the top of the cupboard.

It was so quiet that a sliver of sunbeam that slid through the wooden kitchen shutters seemed louder to Carla than all the cacophony of the morning's excitement. 'My mother will be home soon,' she said softly and walked quietly into the kitchen to clean up the mess.

The Unsuccessful Exorcism

In the village over by the Red Hills there is church where most of the villagers worship. It was built long ago when a proselytizer, hot, dusty and full of the holy spirit (or terribly crazed by dehydration) dragged his parched body to the circle of a tiny gathering of huts where he saw a vision and fell over jabbering that the place was consecrated.

The people in the locality did not know what consecrated meant, but they knew of their own holy places, so they did not question the man's earnestness. The place was surely not consecrated, for as we know, consecration requires religious rites. A man, with a swollen tongue and cracked lips covered in dried strips of white saliva and flaking skin, is in no position to perform holy rites. His rolling eyes with trails of dried tears caked with the red dust of the hills (which looked like tears of blood) convinced the people that he was onto something.

They weren't sure what. So, they built a little lean-to for him, made of arbutus limbs and a blanket soaked in water to cool the hot breeze. They laid him by the spring next to Water Rock, and left him there until nightfall. They were accustomed to the ways of holy folk. At nightfall the women tried to feed him, but he just groaned and slept. They threw the blanket over him, which the hot breeze had dried, and went to rest in their huts.

They were not surprised to find him in the morning sitting on the consecrated ground with the blanket wrapped around him. The people proceeded to build a low hut around him. A woman put a jug of water in the dirt beside him. Another brought a piece of flatbread and a small bowl of rice and meat.

And so it was that Carlo Herrera persuaded the heathen, by his vision, exhausted ravings and claims of consecration, to worship a deity they had not heard of before. His bloody tears had also been very convincing.

Much later, when the hut circle had become a village with a fountain and houses with gardens, and the low hut had become a church with clanging bells and pews, alters, crucifixes and holy water, is when this story happened. But, as you can see, stories sometimes start long before they actually happen (generations before - sometimes, or just days before – sometimes).

In a house on the edge of the village lived a family with an old grandfather and grandmother, the mother and father, and many children. There were, in fact, three sons and

three daughters who had survived infancy. The three sons had been born first: Mathias, Marco and Luka; the daughters born second: Tera, Mistral and Tandy.

The house had grown as every generation added its own claim to enclosed space. But the kitchen had not grown proportionally for there were times when the kitchen was a difficult place to inhabit. There were times when even though they needed to work in the kitchen, they were afraid to. At these times they hoped for clear weather so they might cook outside, but inevitably, engorged clouds would pile over the house and disgorge on the makeshift kitchen, or terrible winds would swirl and whip a frenzy into the dust of the Red Hills. The blanket tents of the makeshift kitchen would billow and leap into flight and flap over the village to disappear into the sky; the stove's fire would expire in a heap of sand, and the meal lost.

It had been quite a few years since such things had happened at the house when, one day, the grandmother said to her daughter, 'The time is coming.' She watched Tera dash around the brothers in a game of tag. With her skirts tucked up, the girl ran as fast as they did even though she was younger and smaller. Her black hair was copper streaked by the sun and like a twisted strand of strong rope it flipped and snapped behind her.

'I see it too, Mama,' the younger woman said, but she was watching Mistral who was sitting on a patch of grass playing with kittens. Her hair was loose, curtaining her full shoulders and back, and the white and black kittens swatted at the chestnut strands.

But the grandfather said nothing as he watched Tandy, who stood alone leaning against the adobe house, gazing at the immense clouds piling above the Red Hills. *She looks so very small*, he thought, as the clouds heaped higher and higher.

And so it was that, only a few days later, the grandfather stood in the kitchen carving paper-thin slices off of a large salami for his morning snack. His wife was in the garden collecting tomatoes, and the house was very quiet with the boys off working the ranch with their father, and the girls at market with their mother.

The knife sliced easily through the meat, and as it was nearing the bottom edge of the salami, when the grandfather's attention was keenly concentrated on keeping the slice evenly thin to its very bottom, a shadow slunk from a crack in the warm earthy tiles in the floor. It hesitated as the man again applied the knife to the top edge of the salami and as he sliced, it moved carefully to the bottom of the butcher's block. Again it paused until the grandfather sliced again. This time it spread up the leg of the table, to the under edge of the thick block and waited. As the grandfather raised the knife to slice again, he paused, shifted the wooden

grip against his palm, looked around the kitchen and set the knife down.

He gathered the meat onto a plate and moved quietly to the kitchen door, careful not to shuffle his feet. He looked back at the block, the knife, the leg and sighed as he passed through the door to take the food outside to his wife.

‘But why would *you* see it?’ the grandmother said that night after she had snuffed the candle and pulled her covers up to her chin.

‘I was born here. I have lived here all of my life and watched the hauntings of my sisters and our daughter,’ he mumbled into his pillow. ‘But I do not know why, my dear, I have seen *it* today before anyone else.’

‘Perhaps, this time, your family will call in the priest to handle this *thing*. Has it not been a bother long enough? In my family, no one would tolerate such nonsense!’ she said softly.

‘In *your* family? Are *we* not your family?’ he said. ‘The visitor was here before the times of priests and its needs, as mysterious as they are, cannot be attended to by priests. But with all of these girls here in this house, I feel very tired at the idea of what is soon to come.’

The grandmother rolled over onto her side. She thought of the candles she had lit in the church that afternoon after her husband had told her about the shadow on the butcher’s block. She silently re-prayed the prayers she had whispered as she had lit the three twiggy tapers. And, in her memory, she scanned the bronze plate just inside the vestibule, the one she had scanned so many times before, that told of the consecration of the land by Carlo Herrera.

It wasn’t many more days later that Tera was breaking eggs in the kitchen with her mother when the cupboard doors sprang open and the crockery seemed to sweep out onto the floor. Tera covered her ears but hopped and dodged around the crockery that bounced her way. Her mother grabbed the girl’s elbow and yanked her out of the kitchen. As she did she shouted, ‘It has started. Come! Come! Come!’

The woman had shouted as much to herself as to the girl. Tera stood outside the kitchen looking at the plates and cups in a pile on the floor, still with her hands clamped tightly over her ears, while her mother walked rapidly to the back of the house where boys and girls were exiting rooms looking bewildered and alarmed.

The grandmother came through the front door as she returned home from her early morning prayers. The grandfather had been having coffee in the big room and was soon standing next to Tera watching the mess on the floor. The father was still at the stables preparing for the day’s work on the ranch. He didn’t hear of the exciting events until he was

called in for breakfast, and then he sighed and shook his head and blessed himself as he entered the kitchen to eat.

As he pulled out a chair to sit down to the table a spoon and a fork clanked on the floor where the chair's legs scraped over them. 'Did all of the silverware fly out, too?' he asked as he stooped to get the two pieces. But he saw that it must have because there were other pieces under the table that had been missed in the tidy-up after the attack. 'And the pots and pans, too!' said his wife.

'And the pots and pans, too...' he echoed as he sat down. 'Well, Tera. It seems your time has come. I hoped the curse on this family would bypass my daughters, but it seems it is not to be.'

'Not just Tera,' said his wife. 'It has come for Mistral, too!'

'For Mistral, too!' he echoed. And he blessed himself.

The grandmother spoke, 'Perhaps this time we will call the priest? I was not allowed that small comfort when that creature attacked my own daughter! Why can we not have the priest this time?'

The grandfather's attention was on the shadow that was pooling on the floor in the corner next to a broom. But he spoke firmly to the old woman. 'You say your prayers in the house and in the church. You say them any place you like, but we will not be having the priest over to attend to this matter.' The father blessed himself again, and the family followed his lead; even the grandfather slowly crossed himself but he did it wilfully, with authority, and they all knew the matter was closed.

You might think that the grandfather was being stubborn with regard to this strange and inconvenient situation; that any assistance from whatever quarter should have been sought. If you are thinking this way, then you are of the same mind as the grandmother was, and you might also be wondering if she should take this matter into her own hands, and seek help from outside of the family. She knew that her husband, as good as he had been to her, and even though he had always loved and cherished his children, was in fact, a superstitious man, who lacked faith in the power and authority of the church. If you are like her, this thought might undermine your own faith in his judgement and lead you to sidestep his wishes and convictions, quietly, on the sly.

It was in low voices that she and priest discussed the matter. The visitor's intrusions over the generations were well known to the villagers. As a young girl, courted by the son of a woman who had endured, first hand, the tumultuous activities of the spirit, she had felt

slightly wicked, slightly wild for even entertaining the thought of perhaps living in the house someday, raising daughters of her own. Her parents, being of mixed opinions about the relationship, had offered cautious advice. For, although, a marriage into that family, and their sprawling adobe house and the viable ranch, would be a blessing, encouraging their daughter to proceed to a life tainted by a spirit of dubious origins, chafed their consciences.

It was with this memory of her conflicted, long ago departed parents slinking around at the edgy part of her nerves that the grandmother thought to rectify the matter of the visitor. The house would be scoured of the stain of the curse and she, in her old age, could completely claim her honourable position as the matriarch of the big house.

A time was arranged and a procedure outlined. The grandmother thanked the stars, or the saints, that she had early on in her marriage embarked on the habit of going for daily prayers in the church, for they now afforded her moments for consultation with the priest, and no one grew suspicious of her time away.

Things in the kitchen were getting complicated. The mother did her best to coordinate all of their timing but there were times when it all seemed like an impossible task and she would slap her dishcloth around and shout for Tandy to come and carry-on while the rest stood outside the kitchen door and gave direction. The spirit was vigilant. If the grandmother, the mother and the two older sisters did not enter and leave the kitchen as a group, the cupboard's contents became missiles.

The men and boys were not affected but they were not inclined to enter the kitchen except to eat their meals. The shadow slinked around the walls as if watching for an opportunity to strike, sliding along the floor or hovering against the edges of the counters.

Tandy was not affected. She did her best to ignore it while her grandfather stood by, an impotent guardian, feeling vaguely responsible for the trouble the shadow caused. After all, the spirit was attached to a house and a blood line, and it was through his inheritance of the house and the bloodline of his mother, that the shadow was activated. And because of the girls, of course. The spirit would not have awakened except for the girls.

The morning of the unsuccessful exorcism, the grandmother woke at day break and lay beside her old husband who was deep in some fitful dream. *You will soon be relieved of your burden* she thought as she scanned his jerking eyelids and furrowed lips. Her conscience pressured her mind but she dampened its insistence by telling herself that what was about to happen should have happen ages ago. She settled herself by going over the plan for this

unusual day, an activity that lately had replaced her daily prayers. It had, in fact, taken on the effect of formalized praying; for the words of the plan were set in a prescribed order, and in her mind, she said them and phrased them as if the plan were a verse.

The morning went as usual with too many females in the kitchen trying to work or keep out of one another's way. The men filed in for breakfast. The men ate and left to work the ranch and the women and girls stayed behind to clean up before they set about their daily chores, or went to school, away from the kitchen. It was in the early afternoon that the routine changed, for the grandmother had arranged for all of the girls and their mother to go to the house of their hugely pregnant cousin who was in need of some cheering up, owing to her discomfort from the size and tumbling activity of the infant inhabiting her insides.

The old man she sent on an errand that required him to visit a merchant who produced a unique liqueur that he stingily refused to sell through the shops in the village. He kept his supply close to home, which was not close to their village, which meant the grandfather would be away the entire afternoon.

She kissed him at the door as if they were young and courting, shyly, tentatively, but with affection. But when he responded by pointing out that the house was empty for the afternoon and tried to nuzzle the soft crêpey skin at the base of her neck, she bustled away, like a flustered hen, and squawked at him to get on his way or he would not be home before sunset. She watched him drive the donkey cart away, then watched the dust that rose from the road while the anticipation of what was about to come swelled in her stomach and caused a furious burp.

There was deep quiet in the kitchen. It was when she burped that the grandmother realized how profound the quiet was. She had not been listening, had instead been busy reciting the plan and getting the family out of the way. Tip-toeing to the kitchen door, she peeked through, not daring to cross the threshold. The shadow was out of sight, hiding, perhaps; or, perhaps, sensing the progress of the priest as he moved along the cobbled streets of the village, to pass onto the dirt cart paths of the houses at the edges of the village.

He walked without urgency, although he felt urgent, for his task that afternoon required discretion and displaying his nervousness would attract attention to his imminent involvement in an event that he vaguely sensed he should not have agreed to. As he walked, his coarse cassock brushed across the tops of his knees, and, he was aware of that miniscule irritation he felt as he stepped along the road. For most of his life, as a priest, he had worn

such robes and never felt the rasping texture against his legs. Across his back, and over his shoulders, against the back of his neck, these places had always felt the rub; especially in the heat. As he had aged he had taken to wearing a light, silken undergarment, an extravagance, he supposed, but one that had saved him from constant itching and rashes. And, as he had aged, some of his parishioners had noticed the rough texture of his garments and offered gentler materials for the fabric. One clever woman had woven a fabric that appeared impressively rough but was, in actuality, pliable and soft. He had made two cassocks from it, and worn them regularly after that.

But he reckoned that his mission that afternoon would require a stepping back, or recommitment, to the rules and the ideas those rules represented. He had redressed himself, literally, but putting on the old style robe. The coarseness had jogged his spirit. As he said his daily prayers he became mindful of their meaning and purpose; a craving stirred within him as the itching aggravated him without. He was grateful to the grandmother for persisting with her request to perform the exorcism on the house. (Without her insistence he might never had experienced this reawakening.) But he felt uneasy. His spiritual hunger was growing, and he sensed that until it was satisfied, he was not in a strong enough position from which to tackle an established and ancient familial entity.

The priest was aware that the irritation from the bit of his robes that was brushing across his knees was developing into a rash. What he was not aware of was a cloud that had started to form over his church. With every irritated step the cloud had grown larger and higher, a magnificent cumulonimbus column with an offset plate-like top that stretched in the direction of the house where the grandmother waited. Except for that one huge pile of intense white fluff weighted down by dull black, there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

The grandmother pulled open the heavy blue door. The aged iron hinges did not creak but their friction growled an undertone that could have been mistaken for a man moaning. The priest pressed his whole hand against it, as if to calm it and bless it. The vivid blue paint was hot from hours in the sun. For a moment the priest took comfort in the heat and pain it caused, then slid his fingertips over the thick planks until he was standing inside the darkened cool house.

As his eyes adjusted, the only thing he could see was a ray of light coming from the kitchen. Everything else was black. The old woman's voice seemed excited and disembodied. 'It is as we planned,' she said. 'The house is empty save for the shadow. But we must hurry. My daughter will not stay long with our cousin, and she will surely bring the girls back with

her. There are still many chores to be done here today.'

'Yes,' said the priest. He squeezed his fingertips into his palm making a rigid fist. He stepped to the kitchen's threshold and peered at the walls and ceiling. 'I cannot see it. Do you see it now? I have never been invited to view it, ever, and perhaps do not know what to look for.'

The old woman leaned toward the doorway cranking her head this way and that. Bending at the waist to get a better view, she said, 'I cannot cross over now without disturbing it. I cannot see it anywhere, but it can hide, under the table, under the chairs, in the corners on the floor. It is like water and seems to flow and even spill, as it moves.'

The priest stepped away from the kitchen door and looked at the old woman. Her eyes were bright with anticipation and faith, her mouth pursed with determination. She whispered, 'It will not hurt you. You are a man. It dare not hurt you for you are a man of God! This spirit must go from this place today.' She gently pressed her hand against his back but withdrew her hand immediately. The coarseness of the robe disturbed her and she had never touched the priest's body before, only his hands at times of blessing or supplication.

He moved cautiously into the kitchen to stand in the middle of the room and slowly turn all the way around inspecting the ceiling and floors, the cupboards and stove. The sun beamed through the place where the shutters did not quite fit together. Uncannily the beam on the floor formed a vivid cross of bright white. This reassured the priest and he began to remove the tools from his robe that he had brought for the job he had come to do.

The old woman knelt on the floor outside the doorway silently reciting the plan even though it was already successfully in motion. She watched the priest preparing his books, papers, bowl, and water which he placed on the floor below the sunlight cross. She mouthed a prayer for protection, as he pulled a small ornately decorated silver coffin from his robe. She mouthed another prayer for success, and trembled.

The donkey was unsettled as she clipped along the road with the old man in his cart. Any little noise or movement in the shrubs from the breeze or a lizard spooked her. The old man clicked and cooed at her to calm her. 'There, there Jenny. Steady there my girl...' but she jerked and lurched and chaffed at the harnesses.

The grandfather was having misgivings about the purpose of this trip. There was no particular reason for him to have to travel this long way at this time. There were no baptisms scheduled, or holidays that required such a fine and expensive drink. He thought about his

wife's sweet affection that morning as he was leaving and felt the mild stirring of rejection.

Jenny suddenly swerved and he was nearly thrown from the cart. She looked back down the dirt road in the direction from which they had travelled. She snorted and nodded her head several times.

The old man got out of the little cart to calm her. He rubbed her forehead and played with her coarse stiff forelock. She still tried to look beyond him toward the village as he ran his hands up each of her long ears. 'You want to go home, do you?' he said in a low voice. 'What do you need back there, Jenny?' As he said this, he glanced back and stopped; his hands dropped to his sides. A cloud, a monster of a cloud, was rising creating a massive wall between the village and the Red Hills. The top of it appeared to have formed a limb that was reaching towards the edge of the village where the big house sprawled.

The grandfather leapt into the cart and whipped the harnesses against the donkey's back. She shied from what she saw ahead, and tried to turn away. But the man's forceful urging and a hard slap to her rump got her moving rapidly toward home. Between his desperate shouts at the donkey the man muttered over and over, 'My wife, my wife! What are you doing? What have you done?' The man and donkey were terrified.

The priest sat quietly on the kitchen floor. His materials were in order. He needed a moment to get his mind in order. The preparation had been uneventful; the shadow had not appeared. He kept his eyes away from the old woman though his peripheral vision could not avoid seeing her fluttering lips. He wanted to tell her to leave, or at least to keep every part of her slight body - her lips, her trembling fingers, her darting eyes - still, so that he could concentrate on faith and power and the implications of the ritual ahead; for he was still having misgivings about what he was undertaking. The old woman's determined insistence to keep it secret; the restricted timing; his own ambivalence about the value and efficacy of attempting to remove whatever it was without the wholehearted agreement of the family, played against his own re-established and reawakened spirituality. Even as he knelt on the floor in preparation for what he was about to attempt he was distracted by the irritation of the rough wool against his legs and across his back, and yet elated to be in such a trusted position.

As the priest placed his purple stole over his shoulders, the old woman leaned toward the doorway and nodding her approval and support. Her faith was strong. She knew that soon the house would be cleared of the mischief, relieving her granddaughters and their daughters forever for generations ahead. She felt the warmth of their future love and appreciation, and it

confirmed her resolve for she understood in her heart this moment was a pivotal one. She was changing the course of their futures and this change would generate stories that would be told about her long after she had died. She mouthed a prayer of gratitude and humbly asked that a special blessing at this special time be placed upon the women in her family. She bent all the way to the floor in surrender to the powers and events she had set in motion.

The cloud from the church bent closer to the house. Villagers were gathering here and there to comment on its height and shape. Its singularity caused suspicion among many of them. Its base in the church, its reach extending across the sky and towards the ground like an accusing finger, or grasping hand, excited comments about the hand of God. Some ran into the church to find the priest but only his anxious novice was there for he did not know where his mentor had gone and he did not have the experience to interpret or deal with such a strange phenomenon. He left in search of the priest.

The priest started the ritual. He called on God and the saints to rid the house of the spirit that possessed it. He lit candles and prayed over each one, calling on individual saints for assistance. He sprinkled holy water in the directions of the cross of Christ and the grandmother interpreted it as being at the crossroads and taking the right road at this junction in life. And as she thought this, her lips mouthing her prayers and her mind on dusty crossroads, the priest concentrated on drawing the power to cast the spirit out. His eyes were full of the symbol of the cross, the bright sunlight on the floor blinding him to all that was around him.

For around him was a shadow that had pulled itself across the ceiling and slowly dropped over the priest, and then the kitchen. The kitchen was full of it. The only bright thing was the cross on the floor. All the colours of the kitchen were dampened, and indeed, had the old woman and the priest been more aware, they would have seen the colour seeping from everything around them, even from themselves.

The girls' visit was abruptly finished when a neighbour burst through their cousin's front door jabbering about a cloud and the church and the big house. 'Your big house!' is what she said with her hands up high and fingers splayed in the direction of the house.

When they all ran outside, they saw that her fingers had imitated the cloud. The mother gave out one shriek and covered her mouth in shock. The cloud was slowly

descending over her house with thick misty fingers spread as if to grasp the whole thing. From her position in the village on the ground close to the church she could not see from where the cloud emanated. But a group huddling close by told her everything they had seen and all they had heard. The mother gathered her girls together and took off for the house.

In the Red Hills the father and his sons were having trouble with their horses. These were well trained working ponies and they were not easily spooked. They had watched the cloud's determined rising from the time the priest had started his walk to the big house. So had the men. It was not until the horses began neighing and snorting, and stomping their feet, and then one and another reared up with rolling eyes, that the men began to understand that there was trouble in the village. As they turned their horses to gallop home they realized that the Trouble was bending down close to their own house; they kicked their horses hard in the sides and shouted at them as if they were cattle.

The donkey was terrified and foaming at the mouth. As they approached the square by the church, the old man dropped the harnesses and leapt from the cart. Poor Jenny turned from the place and finally came to rest under an arbutus shrub where she was hidden from the frightening menace.

The grandfather approached the open doors of the church.

The father and his young men rode desperately past the stables and through the garden

The mother and her girls approached the blue door of the big house.

The grandmother held her breath as the priest gently lifted the casket with the bits of bones and dried skin, the unholy relics of Carlo Herrera, the mad man who had passed himself off as a priest.

While Tandy, who had somehow slipped away from her mother and sisters, slowly walked below the cloud amongst the bewildered villagers in the direction of the church.

The priest spoke the prescribed words as he rose from his knees. This is when he realised that the colour had drained from himself and the room. He looked at the old grandmother and saw that she was even more pale and drab. But he continued with the ceremony, and proceeded to touch the walls and floor with the casket using the name of Carlo

Herrera to cast out the spirit of the kitchen.

The cloud closed around the house and filled it with mist. The mother and her daughters opened the door to a house full of cloud so thick it tumbled out like grey whipped cream. In the mist they heard the thickened sound of the grandmother weeping and the priest still intoning his ritual. 'Come' the mother said to her girls. 'Tandy is not here!' they replied. 'We must go without her,' she said. She linked hands with her girls and waded through the mist to where the grandmother huddled against the wall outside the kitchen.

They lifted her and carried her with them into the kitchen where the priest persisted. Then they caught him in the fog and threw him out of this place where he did not belong.

But it was not over yet.

The grandfather found the church was empty and hazy with black smoke. He could not find fire but as he raced from place to place looking for the cause, he saw his petite granddaughter silhouetted in the church's entrance. As she stepped toward him the floor rumbled. 'Yes. She is of our line,' the old man said slowly. He reached for her and lifted her. She held him around the neck and hid her face in his shoulder. 'It is as of old,' he said softly. But the floor rumbled again, so he shouted, 'It is as of old! Our place is your place. Our bloodline, yours, too. It shall continue as always, as before.'

The father and his sons arrived at the house as the cloud poured from the windows and doors, and pulled back into the sky rushing over the village to the church where it sank and dissolved. They saw the dispirited priest walking away down the dirt road. They found the women in the kitchen where the grandmother sat straight and unrepentant and indignant while her daughter stood beside her, arms crossed, glaring in disbelief. 'I have done nothing wrong,' the old woman said. 'If you had left the priest alone to finish his work, this house would be free of your vile spirit!'

As the priest moved on toward the church he watched the tips of his dusty shoes peek out from the edge of his cassock as he walked. His spirituality lay sluggish and heavy within him, deflated by the attack of the entity, with barely a spark of movement. He had grown increasingly anxious as the exorcism of the house had progressed. It was not so much an anxiety of lack of faith but more the nervousness of being out of one's own territory – not even out of his depth – but out of his place and away from his purpose. As he held the relics

of Carlo Herrera he became fully aware that what he was doing had nothing to do with the church, and that this visitor in this kitchen was as integral to this family, this house and the land that it was on, as the materials the house was built from, or the blood that flowed through the hearts and lungs of those who lived there.

And yet, fully awakened to this knowledge, he continued to command the spirit to leave and pressed the relics of a dead man, of who very little was known and who somehow had interacted with this being before, against the structure of its sanctuary: the walls of the kitchen. He did not understand the full mystery of it, but he was certain the old man knew more than he himself had intuited.

He wondered about a spirit that threatened his concept of an all powerful god. He wondered at himself that in only two weeks he had gone from being a complacent priest to one with inspired and invigorated spirituality, and now a man in spiritual crisis. He was tempted to believe that this was the work of an evil entity that pressed on his soul and caused doubt and anguish to save itself from banishment and destruction. But then he remembered that sudden knowledge of territory, and he knew that it had to do with something else, and that is was not evil but an ancient fact of the formation of the land and endurance of the family that had become part of it.

He had been shocked at the forcefulness of the women as they moved against him and cast him out of the house. The mists had been so thick he was at first alarmed that perhaps the spirit had taken on physical forms. But he heard the old woman whimpering next to him and then crying to the others to stop their intrusions. They worked without her as a united force and lifted him through the mists. He heard the old woman following, her voice shrieking and angry, and he said nothing.

As he tumbled from the house he felt relieved. When he finally stood up, he faced away from the house and walked, without looking back, at the place where it stood enveloped in the mists.

Throughout his introspective walk back into the village he had been under the shadow of the cloud. He had not noticed until it receded and the sun suddenly lit his path. He noticed villagers looking in the direction of the church where the last of the cloud was evaporating. And he began to wonder, again, at the origins of the cloud and why it had reached over the village to envelope the house. What had the church to do with the entity at the house?

In the road ahead, coming from the church, was the grandfather with his diminutive granddaughter. He held Tandy's hand protectively, and directed her to the side of the road in

a way that made it clear that the priest was not to approach her.

‘I did not know,’ the priest said. The grandfather looked straight ahead. Tandy tried to peek around to glimpse the priest, but her grandfather adroitly blocked her. He kept his steady pace as they walked through the village to the big house, and he felt sad as he thought of all that had been disrupted, and perhaps, forever lost, because of the meddling of his little old wife.

More single stories:

Garden Improvements

Lilly's back garden is a wonder of intense Kelly greens and deep viridians. Her flowers take on luminous tones and hues, and when the sun splashes morning light upon them, they shimmer brilliantly. It is in this foliage, in the recesses of her warm garden, that she likes to lift her full, long skirts, squat and pee. She has no secrets the garden does not know.

The garden is edged by a hidden fence, a trickling brook and Lilly's house. The fence is quite old and has been engulfed by lilacs, crocosmia, forget-me-nots, and old climbing roses. When the brook gargles down to a trickle in summer it smells damp, like old frogs and cucumber peelings. Lilly's house is always being painted. It takes her nearly two years to paint around to where she started. The window frames are bright yellow and the door is periwinkle blue. She likes the smell of oil-based paint.

When it's a warm day, and the sunlight goes about stealthily chasing shadows, the fresh air becomes a stew pot of scents: Victorian roses, cut grass, lilacs, rich earth, carnations, paint, and the brook, all spiced subtly with the smell of Lilly.

One autumn day Lilly was sanding her front door in preparation for a good painting: royal blue this time, she was thinking. She saw a person approaching her house but the man abruptly left the road and cut across the field toward the brook. The water was low at that time of year; the first rains hadn't fallen. The brook's drying bed made a footpath that people from town sometimes followed. Children, in particular, liked to spend hours exploring there and, as they played or walked, the noises of them flowed into Lilly's garden.

Lilly stopped sanding and went to her back garden to see where the man had gone. She would be able to watch the man through the thick shrubbery without being watched back. Few people knew the garden was there.

She listened for his footsteps along the creek bed and all she heard was a robin chirping in an earnest search for an equally chirpy cricket. She peeked through a sparse place in the lilac leaves.

He wasn't there.

She moved to the crooked gate that had been there long before she and her lover had come to the house. They were so young and loved the garden with the scraggled oak tree that guarded the apex. She unlatched the gate, and pulled it open.

It did not creek on its old hinges. Lilly always kept them oiled and if anyone noticed

they would have been surprised to see that for such an ancient gate, the hinges were wholly without tarnish.

She peeked around into the creek bed where minute gnats flew in a clump over a bit of mud. She sniffed and smelled old frogs and cucumber peelings, and pushed the gate closed. As she pulled up her skirts in preparation for a little relief, she turned and bumped straight into the man.

‘Oh!’ she said clutching her skirts.

‘You have a lovely garden,’ he said.

She dropped her skirts. ‘Yes. Thank you. But who are you?’

‘I am William Hutchinson. *Will* is what most people call me,’ he nodded.

‘Yes. But what are you doing here?’ she asked. She stood straighter and squared herself to him.

He looked around at the foliage and the grass and the house. He was a head taller than Lilly with narrow shoulders and straight, black hair on his arms. His blue plaid shirt sleeves were rolled to just above his elbows where his biceps began to swell.

He looked at Lilly’s greying hair and his eye strayed along a thick strand that curled where it touched her shoulder. ‘I’m looking for work,’ he said. ‘You have a garden that looks like it could use some clearing. And I noticed you were sanding your door. I can paint.’

‘I like my garden the way it is,’ Lilly said. ‘There’s no work for you here.’

‘Surely there must be some work I could do for you...’

‘What makes you think I have money lying around for work that I don’t need doing?’ she said. ‘There’s no work here for you.’

He folded his arms and leaned back a little at the waist. He looked at the top of Lilly’s head and then at her skirt by her hip. He looked at the gate and squinted.

‘You need to go now,’ Lilly said as she walked to the gate and pulled it open. ‘Right now.’

He looked around her garden one more time, turned around and walked out the way he had come.

‘Be seein’ ya,’ he said. He looked back at Lilly’s front door as he walked down the road.

She bit her lip as he went. She pushed her old gate closed, and latched and locked it - something she rarely did - and went back to work on her front door.

The afternoon was warm and it seemed a shame to shut the house up when the fresh

air was so swollen with aroma of the Autumnal harvest. Lilly rested on her couch. As evening settle in, the air cooled, and the smells receded. The air went chilly and the odor of oil-based paint, mixed with the crispness of the approaching winter, sat quietly in Lilly's house.

Lilly woke slowly to a dark and cold house.

She rolled off of her couch and wrapped herself in the worn quilted patchwork throw she had made when she was young and had gone through a patchwork phase. It had been preceded by a macramé phase and followed by a granny square and crochet phase. Her house displayed the results of all of her phases, even the mourning phase, which Lilly had never been able to put away, as others she knew had. To Lilly's mind, every phase in her life was evidence of her involvement with living, and grieving was what living people did.

The only constants in Lilly's living were the garden and the house. They were perpetual; they were without phase. Her best time was spent maintaining and nourishing the garden. She cared for the house as if it were a lover.

She switched on the alabaster floor lamp in the corner of the room which set a low, coppery glow through the room. She lit the fire she had set that morning and climbed the stairs to the dark upper floor. She knew her house like the curves and creases of her hands and feet, and she didn't need to see to move through it.

Upstairs in the dark she lifted her skirts to lower herself onto the toilet but she caught herself, sniffed, tilted her head and stiffened. She moved quietly back to the door and as she was passing through she felt a hand against her back. She ducked and jumped around into the hallway, and stood still against the wall.

'Hey, old lady,' a man said. 'Are you sure you don't have any work for me? I could really help you out.'

Lilly crept to the stairs. She was two steps down when the bathroom light splashed on and she was awash in ambient light. She saw William Hutchinson silhouetted above her on the landing.

'Where you going?' he asked.

She tried to run but lost her balance and fell against the banister. He jumped down the stairs after her. His fingers locked in her hair and as he yanked her back he growled, 'You're not going anywhere.'

She fought. She pulled against her hair and left him with a handful of silver strands. She lunged toward him and knocked him down; he was above her on the stair and she punched his crouch and stomped his shins. He tried to stand but Lilly smashed his knee with

her shoulder and he fell forward over her, and down the stairs. He grabbed her as he went but Lilly held onto the banister and kicked his hand where he held onto her ankle.

They worked quietly. They worked hard and expended their energy with their bodies and through gritted teeth.

And then he screamed, 'You old fucking bitch!' and he let go, but as Lilly cocked her knee to climb, she heard him catch his balance on the stairs and hunch against them like a lizard, belly flat, elbows up, creeping.

She scrambled and felt a drag on the edges of her skirts. Air slid under her skirts and up her to her thighs; she dug her feet into the steps. She clung to the top newel post as she swung around onto the landing and glanced back to see his hand reaching for her, the tips of his stumpy fingers gleaming on a black shadow hand.

Lilly ran into her bedroom and locked the door. She heaved open the sash window and was sliding out onto the roof when the door blasted open and William Hutchinson strode in.

'Not so fast!' he yelled.

She let go of the windowsill as his fingers brushed hers, and she scurried along the roof in the dark. She heard him climbing through the window, but he stopped and climbed back into the house. She heard thumping down the stairs. Crashing and smashing ensued; clubbing, ramming, splintering and Lilly held her skirts over her ears and cried. The tumult stopped.

She watched the night sky full of stars and a sliver of moon and wondered what to do. She listened for his footsteps, or for doors opening or closing. The night was quiet, an owl screeched, and Lilly wrapped her skirts up around her hips and tucked them between her legs as she squatted on her roof.

She was leaning against a dormer, which would have put her in shadow if there had been a fuller moon. She was in darker darkness, and it seemed to her that that was the safest place to stay for the time being. She started to shiver and thought of the warmth of the chimney, but knew that if she moved that man would surely hear her creeping over the roof.

As she shivered her bladder began to ache and Lilly finally pulled her skirts back. She heard trickling on the roof and into the guttering. The warmth of it consoled her but she smelled an unaccustomed scent and wondered if this is what wild animals noticed when they smelled fear.

The temperature of the night air dropped, and a tiny breeze swept up and over the

house. Lilly tucked her skirts and made herself into a tight shivering ball. She wondered what that man was doing, and she thought of the man who she had loved the house with when she was young.

She had missed him when he had gone. But she had worked through all of that during one of her phases, and what she did now, when she thought of him, was remember those first days. They were vivid, sensual bundles of sensation. The colours still bright and intense: Lilly conjured his scent, felt his fingertips, heard his murmur. She tasted the first apple they had eaten from their tree. Each bundle of sensation linked to another until she might complete a sequence of memories, but most often she immersed herself in one tiny moment of their passion or affection.

Something slammed on the guttering on the other side of the house. Lilly unwrapped herself and climbed over to her bedroom window. It was locked. She tried the window beside it. It was locked too. She saw the beam of a flashlight skittering above her and heard the groans and creaks of her old wooden ladder under the weight of the man. The guttering rattled. Lilly lay on her belly and inched over the shingles until she was at the edge of the roof. The low roof of the kitchen was below her. In the dark it looked like black velvet.

‘One, two, three,’ she whispered and in one move pushed her legs over the side to fall to the roof. The roof was rough and scraped her knees and elbows as she landed. She banged her head, and scraped that, too. But the roof was old, and gave a little as she landed.

Lilly rolled to the edge and lay still, listening. Her shivers had gone. All quiet. Then the scrape of a boot from above and the beam of the light passed across the bedroom windows. More scraping, and Lilly rolled over the edge as the beam moved down in her direction.

She landed face-down in the cold dewy grass with one of her arms pinned under her. She bit her lip and rolled to free it. She cried out, and pulled herself up as pain enveloped her shoulder. She hobbled through her garden and around the house to where the man was coming down the ladder, and she lunged against it. The ladder fell back and William Hutchinson crashed into the tangled old shrubs beside the house.

Lilly stumbled into her house, bolted her doors, and screamed into her skirts until she couldn't scream anymore. Her phone was the only thing still attached to the kitchen walls.

The dawn arrived with the police cars. Coloured lights flashed through Lilly's windows and whirled around her walls. She unbolted her door and stood before them, bloody, dislocated and triumphant. ‘He fell over there somewhere,’ she waved at her shrubs.

‘He’s there alright,’ said a policeman.

The man groaned

‘Get him out of here,’ said Lilly. ‘He’s stinking up my garden.’

As she rode to the hospital, Lilly watched the morning brighten. She conjured the last time she held her lover. She, on her knees in the shadows pulling weeds, her patchwork skirts spread wide around her. He, shirtless in the sunlight at the base of the old oak, tugging a rope to dislodge a rotten limb. She sits up and, as she wipes her earthy hand across her sweaty cheek, watches the limb break loose and swing gracefully into her lover’s head. She chokes on the cloud of fungus, moss, and rotting sawdust that filters from the tree. In the sunbeams it sparkles like flakes of gold.

Lilly holds him carefully in her lap, wrapped in her skirts. ‘We shouldn’t have tried to improve the garden,’ she whispers. ‘It was lovely the way it was.’

Connecting with the Curb

Allen has been watching from across the street for about an hour. He spots what he's been waiting for and jogs across the street; the traffic avoids him. He deliberately collapses to his knees, his knees connecting with the curb, his toes curled forward in the tips of his shoes in the gutter, and there he proposes. Marriage, to Mary Ellen, whispers of secrets and habits, but as she looks down on him there on the curb a cab pulls over and deposits a dainty old man right against the heels of Allen's crushed toes.

Allen says again, 'Mary Ellen, will you marry me?' and extends a little square box that pillows a white gold ring.

The old man tip-toes past them to make his purchases in the pharmacy. She watches his delicate, precise footsteps and clutches her empty shopping bags against her middle. 'I haven't got my make up on, Allen,' she says.

'Your make-up?' Allen looks up to her face, scans across her nose and glances at her lips. 'That doesn't matter, does it? You're fine without make-up.' He speaks louder to compensate for the traffic noise behind him. 'I want you to marry me not put your make up on!'

'I can't answer right now,' she says. 'I need to do the shopping and put my make-up on, and then maybe we can talk about it.' A pigeon lands in the gutter near to Allen and pecks at something there. It eyes Allen's box, cocking its head side-to-side, and struts backwards and forwards. Allen stands up and the bird flaps off, alarmed.

'You don't want this?' he says and extends the box again. He closes the lid and tries to put it in her hand.

'I don't know,' she answers. 'I don't want it right now.' She flaps her hand at it and moves away.

'I can help with the shopping,' he says but Mary Ellen waves her bags at him as she turns away and then hugs them tight as she moves down the sidewalk.

'I thought this would make her happy,' Allen mutters at the box. He watches Mary Ellen's rounded shoulders swaying in the pedestrian flow. He's still watching as he turns from the curb to cross the street. This time the traffic does not avoid him. This time he is struck three times by three separate cars. As he passes out he stares at the tiny wooden box that has bounced up to the curb. He doesn't notice his blood.

Allen's monumental strength, which on some men would look like symmetrically

organized landscapes of arid hills and valleys, is hidden under lax swathes of fat. He appears sedentary and lumpy; and this, tripled with thin flat hair and arms that seem too long for the rest of him, gives him the appearance of an oaf. Lying on the road, with blood seeping out of him, he looks like some fairytale creature that has come to nought, like the beanstalk giant fallen from the sky.

As Mary Ellen puts her shopping bags under his head he whispers, 'What happened?'

'You got hit when you went to cross the street,' she says.

'Will you marry me now?' he says, and passes out again.

The old man climbs back into his cab as an ambulance pulls up to collect Allen. He hesitates before closing the door, leans out slightly gripping the door handle, to look at the man in the street, and the pale woman bending over him. 'Poor guy really took some hits!' the cab driver says. 'He was flyin' around the road like a pinball. Where you headed?'

Mary Ellen watches the cab pull away as the paramedics get out of the ambulance. She watches Allen's eyes moving around under half-closed lids. She wonders what would have happened if she had suddenly hopped into the cab with the old man, gotten away from this place, this street. She picks up the ring box, opens the lid and slides the ring onto her finger.

The paramedics are working hard over Allen, putting in drips, shining lights into his eyes, cutting off his clothes, listening to his chest. They talk to the driver who is radioing the hospital. The flow of people on the sidewalk has dammed up, and only a tiny trickle passes on around. But they don't move in close. They balance and bump around on the edge of the curb as the paramedics lift Allen into the ambulance. They try to get a clear view of the equipment inside.

'You can ride up front with me,' the driver says to Mary Ellen.

She looks at the shiny sliver of metal encircling her finger, and says, 'Oh, no thank you. I'll put on some make up and drive myself over.'

The driver frowns and drums the steering wheel. 'Suit yourself. FYI we're taking him to St. John's.' She turns on the siren and the flashing lights, and eases the ambulance across the road, picking up speed as the vehicles part to let them pass. The pedestrians move on and Mary Ellen squats to gather up her shopping bags.

The cab drops the old man at 2363 Oak Street, a tidy, cedar shingled house next to the

new fire station. The new fire station is actually eighty years old but with perpetual retro fitting has taken on an appearance beyond timelessness, much like the old man whose daintiness appears to be agility on someone who is beyond it.

Gregory is his name. A name his mother gave him with the consent of his father after she had agreed not to report on paternal lineage. She took a large deposit of money with the understanding that periodically there would be more, equally sufficient amounts, to keep herself and Gregory comfortable. She never married; hence, 2363 Oak Street held Gregory and his mother as the original and, for years, only occupants.

That is until Gregory mistakenly married and quickly divorced and, during and after, had a succession of intimate friends: male. All coming and going until Gregory's mother went to stay at St. Mary's of the Constant Heart; that would be in the church yard.

There was an incident as she was being carried in her box. The pallbearers were men of various ages, most of them Gregory's friends. As they approached the curb, having left the hearse across the street, an elderly gentleman abruptly stepped forward from the church gate and knelt before them. He cried, 'Angelica, please forgive me! I now seek your hand in marriage!' The pallbearers at the back, unaware of the disturbance, continued to press forward; the pallbearers at the front had stalled in astonishment. Gregory walked beside the group, and although he was aware of the peculiarity of the elderly gentleman's gesture, he was more aware of the tremendous mound of flowers that crested his mother's coffin. They were slipping and the box was tipping, until two of the pallbearers feet smashed against the curb. The two men fell forward while still trying to support Angelica's box. They effectively brought it down on everyone, including the elderly gentleman.

Gregory was only caught in the periphery of the tumble. In his sprightly way he sprang to his feet, slapped the dust from his black pin-striped suit, and darted around the moaning mess of men and scattered flowers to the head of the group. The man was face down, his head crushed on the curb, Angelica's box having given a succinct reply to his requests. There was a tiny trickle of blood in the gutter, and a fine film of dust muted the shine of his freshly polished shoes.

Gregory only rarely thinks of his mother's funeral now; he has recently made arrangements for his own. What he has seen today brings it full to mind. He wonders about the young woman with the shopping bags. He ponders the man kneeling on the curb then lying in the street. In his mind the two images become linked and move backwards and forwards in a loop of kneeling and falling. As Gregory sorts and arranges his various

medications for the week, he wonders if he will ever see her again.

Head Bashing in the Summer Sun

Tucker Jones bashed his head with a compressor. His crew had just turned the thing off as it was getting late, and time to sweep up a bit, and then have a pint before going home. The compressor was still hot. And even though the large part, the engine or motor, was insulated, when he tripped forward and bashed it, his forehead sizzled. It sizzled right through all the white powder Tucker was covered in, and then the sizzling spot split open and spurted blood.

We can't see that yet. Tucker Jones is still inside the Lion where he has been doing a remodel with the crew.

Pam Swanson didn't see it either, but she heard the ambulance, and since she and her kids were right there on the High Street anyway, they waited around to see the goings on. The Lion is not on the High Street. The Lion, where Tucker Jones was having a brilliant bleed, is around the corner from the Sweeties Shop which was at that moment emptying all its customers into the high street. Three were Pam's kids.

The High Street in the village is a narrow affair. The ambulance was making all the loudest noises, and flashing all its brightest lights, but it was mostly standing still because Mrs Morys, who is slow moving and hard of hearing, was in the Post Office trying to decide which post card to send to her nephew who was spending the summer in Canada. She had a generous car parking style which left plenty of room around her car on all four sides for pedestrians, motorbikes and bicycles.

Not for ambulances.

There is a bright spot, a terraced place, next to the tourist information office across the street from the Lion. In this place, at that time of the afternoon, men gather when the sun is shining, to have their pints. When Tucker Jones whacked the compressor, quite a few men had already gathered. They had gone into the Lion, shuffled through the dust passed the compressor to the bar, gotten their pints and walked across the street to stretch in the sun. And then Tucker Jones swore and somebody yelled, 'Bloody hell mate! What a fucking lot of blood!' A woman with a mobile ran out. She was looking for a signal, which is a thing that can be hard to find in our compacted village where all the houses have walls of granite three feet thick. She persisted and found her signal and dialled 999.

The men rose in unison. They held their pint glasses at right angles to their bodies, from their elbows. They were all of one position: bodies directly facing the building opposite, but faces turned slightly up the road to watch the Lion. They were like a family of meercats

up on hind legs, one or the other twitching a glance in whatever direction but all really intent upon the Lion.

When the ambulance got stuck, someone thought to look for Mrs Morys. There was a fracas in the Post Office and then Ed Jenkins emerged and trotted to her car and moved it up the high street. Mrs Morys stood at the Post Office door with her mouth open as if she had turned to stone in mid sentence. Perhaps she had. Ed had wrested her car keys off her in his usual straight forward way and Mrs Morys was not likely to have gotten all soft and cuddly about this. Ah, well. We are no strangers to Mrs Morys's stoniness.

About the time the ambulance got situated in front of the Lion, Tucker Jones staggered out. He was powdered white except for a lumpy bleeding place on his forehead and a spectacular splash of dark red down the front of his dusty white t- shirt. He was staggering with the aid of the woman who had phoned 999 and who was shouting soothingly, 'You should not be walking! You must wait for the paramedics! You are still losing blood!'

Everybody, the kids and folks on the high street, the men on Meercat Terrace, shopkeepers standing at their doors, made a gentle movement at Tucker like the quiet lapping of a receding tide. The ambulance men jumped out and took hold of him. They led him straight back into the Lion.

'Wicked! Deadly!' said the kids, for Tucker Jones's blood had now been seen by all. One of Pam's sons sicked-up his sweeties, as he would do, for he has always been of a delicate sort.

'Who is he? I don't know him' said Pam to the woman at the sandwich shop.

'He's not from around here but he has relations in Dolgellau, he says. He was raised over in Merseyside, he says. He's just here for the remodel, he says.'

'Imagine bashing your head with a compressor!'

'To bash your thumb with a hammer is one thing, but to bash your head with a compressor! That's just bad luck!' said the sandwich shop woman.

Mrs Morys was unobtrusively making her way down the high street to her car.

One paramedic came out of the Lion and opened the back doors to the ambulance. The gurney inside looked as if someone and their special friend had spent a vigorous three minutes on it. The paramedic did a double-take, chuckled, pulled on his latex gloves and made the gurney tidy. Then he removed it from the van, and parked it against the curb.

The men with their pints were again starting to relax on the terraced place. Their pints glowed amber in the late afternoon sunlight, and projected golden halos onto their chests and

faces.

Mrs Morys opened her car door and picked up the keys where Ed Jenkins had tossed them on the seat. In her handbag she held numerous postcards of Snowdon and Cadair Idris and Portmeirion. She had decided not to purchase them owing to the distraction of all with regard to Tucker Jones's head bashing.

Pam Swanson signalled her children with clicking sounds. They grouped together and crossed the street to afford themselves a clearer view of the happenings. The men in the sun watched them uniformly in their riveted meercat manner.

Mrs Morys drove past a little too quickly.

Tucker Jones emerged from the Lion on foot again. He refused to be carried to the ambulance. He had a compression bandage wrapped round his head that protruded over one eye. His hair was still full of dust and blood and looked like the top of a well-made meringue. He still staggered a little. 'I need a pint!' he yelled as he fell over on the tidied gurney. A fine cloud of dust rose from him and delineated several sunbeams.

We cheered.

There's Nothing to See

Up ahead is the corner where it happened. I follow the uniformed PCs up the high street to the place that has been taped off, sequestered, set aside for their inspection. There are blotches of blood splattered here and there marking a path to the cordoned area and then we duck under the suspended yellow line. We are inside the temporary sanctuary where some of the officers, like priests focusing on a ritual, are placing placarded numbers by a puddle of blood, a broken shoelace, a pair of bent glasses with unbroken lenses, a lone button; all relics of what is left of the night's violence.

There's nothing to see inside here, really, that we couldn't have seen out there. The shoelace limply sprawls like a lost worm. It doesn't have a direction and might not even have a purpose, if it doesn't belong to the person whose blood is close by it. The mangled glasses don't appear any more or less mangled now that we are standing inside the yellow police line. But of course, it's not to enhance the viewing of the objects, this special place, but to preserve them as they landed to stimulate imaginations to re-create the moment when Raymond Curtis was finally thrown to the ground after being beaten then dragged from his house and up the street.

Just an old man, slightly hunched, not much, who washes his hair every Sunday morning before he goes to church; eats a roast dinner afterwards with his daughter and grandchildren; and always re-hangs his suit and dress shirt as soon as he returns home in the late afternoon. This is to air it for next Sunday.

His attacker(s) may have lost the shoelace, or perhaps the button, but not the glasses. Those are Raymond's, and he has had the same frames for 35 years. His wife picked them for him for their practicality – sturdy metal frames – and their shape which she said suited Raymond's sharp jaw line and broad forehead. He's told me this often, and he always follows it with another story of how a misguided optician had suggested to Raymond he should seriously think about updating his glasses. And Raymond told him that he seriously had better not suggest such an idiotic thing again because his Clara had chosen those frames for him with the intention that they should last a very long time; that their conservative design was also an enduring design.

Now, we all know that Clara was a practical and prudent woman, but we also know that Raymond cannot stand the thought of losing anymore of Clara than he already has. If he were to see those glasses, bent, lying on the ground with a tiny spray of blood across one

lens, he would panic and mourn, and he might even swear or curse, because Raymond is a man of feelings.

I say to the PC nearest me, 'He'll be needing his glasses. Mind of I take them now?' But the PC is reluctant - how could he know the extent of Raymond's attachment - and says 'They're bent to no return. He won't be able to see through them. Besides, from what I've heard of his injuries, he wouldn't be able to use them anyway. Why don't you just leave them here a while longer?' But his question isn't a request or suggestion.

I feel a hand pressing on the small of my back and turn to look down at my friend and neighbour Susan. Her diminutive face looks concerned and tips up towards mine although she isn't really looking at me. 'I've been to the hospital, David,' she says. 'He won't be needing them.'

But I have been to the hospital too and I don't think that's the point anyway. Isn't there enough blood, don't they have enough of the pattern of last night, all numbered up, and recorded, without having to keep this little mangled part of Raymond, tipped in the road with grit and stains, in plain view?

'I'm sure they'll take care of it,' Susan says. She gives my jacket a little tug and I duck under the tape and into the outer world. 'They'll make sure he gets them.'

This incident, this beating of Raymond, is the sort of incident you hear on the news for only a day or two because it just won't hold attention for long. It holds more meaning when it's personal: your town, your father, your neighbour. I walk with Susan up the street, absentmindedly following the drops of Raymond's blood, until cognition sparks. The drops look as if they have fallen from a high place, or as if gravity had gotten too intense for them and smashed them against the asphalt. 'They look to have landed hard!' I say to Susan. 'He is on blood thinners,' she says. 'Maybe that had something to do with it.'

The bloody trail veers up a narrow footpath between houses. At the end of the path is Raymond's open door and another uniformed PC stands guard. There is movement inside the house, shadows slowly pacing, some standing still. Raymond's daughter's face is illuminated for an instant, by the early morning light, as she peeks out of the door over the PC's shoulder. She's puffy but her eyes are not red. Just puffy and serious edged with disbelief.

We walk on, and I wonder where we are going but I cannot seem to ask out loud. We walk the street as the morning ages. The sun tries to warm the day through the haze but the air just seems breathless and chilly, and I am trembling within myself. We walk to the edge of town and look over the hill, across the valley, to the darker hills at the other side. 'I'm not

sure what to do,' I say to Susan.

I tremble more and more and then I cannot see the hills anymore, or the valley. I cannot even see Susan. I know she is saying something but I don't know what and I don't even care what. There's a terrible low rumbling in my gut and chest. My gut hurts like there's a clamp on it, tightening, crushing. The rumble in my chest rises and suddenly there is shouting – sustained and vicious – plunging into the air, pummelling the valley and striking at the distant hills. Then there's silence. Every bird, insect, even Susan, gone very quiet. Are they frightened? Are they waiting for more?

There isn't any more. There is only the slow sound of Susan's fingers lightly caressing my jacket at the small of my back.

How You Sounded That Last Time

In the dark her voice sounded severe. I could only see as far as the phone and hear as far as her voice. “I heard you,” she said. “I heard how you sounded that last time you called.”

The last time I called? When was the last time I had called her? I traced and sorted through bits of memories, trying to remember what I had said the last time we had spoken. Had I been drinking and called her, and then put some unsavoury conversation out of my head? In the dark, I thought I saw her mouth moving just beyond the receiver. The darkness around the phone had feathered edges as if it could be blown away with a puff of breath. Realization came with the building conviction that we had not spoken. And yet, the severity of her voice unnerved me.

I wake up. This morning my tea tastes as if it has gone rancid, my clothes feel wrong, and I drive to work in what seems to be a giant matt painting in a sound stage. *Quiet! Quiet everyone! O-kay. Take 13 – Driving to Work. And...Action!*

‘You alright, Lori?’ That was the voice of Richard as he watched me struggling with my shoes this morning.

‘I dreamed her voice last night.’

‘Just her voice?’

‘Yes. I dreamed it was coming from the telephone, and I could see her lips moving in the dark.’

‘That gives me the creeps!’

‘She said she had heard how I sounded.’

Richard came to me and I couldn’t look at him. He hugged me and petted my hair. My cheek pushed against his shoulder and he smelled of soap and hair conditioner. I stared at the wardrobe and thought about the feathery nature of darkness.

‘Should you take the morning off?’

‘No. I’d just mope around. I’ll go,’ I said.

But, as I sit in front of my monitor trying to remember what I am supposed to be doing on my project, her dream voice is in my head. “I heard how you sounded.”

How could she have heard anything? We hadn’t spoken. We had stood there; that’s all we’d done. We glanced at each other and waited our turn to get our baskets cashed out, and bagged. Two middle aged women buying the supplies for supper. She wore practical, low, black shoes and mine were high and red.

“I heard...”

I can't think and leave my office for a quick walk around the block. I forget to change from heels to flats. The sidewalks around the office are cracking and lifting from the roots of the Sycamore that line the road. It is winter; the trees are leafless and their empty limbs looked like swollen arms reaching with groping emaciated fingers toward the sky. The sky is blue and bright. But I think I see feathered darkness at the edges. My heels are a disability on this terrain, and I trip and scuff along the sidewalk straining to listen to something other than

“...how you sounded...”

I never heard her, not even afterward, but for that tiny half second after I knew what she wanted. How could she have heard anything from me? Unless, she meant she heard me talking on my cell phone as I left the store? I was first out. I glanced back and saw her poking in her pin at the register as I called Richard to tell him I was on my way home, to open a bottle of red, to flip on the oven. The twilight intensified the red of my shoes.

As I struggle back to my office the shadow of a bird, flying low overhead, crosses the ground ahead of me. I am unable to move across the invisible line it leaves. I watch the line and feel weak and sick. My shirt sleeves touch the insides of my arms. The smoothness is uncomfortable. Stuck there, watching, I hear her severe night voice speaking again and want to cry, ‘You couldn't have heard me! I couldn't hear you! I couldn't hear anything!’

“...that last time.”

There had been a violent, loud, crash: a moment of too many layers of sound filling every bit of air. And then, quiet, as if all the sound, every sound in the world, had been sucked away. I looked back as the windows blew from the shop but I didn't hear a thing. The tail of an airplane jutted out of the roof of the store. She had blown from the store like she was part of the splintering glass. She was burning and bleeding but she still rose up and reached at me. I watched her say, “Help me. Help me!”

I could not hear myself speak but I know what I said as I clenched my shopping

against my chest. 'I can't. You're dead.' Her eyes were wide and watering. She was frightened as she slumped over onto the shards of glass. There wasn't a sound.

I kneel on the sidewalk beside the shadow's line of flight, and as no one comes by, I sit on the sidewalk and then lay down on the mounds of the Sycamore roots. I kick off my useless shoes and I listen to her dream voice, and answer back. I tell her I might have been wrong, that she might be alright, because it sounds as if she might not be dead after all.

From here on the sidewalk the sky is so bright I can hardly look at it, but I keep my eyes open anyway. I keep them open so long they start to sting and water pools at the outside corners. The water trickles out and it chills as it dribbles into my hairline and across my scalp.

I Wonder How Long

Jesse, my builder, has hair as long as my daughter's, although his is brown. With hair that long, he has to tie it back to keep it out of the way as he saws and hammers, and shovels sand into the cement mixer. When he gets out of his pick-up in the morning he runs all of his fingers through that hair, starting right against his scalp. Then he grips it at the nape with one hand and with his other encircles the hair, three times, with a bright blue stretchy band.

He's been working on our place for three weeks and it's always the same routine. Get out of the pick-up, pull back the hair, survey yesterday's progress while smoking a fag, back to the pick-up to pick through the equipment and supplies piled there, and get to work.

After he gets to work I don't watch anymore. He seems to do something different everyday and I get uncomfortable when his morning routine stops. I watch from my window when he arrives, and sometimes he sees me as he gets out of his pick-up. 'Hello Ms Andrews' he says when he sees me, and he waves as he lifts his hands to his head. He has small hands but they're rough as planks of unsanded wood, like his palms might be surfaced with splinters.

My daughter's hair grows to just below her shoulder line; that's as long as she wants it to grow. She says it's as long as she ever dreamed it would get these days and she's happy with it. But I have watched her brushing it and I wonder how long it would be now if I had never cut it since she was born, or if they wouldn't have cut it in the hospital, if they had just done the repairs around it. Would that have been so bad?

'Rachel,' I have said to her. 'Wouldn't you like to grow it longer?' But she shrugs as she looks at her reflection in the black refrigerator door and says 'Just don't go there, Mom.'

So I nod to her hazy reflection, as if I agree, and I wonder *How can I not 'go there'?* Every time I see her hair, and especially when it's free from her head all tangled in a brush or matted in the shower drain, I feel as if I'm standing at the campsite again. And I'm there again, tidying the campsite, before we set off for another day of hiking.

Our site is near the cold rushing water and I listen to the river as it bangs some loose rocks against boulders. The water's cold because it's snowmelt and it rushes because the mountains above us are very high. And yet, where we have camped is high, right at the line where the trees start to grow stunted and their numbers dwindle.

It is an area where the numbers of people also dwindle. This place is beyond the day-hikers and the weekend campers. This place is where few pass by: where the river water is

exciting and invigorating, pumped with the violence of its journey down the mountain; where the mountains, woods and small meadows survive without the hindrance or assistance of people.

I gather up our food, the energy bars and dehydrated eggs, powdered milk, pack it away with the light aluminium pans and eating paraphernalia that are spread on a rock by the embers of the camp fire. Rachel and I will string the pack high between two trees where the bears won't get it. I shout to Rachel and she clunks over to me from wherever she's been. She shouts 'Mickey!' and her boyfriend lopes over from where Rachel has just been. As if I'm not going to notice they've been together, out of sight. We string the pack up on the line between two young conifers. They are trees strong enough to withstand a beating from bears, but not so sturdy looking so the bears will think twice about climbing them.

Rachel smooths her sleeping bag in the tent while I sweep the area for bits of food that might attract attention. Mickey douses the fire.

We lift our day packs and turn toward the river because today we will be hiking a path that runs along the river and into Jester Meadow where we've heard the mule deer come to congregate and graze.

The day is clear. There is no breeze but the air is chill and fresh. As we weave along the path around the tips of buried boulders, the trees become even sparser, until we are out of them and hiking in the bright sun under an enormous sky. The sky is so big it makes the mammoth mountains ahead of us look like piles of grey elephant dung. And this image, of an elephant sky meandering away from its excrement, makes me laugh out loud.

Rachel and Mickey are ahead of me. Rachel turns her head just enough to catch me in her peripheral vision. She keeps to her rhythm and smiles. 'What you laughing at Mom?' Mickey turns to get a good look and stumbles.

'Mountains like elephant dung.' They look around at the mountains and say 'he-he'. 'You have one weird way of seeing things,' Mickey says. 'Yes, she has!' says Rachel.

I have. And I'm at a point in my life where I don't seem to care what people think anymore about my way of seeing things. How Rachel's braided hair has frizzed and around her head there seems to be a golden halo. Hiking with an angel up ahead. How the water we hike beside has a certain blackness in its depths, and a transparency, that makes me feel like crying from the pain of trying to look at it for too long.

As we approach a meadow Mickey lets out a sudden loud grunt and we know he's

seen something we haven't noticed. We stop. I scan the path ahead and Rachel looks in the direction of Mickey's outstretched arm. 'It's over there,' he says. 'I saw it go behind that brush by that rock.'

We watch and listen. In the still, cold air, sounds travel unimpeded, perhaps too well, because they seem to jump from here to there too quickly, like a hungry, nervous little bird watching out for predators. We hear it then, the grunting and snorting of a bear, but we still can't see the beast. It crashes through the brush and waves its tawny head from side to side as if scanning the landscape. It glances at us and turns away. Not a large bear, as far as black bear go, and it seems to be a youngster although not a baby. We watch it move along, clipping and disturbing pebbles and stones as it goes. 'It seems well away. Shall we push on?' I say quietly.

As we move along, Rachel and Mickey continually glance in the direction of the bear. I relax through their vigilance and continue on with my musings. Besides, if that bear had wanted to get us, it would have gotten us by now. It probably smelled us coming well before Mickey spotted it.

The rest of the hike to Jester Meadow is uneventful if you can call being constantly surrounded by grandeur a non-event. The meadow is surrounded by granite cliffs on three sides, and we hike down a narrow, steep, uneven path with the river cascading beside us. I say hike, but it is actually closer to sliding or skiing on shale, gravel and grit. I squat on my haunches and slip along, exhilarated with speed and danger. Mickey's in the lead, sliding on one foot then the other, looking like an off-balance skater. Rachel's giggling as she quickly scoots by the boulders she's using to brace herself. Below us the trees crowding the edges of the meadow seem to grow larger and the sky smaller until we are among them, the granite walls towering above them and us.

I feel small. Chipmunks on a romp tumble in the lowest branches of a nearby tree and I still feel small, as if the size of our bodies isn't the issue of smallness. I don't understand the effect, how I feel so small, when previously under the giant elephant sky of the morning's hike, I was tall, like a giant upon the land. Now, in the company of chipmunks, I am infinitesimal.

'Mom! Look there!' Rachel whispers. We are still among the pines, walking in the shadows on the quiet needles dropped by the trees. The meadow ahead is bright, a glowing hotpot cradled in the dark trees. Grazing in the light are the deer, and I am surprised because I thought that the deer slept during this part of the day. They are a group of bucks, the velvet of their antlers going sparse as the mating season approaches. Their large ears twitch, turn and

twist actively listening to this meadow. I listen too. What is it they listen for? Do they listen to the river as it dashes down over the cliffs? Do they care about the quiet sounds the rising breeze makes in the tops of the pines? Or are they only listening for the sounds of hoof and paw and foot; the noise of breathing; the crash of bodies lunging through the brush towards them?

The deer lift their heads and look in our direction, all at once. We have stopped walking and are standing in the attitude of statues. I wonder if the breeze has taken the scent of us to them. Mickey looks sideways at Rachel who is looking sideways at me. And then Rachel turns and faces the deer. They all look at Rachel. Two of the bucks snort and backup a step or two. Another buck shakes his head and his head, supporting the weight of the antlers, sways heavily like a ship, his antlers weird masts.

Rachel moves ahead. She takes slow steady steps right toward the bucks, and the light in the meadow catches in her hair. The glowing angel of the meadow approaches the wild deer, her hand slowly rises towards them as something awful rises inside of me. I am no longer voluntarily keeping still: I am immobile with fright and I cannot even open my mouth to voice the terror that has caught in my throat.

Mickey watches Rachel. He is awestruck.

The deer stomp and jump. Several bound away, but the largest buck watches Rachel; he turns from side-to-side, his black tipped tail twitches manically, his ears gone erratic with all the listening.

Two leaps forward and he's on Rachel. He rises on his hind legs and beats her head with his hooves. As she falls he lands on her and pounds her with legs ridged as metal poles. The buck turns around twice, surveying his meadow, and jumps on Rachel one more time as he stares at me. He eyes Mickey and bounds away.

My angel! Now my body loosens and moves but it's too late to save my angel. Now the terror is released and horror takes its place. I stumble to her, fall beside her and scream, 'Rachel! Rachel!' but she doesn't speak. She does not move and for an instant, I think it is just an instant, I do not know what to do. My daughter, who I have cared for all of her life, lies beside me in the grass, quiet and bloodied, and all I do is watch the blood trickling from the gashes in her face, especially her forehead because it is pooling in the place from which her eye has been dislodged.

Mickey falls beside me and he's groaning. He sounds like a cow in pain, which probably isn't a groaning sound at all. But that's all I can think of: a groaning cow. The sound

jostles my mind. It's such a strange sound it gets inside where the horror has been lodged and dissolves it so that I start to think and act again, in order to save my girl.

I lean close to her face and listen. She breathes without difficulty. I feel the ground around her head for rocks. The ground is soft and damp from the herbaceous carpet.

'Mickey, get the first-aid kit,' but he seems only semi-conscious, his eyes open and moving but without response to what he might be seeing. 'Mickey!' I shout. I throw my pack on his chest and this somehow wakes him up. He sits up, looks at the trees, up and down, as if he might want to climb one. His face goes red and he looks at me, looks at me hard. 'Rachel!' he says sternly and scrambles towards her.

As I yank open the first-aid box he leans over her, close to her face. He touches her head and feels along her arms. And, then, he carefully turns her head, holding her cheeks between the palms of his hands. He speaks as he looks at her, quietly voicing a list of her injuries: 'This cut on her forehead is very deep; her eye socket has filled with blood; here is her eye: it is attached; her left ear is torn...' I stop fumbling with the kit and kneel beside him, unzip Rachel's orange jacket, her red fleece, feel under her bright blue t-shirt tracing the lines of her ribs. 'Her right arm is broken,' Mickey says. 'I can feel something's wrong.' We manoeuvre the clothes so we can get a better look. 'This bruising on her chest is bad; her arm seems broken in two places; there's a lot of bruises forming over her stomach...' and we discover that the buck has not attacked Rachel's lower body. Her hips, legs and feet have not been broken.

I press the gash on her forehead while Mickey soaks out the pooled blood to replace Rachel's eye. 'Careful, careful, careful' is all I say. I don't even mean it, it's just the habit of parenting, of keeping things under control, because Mickey couldn't be more careful as he nudges Rachel's eye back over its socket. 'I don't know the first-aid for an eye that's out,' he says suddenly.

We look at each other, and for some reason I think of the chipmunks in the trees. 'Press it back in?' If this wasn't so ghastly I think we'd be laughing. 'Press it back in; yes.'

Rachel moves and cries out.

'QUICKLY!' I say and I hold her head tightly. It is as Mickey is pushing on her eye, and Rachel begins to struggle, that I notice something strange about her head. There is a lot of blood; we have done our best to identify the places that are most deeply cut, but as she jerks to free my hold, her hair seems to have come free of her head! Her scalp seems too loose.

Mickey gets her eye back in place and Rachel starts screaming. When I let her head go she stops struggling. She knows who we are and she says she hurts but she can't say where. We make fabric bundles and press them into the gashes to stop the bleeding. I take Rachel's hand and make her press on the cut in her forehead even though it is difficult for her to move. Mickey wraps her head. He doesn't say much, just quietly grunts or sighs, let's out half breaths that he catches in the back of his throat before he exhales more.

I realise that I haven't been listening because the volume in the meadow abruptly swells, and the sounds swirl around me and into my head, rushing through my ear canals and careening through my sinuses. My brain vibrates and I force myself to listen to every little sound possible to keep from passing out.

Every little sound pulsing through that meadow, or thumping, scratching, splashing around us. A woodpecker pounding; a squirrel chewing a pinecone; the sticky sound of Rachel's blood as I open and close my hand. I look at my hands, at the coagulating blood, and am alarmed at the amounts of it. Some of my fingernails are hidden under thin sheets of it; the lines of my palms are dark meandering rivers, like the lines on our map.

'Rachel, do you think you can stand up?' Mickey asks. 'Let's sit you up.' But she's hard to handle or manoeuvre. She doesn't have much control of the broken arm. And as we try to shift her up it slides beside her and she cries. Where ever we touch her 'hurts', and again, I don't know what to do. I'm thinking of stretchers made of branches or of draping her over our shoulders, taking turns hauling her up the paths when Mickey abruptly wraps his arms around Rachel and lifts her to standing while she screams and gasps. I make a sling out of my t-shirt and Mickey and I immobilize her arm. She's propped against Mickey but standing on her own and crying, 'I'm trying to be brave. I'm really trying...' and she moans and grits her teeth, and shrieks. We tell her she *is* brave. That she's doing great. The things we say when a child has skinned her knee, or just had a flu shot – but it's all we have to comfort her and ourselves – and we repeat the phrases over and over as if the words can make it all better, after all.

Mickey helps her take a step or two. I walk beside with my arms open, hands out to catch her in case she collapses. I look down at her boots and feel sentimental about them, these dusty worn boots protecting Rachel's shuffling feet, and notice a fine thread of yellow gold extending behind us. The thread is attached to others and then to locks of hair, Rachel's hair, a hunk of her hair sprawled where she had been knocked to the ground and assaulted.

Mickey is entirely occupied with steadying Rachel and helping her get her bearings, but I know that this teenager has already seen more than he's let on to. While he had

bandaged Rachel's head, he must have noticed the missing hair, the exposed place where her scalp had come unattached. But he had kept his wits and carried on. I wondered what else he might be keeping to himself. As he encourages Rachel forward, I duck behind and snatch up the hair with its tender pink scalp, and tuck it under my thermals against my belly. This part of my daughter that has fallen off must not be left here in the wilderness, away from warmth and comfort, to become a forgotten, decomposing relic, a bit of heaven lost.

I press the place where it rests against my skin, and scan the trees ahead, the dark granite cliffs beyond. Rachel seems to be adjusting to her injuries but, even so, the path back is steep. Mickey silently assesses and monitors her injuries and immobility while I assess the likelihood of us being able to get Rachel out of this valley. After a few yards of slow travel, Rachel says she needs to rest. We are reluctant to let her lay down, for fear she might not want to get up again, and so manoeuvre her to some boulders nearby where we can sit together and keep her upright.

I open out our map and search for a less strenuous path out of the valley. But anything less strenuous will add many more miles of hiking. My finger runs over the map along the possible pathways and again I see the dried blood covering my fingertips, blackening my nails. Mickey has Rachel balanced, or perhaps she's just propped, against his back while he tidies his rucksack, organising our supplies. Rachel seems to be sleeping, or resting very deeply. Her face is smeared with blood. Every bandage has blood oozed from it that has slowed to dried drips. Her face is swollen in places that have already turned dark blue, and the bruising on her abdomen must be just as dark by now.

Behind us is the short trail she has struggled over, the glowing meadow beckons to us offering false light, and ahead the falls pounding down the cliffs boom and crash. Mickey has finished with the supplies and waits beside me.

'She can't make it.'

'I know,' he says.

'You could hike back to camp and collect enough equipment for the night. She'll be better in the morning. She'll be more comfortable here - we'll build a fire - get some warm food into her...' but I'm just rattling around the words trying to avoid what we know has to be done. Because Mickey knows how to keep her alive, he has all of the certificates that make him the one able to splint her broken bones, relieve her shock, and stop her bleeding. He is the better protector; and I know how to navigate the wilderness, how to leave for help and bring it back to this place.

But to leave this place, to leave my broken daughter, feels like desperation and desertion. It means she really might not survive, it means she might be dying, right now, right there propped against Mickey: and I cannot think of it fully. The feeling of it presses against my chest and tightens my shoulders, wrings my back muscles so tight my teeth grind from the pain. But I will not think of it fully and instead think of the map, and the quickest trail out of this horrific place.

‘Yo, Mom,’ he says quietly. ‘You got to go.’

And so I go. I walk past the boulders and ascend the slippery path, leaving my battered daughter leaning against the back of an eighteen year old man. I look back once and see Mickey twisting around to reposition my weeping Rachel in his arms.

My builder, Jesse, doesn’t know my name. For some reason unknown to me, since that trip, I have secreted my name for myself only.

It started with the forest rangers who stumbled upon me as I was refilling my flask at the river. The water was loud, the sound of it absorbing, and even though it was moving with tremendous speed it was clear, ‘crystal clear’ as some like to say. Or more like, tinted-glass clear, like the exquisite tiles you might find in the bathroom of a Five Star hotel, cleaned, sparkling from glitter embedded inside, with depth and a chill you can see.

I admit I was tired. I had taken a route that by-passed our camp, hoping to cut down on my time but missing out on nourishment. As I had paused to gather water to quench the hungry ache in my gut, there seemed to be ideas and suggestions in the river that I couldn’t quite fathom over the rushing clamour. I could almost hear words, whispered phrases, issuing from the water, being carried away with the swirling breeze that rode along the surface. And so I was paused, listening and watching the depth and chill, feeling, wondering, if I dared think that Rachel was already dead, and the water seemed to whisper, to suggest, that jumping in and riding it down would solve many problems: that I would move faster, that I would be rehydrated, that I would be rejuvenated, that I wouldn’t need to know if she had died, ever, if I rode the flow over and around the boulders and cascaded with the falls ahead.

With my flask submerged in the glass clear glitter, the water around my wrist felt like a sparkling bracelet, a cold cuff that held me and tugged gently, subtly pulling me off balance. I rocked on my haunches listening hard to the water, when I was gripped by the scruff of my parka and jerked back onto land. For an instant I thought I’d been attacked by a bear, and I was struggling to get away when the ranger caught me by the arm to help me

stand.

‘The water can be more dangerous than it looks,’ he said. ‘It’s swift and cold; it’s deep. Let me help you up.’ Except he didn’t ‘help’ me up – he held my arm roughly, nearly wrenching it as I tried to get to my feet; I staggered and finally grabbed at him as I swung unsteadily against his grip.

He let me go. The water and Rachel went out of my mind. I was frustrated and resentful towards this man who had invaded my mood and space; my space, there under the darkening elephant sky. And maybe it was a hazy realization of what my mind had just done, how it had taken me off track, away from my preoccupation and concern with Rachel, which made me hide my name. Whatever caused it, it happened without thought as I told the rangers about the deer attack and Rachel’s wounds.

The second ranger had already started to radio for assistance as I told them my story. He stopped and turned to me. ‘Ma’am, what’s your daughter’s name, again? And what’s yours?’

‘Her name is Rachel and I’m Clara Andrews,’ I said. It was simple; it came out as if it had always been my name: Clara Andrews. Rachel’s mother, Clara Andrews, who had hiked out of the cliff encircled valley to save her daughter’s life. It sounded completely right and true as I showed the rangers the spot on the map where Rachel and Mickey were waiting. It was exactly right as the rangers told me - Clara Andrews - that a rescue helicopter would be on its way to them in a matter of minutes. As the sun was setting, and we started down the path to the clearing where the pilot had promised to pick up me up if they thought Rachel was able to handle a quick detour, Ms Andrews walked between two able rangers while watching the elephant sky turn a deep shade of violet.

And then it turned so black that as I tried to look into it, into the spaces between the piercing stars, my eyes wept from the pain. They seemed attached to a depth that slowly but persistently pulled at my vision and hurt at the backs of the eye sockets. The fronts of my eyes felt like they were stretching out toward the sky; like they were changing shape, going conical. The lids couldn’t close around them, they seemed so misshapen, and I cried out and fell into the darkness away from the beams of the rangers’ flashlights.

They cut off large chunks of Rachel’s hair. I don’t know what they did with it, if they threw it into a bright yellow bio-hazard waste bin or incinerated it where they dispose of the offcuts of diseased bodies. It’s all gotten confused, but I had my little bit and I pressed it

against me, kept it safe there beside my belly, as the medical people moved in and out of the room.

They kept a billowy curtain drawn between us where Mickey stood and watched and described to me how they were putting Rachel back together. But I didn't want to see and stayed down on the cot where they had placed me when they had brought us in. It was very bright. Rachel spoke softly when they asked her questions but she sounded sleepy and I wished they would just let her sleep, let me sleep, turn down the lights so we could recover from it all. The sounds of repair continued and then it was quiet and there was sleep.

My builder is making a wall that edges the boundary of my home. It replaces the high wooden fence that replaced the sweet picket fence that was there when Rachel came home from the hospital. As Rachel walked up the path to the house, while Mickey carried her hospital supplies and I held her hand, it was clear that the fence had lost any pretence of supplying protection. Even though its pickets were securely attached to its sturdy wooden frame and stood erect, as if to defend, they were only blunt soft wood. The fence was barely a boundary marker with the lavender growing through the slats to the open, and the poppies nodding through unable to get back in with their swelling buds and spreading pedals.

As Rachel's bruises faded and her eyesight cleared, I cut back the plants along the fence. As her gashes grew back together and her bones knit, I dug the plants up. As her hair grew, I tore the picket fence out and called in Jesse to build a solid, defining fence. And he built a hardwood gate to match the fence that had iron door furniture: dark hinges and a black latch that could be locked from the inside. I, Clara Andrews, had never had a gate before.

When he'd completed the fence Jesse stained it with dark brown sealant. I watched from Rachel's window as she slept. And as he moved along the wall I followed him from inside the house, moving from window to window until he had brushed the last stroke. He mounted the gate, secured the hinges with his noisy screwdriver, and played with the latch from the outside. I couldn't see him as he stood on the other side, but I could see silvery lines of smoke lifting from where he stood. It felt good, seeing that smoke on the outside, like smoke signals from a faraway place with messages of greeting, or of warning, or of imminent rescue.

As Rachel healed she noticed that my name had changed. As the garden and fence had transformed, so had the legality of my name. On paper I was no longer the person before

Clara Andrews: all my bills, bank accounts, my driver license, had become who I am, and Rachel was not in favour of it, not one bit. It has been difficult for her, and I'm not sure why something that happened to naturally, and feels so right to me, has become so difficult for her. She has demanded that I seek professional help, and I have refused. I know who I am. There's no need to ask anyone else about that. Who else can know who I am better than me, myself, Clara Andrews?

But Rachel had become very distressed about it and although she had always called me 'Mom' before, she suddenly took to calling me by the other name, all of the time. And Mickey, too, until one day he told her, on the other side of the fence, that perhaps she should let it rest and I might come around to myself on my own.

'I can't!' she said. 'She needs to snap out of it! I'm the one who was attacked, not her. I'm the one who nearly died! If anyone should have flipped-out, it should have been me, not HER!'

What Rachel doesn't understand is, I did snap out of it, right there in the wilderness with the rangers. I seemed to leave something uncomfortable, like an old skin, like peeling the burnt and blistered skin off a roasted pepper. Clara Andrews is who disposed of the bitter, tough, unsavoury parts. I am the essence.

When Rachel moved away, I called in Jesse. He arrived at our meeting with his hair loose, and he ran his rough small hands through the front of it, repeatedly, to keep it out of his eyes. He was surprised at my plans but said, 'If that's what you want, Ms Andrews, that's what I'll give you.' That's when I noticed the length of it; how his hair was the same length as Rachel's.

I watch my builder in the mornings as he prepares to work on the foundations of my stone wall. It will be a wall of substance and beauty, unrelentingly steadfast, unmoveable.

My belly is warm, my hand protective over my angel's long, golden strands. I move away from the window as Jesse sets to work.

The Castle

When Esther was only five months old, her proud and interesting parents took her to see her first castle. It was only a bit of a ruin of a castle, a few spaces delineated by the stone bases of what had once been massive walls. There was one section of wall still standing, precariously, looking frail and arthritic. The curve of it implied that it had once been a strong defensive tower, but a hump near the top, where the edge had fallen away, gave the impression and posture of a tired, grumpy old man.

Never the less, Esther's parents were delighted to show their daughter this dilapidated old castle which seemed just the right size for a baby. They carried her on her father's stomach in a pack with her legs extending out the bottom and her head bobbing out of the top. Esther looked at everything they showed her and listened to everything they told her while she kicked and swayed in her pack, until she fell asleep. She had always been a deep and oblivious sleeper.

Her mother, whose name is Violet, still remembers the day, especially when she gets out the photos which she has never managed to put into an album. She cannot remember the name of the castle. Neither can her father. 'It was somewhere in Wales,' he says. 'Yes, there was a village in the distance and we didn't have to go far off the beaten track to get there. We parked close to it. There was a light mist in the air, remember?' 'Yes! And an oak tree that had lost a huge limb. Now, what was the castle *called*?'

Whatever it was called, it was, never the less, the portal of a lifetime of searching. For it seems that the castle got a hold on the infant Esther's mind, and set her on a quest to find castles, although she did not know why or for what purpose she was searching them out. She just loved them, every one of them.

In early April of her twenty-sixth year, Esther drove up to Wales to visit White Castle, a smallish, moated castle on a gently rising hill. The weather was clear and crisp. In the shadows where the sunlight had not been able to melt them, frost crystals glinted on long leaves of dried grass and tufts of moss.

The roads narrowed. As she left the last tiny village on the way to the castle the road became a potholed affair with gaps of mud and frozen puddles. She rounded a constricted bend with high hedges on both sides that poked and scraped her little red Peugeot, and then the road opened up to a view of the gleaming castle in a spotlight of sun.

Esther was delighted. With growing anticipation, she pulled into the small shale car

park. She was tempted to park square in the middle of the lot, a way of laying claim to the area with her car the way explorers had in earlier times, with their flags planted in the ground, waving possessively in the breezes. She parked along the side nearest a sparse gravel path that led to a ticket booth.

Climbing out of her car she stretched, reaching up towards an overhanging oak tree. Her phone, a map, guide book, bottle of mineral water (still) and handbag were all on the front seat. She rooted around her handbag for some money, then stashed everything but the guidebook under the seat. 'Let the adventure begin,' she said to herself as she locked the car.

The ticket booth was only a wooden box, more like a crate, painted white. It had enough room for just two people to sit inside. There was a covered green bucket outside the door. As Esther approached the box she realized she needed to wee.

Sitting inside the box was a small wrinkled woman who explained through the gaps in her teeth that White Castle had no 'facilities.' She animatedly leaned out of her ticket window and shook her hand towards a wood down a muddy road. 'That's the farmer's but I don't think he'd care though you'll have to climb the fence. There's no stile except if you walk about half a mile down and then there's one but then the woods thin. And of course you could always drive back to the village and try the pub though I'm not sure they'd be open so early in the morning, you know.'

Esther's discomfort had swollen quickly and the chilly morning added to her fidgeting. She briskly set off for the woods with the old woman encouraging her on from the door of her little ticket box. 'That's it! That's it! Just go on down the road there...' Esther hurried to get out of the woman's sight and the hurrying made her need to 'go' even more desperate. The road was lumped with drying mud from tractor tracks, and soon Esther's boots were clumped with clay.

She found a place in the barbed wire fence that had been stretched by some other person, desperate like herself, perhaps, and squeezed through to the rich dampness of the woods. Layers of decomposing plant matter cushioned her feet. Just a few steps into the woods the open air sounds of farm equipment and the breeze that they were carried on were overcome by the tiny sounds of plants growing and dew dripping from leaves. A small bird flitted in foliage close to Esther's shoulder. The closeness of the woods suppressed even the sound of the bird's wings, and rustling of the leaves, as it bounced with curiosity.

Esther undid her jeans and squatted, pulling them to her ankles. The sudden exposure to the chill caused her insides to contract. She ached to go, but was too cramped inside to

relax.

She looked around to distract herself from the chill and tension. A black shiny beetle struggled over a bit of rotting wood; layers of rusts and golds of the fallen pine and birch leaves had exquisite depth. The cramp subsided and a bit of steam lifted from the ground where the pee landed. Esther continued her observations. The bark on a tree close-by was peeling in places, curling like fine translucent paper; tufts of coarse pale grass struggled through the woods' ground cover; the eyes peering at her from deep within a mound of branches and leaves were human!

Esther tried to stand. Her legs were bound by her jeans and she swore as her backside crushed onto prickly needles and sticks. Twisting and straining with the denim, she tugged her jeans up and up until she could stand.

The mound of limbs shook and Esther shrieked, but she had her pants up and was standing to run. She caught the shoulder of her jacket on the barbed wire as she tried to hurry through; she swore as the fabric tore when she jerked away.

Back on the clumpy mud road, Esther tried to scurry but instead tripped and teetered, faltering along hastily but without speed until she stood before the ticket box. She rapped urgently on the thin glass of the box's window.

The wrinkly woman slid the pane open, carefully, because the track it slid in was gummy from mould and grime.

'There's a man in the woods,' Esther shouted. She pointed in the direction from which she had stumbled. Her face was close to the slowly opening window and her breath steamed a patch that hid the face of the old woman.

The woman's dry lips appeared in the open space; her chin exuded coarse white hairs. 'A man, did you say?' her lips puckered. 'Were he a big man?' The window opened minimally in accordance with its resistance to sliding.

'I don't know!' Esther shouted. 'He was hiding and I only saw his eyes and then I ran.'

'Well, I don't know how many men might be inhabiting them woods, but I'm thinkin' there's most probably only one. There's surely only one I know of and he's called Jessop. Unfortunate you didn't see his size because if he's a big man then that was most certainly him. Any other men in there I don't know nothin' about.'

For a moment Esther was taken aback by double negatives, but quickly finding her

wits dashed around to the back of the ticket box and yanked open the door. 'A man lives in there and you sent me there to have a pee and you didn't think to warn me?'

'It sthlipped my mind,' the woman exaggerated a lisped through the gaps in her teeth. 'He's not one I think often of.' She reached forward for the door and gently pulled it shut and latched it. Returning to the window, she continued with her work of opening the pane. She called around to Esther, 'Would you like to see the castle now? That will be £3.10 for the day.'

'Shouldn't we phone the police?'

'What should we do that for?'

As she mulled the question over, she could not think of a good reason to bother the police. The man was in the woods before she had gone in and there was no law against meeting someone in the woods. As far as that went, they were both probably trespassing. He hadn't chased her or even said anything to her. In fact, he was probably as surprised as she was; probably as startled by her as she had been of him. She chuckled to herself as she expanded her impressions to include his dismay.

Esther glanced at the castle. Its bright and inviting wooden bridge spanned the sparkling moat and ran straight between the gatehouse towers. She glanced at the woods that seemed shrouded in dark mist, and looked at the shrivelled woman in the booth whose fingers tapped restlessly on a metal money box. Esther had the unsettling impression of being in a fairytale; this went quickly out of mind when a fish leapt in the water and left a charming ever expanding ring. The reflection of the castle and the bridge wavered through the rings. Esther saw a patch of blue sky in the water, and as she looked it up to the sky she reached into her faded muddied jeans and pulled out a fiver for the entry fee.

'There you go young lady,' the woman said as she handed Esther the change. 'It's a nice castle, a lovely castle, and I'm sure you will enjoy it. A young lady like yourself, in particular - though I'm sure I don't I know why I'm sure I know this - will enjoy this castle. It's a castle that was made for the likes of your enjoyment...' It was as if the woman had a glitch. She could not stop herself from repeating certain words and then Esther was caught in it 'Thank you. I'm sure you're right although I'm sure I don't know why I think that. You, in particular, I'm sure...you know what this castle has to offer a young lady such as the likes of myself...'

The whole exchange petered out to an awkward silence, with the old woman sucking around the spaces left by her missing her teeth and stroking the long wispy hairs on her chin.

Esther took a deep breath and walked to the edge of the bridge. She suppressed, with a shudder, an impulse to look back at the ticket box and walked across, over the moat, to the towers of the gatehouse, and passed into the inner ward.

The grass inside was very green. Not abnormally green, just well fertilized and without weeds or yellow patches, or exposed earth. It was a well tended lawn that gave the impression that the castle was laid with luxurious wall-to-wall carpeting. The luxury of it, this rich plush colour bordered all around by the grey stone walls, set tingles coursing through Esther. She held still, afraid to upset the onslaught of sensation, for this was what she hoped for every time she visited a castle. Some castles set her whole body buzzing with waves of tingly pleasure while others left her senses cut off and dulled as if there were a thick cold wall between them and her. Even though she preferred ecstasy she was still intrigued by the castles that snubbed.

The shadow of a cloud blew across the ground and then several sunbeams sprayed through highlighting grassy spots and stony heights. Esther realized that she was the only one visiting the castle and that this display of colour, light and shadow was just for her, transient, unrepeatable and unable to be shared. This satisfying thought renewed the tingles, and she felt connected with the ground, through the grass, in a way that Violet called 'the ultimate grounding.' This castle energized her, and suddenly Esther had to move and explore all of it.

She ran forward and as she ran she kicked off her boots. Her jacket seemed to bind her, so she threw it off. Her shirt flapped as she ran up a tower and soon fluttered off to the ground. Barefooted, in jeans and a white tight camisole, Esther took possession of the castle, climbing stone walls, balancing on their top edges and jumping to ledges that had not held the weight of a person in quite some time. She shimmied up ruined chimneys, pulled herself through crumbling windows, and slipped down tumbled stairs.

She revelled in the strength of her body and yearned for more. This castle, this White Castle, excited all the right nerves causing all of her, body and mind, to flow and move with power, speed and grace. She felt more 'herself' than she had ever felt before.

She slowed her racing and trotted along the bank of the moat. She came around to the front of the castle and spotted the ticket box gleaming in a spot of sunlight. It looked too bright there perched on its concrete foundation with a soggy gravel path extending between a patch of shale, which represented a car park, and the spot below where the old woman's window was.

Esther couldn't see the woman and she did not want to see her. She did not want to

share this moment, or this castle, with anyone. She climbed back into the castle over a short wall, to collect her disparate belongings. And then she wandered casually over to the bank of the moat, where the view of the valley below, spreading away to a low row of purple hills, caused another gush of tingles that settled in her head and around her cheekbones. As it dissipated, she sat in the grass, then lay down on her jacket with the tips of her boots as a headrest. She watched a bird, a buzzard perhaps, she thought, effortlessly skimming the air in the clear blue sky.

Esther closed her eyes and heard a bird screech. She did not know what kind of bird it was but she thought it sounded like one she had heard in the Western movies Violet took an unexplainable delight in watching. Could it be an eagle? Or were buzzards also capable of such startling sounds? It really did not matter all that much to Esther because she had passed into a deep contented sleep without even knowing what she had done.

She started awake chilly and nonplussed. In her sleep she thought she heard thunder – a terrible wrenching thunder that scraped across the sky and bounced around the castle walls. Confusing dream images fled through her view of the sky and the castle as she stretched the sleep away. Her shoulders were stiff and her thighs achy. In this state – chilled, achy, groggy from dreaming – the castle did not energize her. In fact, it felt joyless and disagreeable. How could this place have changed its mood? How could a place empower and soon after disempower a person? She pulled on her boots and stood uncomfortably. Her jacket was damp from being pressed into the grass. She examined the tear where the barbed wire had caught the shoulder and tisk-tisked at it, hoping she could make a clean repair.

The day had gone hazy and although she could see the position of the sun through the muting haze, she felt she had slept half her day away. She checked her watch but soon realized that she must have tossed it with her other things in her frenzied run around the castle.

Back tracking twice, now, she found it, face down, in the grass by the gatehouse. It must have been the first thing to go as she entered the castle. She remembered it chaffing but could not recall taking it off.

She checked the time. It wasn't as late as she had thought but the time puzzled her because it surely was later than what the clock said. The second hand was moving round and everything looked normal, except the time. Esther shook her watch and listened. It was an action without thought – something everybody did when they thought their watches were off-time – and she listened attentively, as if to diagnose an illness from some symptom of

irregular ticking. She would not have recognized such a symptom, other than absolute quiet, even if she had heard one.

As she passed through the gatehouse, Esther heard a scuffle up in one of the towers. Some jackdaws attending to their young were in a flurry to both feed their squealing chicks at the same time. The crevassed entrance to the cubby where the nest was crammed was not large enough to allow the parents to deposit their caches together. There was much flapping and irritation, quarrelsome noises through clinched beaks. Downy black feathers floated around, suspended for the moment, in the tower's enclosure.

Esther imagined Violet and Dan trying to push past each other to feed their wide mouthed begging baby. She chuckled at the jackdaw's familial predicament as she passed on through the gatehouse onto the bridge. The haze was thickening, and a still mist lay close on the water in the moat. A stench from the moat hovered around the bridge and Esther held her breath. She wondered that the moat had been so bright and entrancing only a little while before. And then she wondered why she could not see the ticket box. Even through the haze she could see the dark grey shale of the car park, and the puny gravel path that led to where the booth should be. She could see the dark woods looming, could even make out the outline of trees, but the little white box was gone.

She glanced again at the dark grey shale of the car park. It took her a moment to register the complete lack of vehicles of any sort in the car park. Her little Peugeot was gone!

The wooden bridge boomed as she ran across it. The gravel path crunched as she pounded toward the car park. The sparse gravel was loose over a hard base of packed earth, and Esther slipped. She fell, and landed, still flying forward, on her knees, hands and elbows. The gravel tore through her jeans to her knees, and imbedded in her palms. When she stood up, blood ran down her legs and soaked into her socks; her elbows throbbed from the impact; but it was her hands that hurt the most. Esther cried quietly as she tried to pick out the grit. She sat in the middle of the car park, sniffing and wiping tears, attending to her injuries as best she could.

There was movement over at the woods. A huge bird lunged from the trees and hovered above the ground. Esther held her breath as she watched it holding steadily in the air as surely as if it were balanced on a bolder. Abruptly it dived sharply to the earth, then arose powerfully its wings assaulting the air. A screaming rabbit struggled against its talons as the bird beat a path back to the woods.

'No! No!' cried Esther. She pressed her cheeks with the backs of her hands and closed

her eyes as if to erase the whole scene: the bird, the woods, the car park. But when she opened her eyes, her car was still not there and the castle had gathered more greying mist.

Esther was cold. She knew better than to sit still in the cold for long, so, for the second time that day, she stood up achy and chilled. Her elbows and wrists were rigid. The blood on her legs and in her socks had and glued her jeans and shoes to her skin. She felt every move as she made it: painful, sticky, gritty and oozing. The acrid noise of the shale as she dragged her feet along the ground was the sound of the discomfort of her body.

She shuffled toward the road. A large man exited the shadows of the castle gatehouse. Esther did not hear him as he crossed over the wooden bridge and approached her steadily, from behind. He studied her wobbly gate and the spots of mud and blood on her clothes. He noticed her injured hands and the tears in her jacket at the elbows and the bits of grass in her straight blond hair. And, he wondered what he should do with this limping woman who had stumbled into a situation that he himself had been struggling to escape for days.

He was an unkempt man with stingy greying hair and a rumpled and soiled overcoat. He walked up beside her and leaning toward her a little; asked if he might help her. He held his thin hands behind his back and spoke softly, but he felt exposed out there in the car park. He wanted to get back to the shelter of the woods as quickly as possible. He had not meant to startle her, again. But the circumstances were such that it was inevitable.

Esther, being keenly intent on her own troubles, had forgotten that there might be someone else around. As he spoke she inadvertently glanced into his eyes and despite her injuries, jumped away from him. She faced him and, like an angry cat, appeared to puff herself up. 'What do you want?' she demanded. 'Did you steal my car?'

'Steal your car? Would I be here if I had stolen your car? That old witch stole your car,' he motioned to where the ticket box had been 'and she'll do more than that when she comes back. We have to get to shelter before they see us. They know we're here but they don't know where, and they won't know where if we hide.'

'*What* are you talking about? I'm getting out of here and calling the police. Stay away from me!' she shouted as he reached toward her in an effort to quiet her.

'Shhh. Please! Don't shout. They can hear you. When you're in the open, they can see you. Getting out of here isn't simple. I've been trying for days.' He spoke quickly and quietly, and he started moving toward the woods. 'I'm going. I have to go. They'll be here soon now that they see you're moving around.'

As he spoke Esther heard a car coming along the narrow lane. The man ran full out,

his coat flapping behind him, while Esther suddenly felt as if she had feet of lead. Unnerved and sore, she could not think. The approaching vehicle was still out of sight. The man was running full tilt towards the woods, and as he was about to enter them, he turned and made huge beckoning gestures to Esther. Terror swelled in her chest and she ran after him as quickly as she could. The pain was no longer an impediment; getting to shelter was her only impulse.

She dashed into the woods slamming through low limbs and sinewy brambles. Out of breath and thoroughly frightened she grappled with the man as he tried to help her up. 'Get away!' she cried as she tried to repel him. But it was as if she was drowning and desperate to reach the surface, so she clung to him and fought him at the same time.

'Shhh-shhh!' was all he said as he wrestled with her. He pushed her away then caught her by the elbow as she started to fall. He dragged her deeper into the woods. 'They'll see us!' he hissed. 'Just come with me...' Her feet hardly touched the ground as he pulled and lifted her along. They came upon a mound of old trees stumps and he crouched on hands and knees and scooted through a hidden opening in the ground. Then he reached out and caught Esther by the ankle and dragged her down with him. She landed on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and whispered, 'They'll never find us here.'

His coat sleeve was coarse against her chin and smelled filthy. Another kind of terror gripped Esther. As she started to scream, the man covered her mouth, and like a constrictor, slowly tightened his grip until she stopped trying to resist.

A police car slowly drove up the road to the White Castle. It stopped in the middle of the car park. 'What happened to the ticket booth?' Pc Rees asked his partner.

'Might be it's bein' replaced,' said Pc Jones. 'It was about as ruined as that castle, ya know.'

'But where's our old Mari, then? It's not like her to be away from her work.'

'I'm famished' said Jones. 'Get your stuff. We can eat in the castle and afterwards have a look around. All right?'

'Righty-o!' said Rees as he opened his door and climbed out of the car.

The man eased his grip on Esther. He had unwittingly afforded her the time to calm herself, somewhat, and she tried to make some sense of what was happening: His fear

seemed genuine; her car had been stolen; and the ticket booth and the old woman were gone.

When he removed his hand from her mouth, she did not scream or speak. When he unwrapped his arms from around her, she scooted slowly around, and faced him. They were in a little cave that was formed by the roots of the dead trees. It was dry and earthy. Under different circumstances, she might have called it cosy. The light was dim there, under the ground, with slits of it sliding in here and there through gaps in the canopy. In the diminished light his features were fuzzy; his eyes reduced to tiny flickering highlights that jumped and skipped as he glanced nervously around.

He spoke softly and rapidly. 'You did right by coming with me. We'll find a way to escape them, but we have to be very careful not to be seen.'

She nodded in the direction of the car park. 'Who are they, and how long have you been hiding in these woods? And what's your name? Is it Jessop?'

The man leaned closer to her face. 'Did you say 'Jessop' ? What kind of name is that? You don't need to know my name. My name is none of your concern.' He did not say how long he had been in the woods, but Esther guessed, from the smell of him, it had been quite a while; probably weeks.

She held one hand lightly to her mouth and nose. 'I feel sick,' she said.

He reached into the shadows of the cave and brought out a green bucket. 'Use this,' he said. 'It wouldn't be safe to go out yet. They'll still be snooping around for us. They take their time when they come.'

As the two policemen finished their dinners they leaned back against the grey stone wall and squinted into the hazy sky. 'Funny how this haze has set in on such a crisp day. Not like April at all, don't you think?'

'Not like it at all,' Rees replied absentmindedly. He stood and tried to look through the haze into the valley. He could just make out hedgerows separating the wide fields. They looked like a giant toddler had scrawled crayon over the land. 'Something's bothering me about that ticket booth. There would be a notice posted about it, wouldn't there?'

'It's not like the council to not have at least put a few traffic cones and sandbags, even outside of the tourist season, don't you think?' said Jones as he stood up. 'Let's have a look.'

They walked along the edge of the moat until they approached the wooden footbridge. 'What's that?' Jones said, pointing into the moat. Through motionless haze they could see white wood submerged in the murky water. A black square of window pane faded into the

depths.

‘I think we have a real problem here, don’t you think?’ said Jones.

‘A real problem,’ echoed Rees. ‘The village lads have gone too far with their vandalisms.’

‘It’s not just vandalism, Rees,’ Jones said running down through the mist to the water’s edge. ‘Oh, this is very bad,’ he said to himself.

The pale face of an old woman, eyes half open and lips parted, floated in the cold water behind the window of her little ticket box.

Esther’s eyes adjusted to the dim light in the low cave. The walls of it were tree roots and in the roots were little cavities and nooks in which the man had put his possessions. Candles, some spoons, a fork, a torch and a box of C batteries. Other things that Esther couldn’t make out were balanced here and there.

‘How long have you been here?’ she asked again. There was a bundle of blankets deeper in the cave. Without light she couldn’t see the dimensions of the cave and Barry did not seem willing to let her move around to explore. When she moved to adjust her cramping legs, he jerked at her as if to grab her.

‘You’ll be safe here, believe me,’ he said patting her thigh.

‘But who are “they”, and why are we hiding? How can they watch us all the time when we’re in the woods?’

‘You are asking too many questions, and I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation,’ he said. ‘Now, either you keep quiet or I’ll have to gag you. And you sit still or I’ll be forced to tie you.’ He shifted around nervously, picking at his fingertips. He stared at Esther’s face and then at the sinuous roots that ran all around them. ‘In fact, I know you don’t understand that I don’t have the time to mind you every second, so...’ He grabbed at Esther’s wrists. She kicked him as hard as she could, fighting and wriggling, but he lay on top of her and crushed her until she couldn’t breathe. She lost consciousness.

‘I know you don’t understand,’ he whispered as Esther came to. ‘But, they’re still here and they’ve brought others. We have to lie low. You must be very still.’

Her mouth was bound with a shredded filthy rag. Bits of frayed thread poked up her nostrils causing her eyes to water. Her wrists and arms were tied behind her back and already her shoulders ached from the awkward angle. Her legs and ankles were wrapped, mummy style, with strips of floral sheets. She was on her back, pressed up against one wall of the

cave, away from the opening where the man was crouched, listening; his finger pressed his lips as if to keep them quiet.

She could see everything clearly now although there did not seem to be anymore light than before. She saw her phone shelved on a rock that protruded from the earth. Her handbag lay on the ground beside the green bucket, and she realized that many of the little things balanced on the roots were things she had left in her car. When she spotted her car keys dangling from a root near the man's head she began to cry. Her distress escaped the gag. He moved to her and snarled low and threatening, 'Stop the noise, girl!' He put his hands around Esther's throat and squeezed just enough to make her dizzy. She panicked and writhed like a worm lifted out of the earth and surprised by exposure. The man lifted her by her neck, his arms clinched, and shook her until she went limp from shock and lack of air. He gently laid her down and smoothed her light hair away from her face.

She watched him return to the cave's entrance. He sat on a small metal money box and settled down to listening again. It was then, as Esther regained her composure and remembered where she had seen that box before, and the green bucket, that she knew that she must not have much time left to live.

'They've found it,' the man said. 'That means they've found her.' He looked over at Esther. 'They won't find you. They don't know about us and they'll be too busy with that silly old bitch and her joke of a ticket booth! She shouldn't have watched me. She should of looked away.'

Overcome with grief and terror, she listened with her captor to the sounds rolling across the field from the castle moat. Men and machinery worked, within hearing distance, unaware of her predicament and the cave where she had been secreted.

She thought of Violet's stories of princesses saved by knights and knights devoted to their lords and kings; of ladies healing the wounds of their children and children getting lost in woods. As she lay there listening it seemed to her that all of Violet's stories had mixed and homogenized to this moment when Esther was trapped underground with this madman, this Blue Beard, this big bad wolf or evil murdering giant. She could not find the point where her reality had slipped into a fairytale. The old woman had not been a conniving witch, the castle was old and in ruins, there were no knights on steeds, no gracious queens, and yet, somehow, she had become the child lost in the woods under threat of danger, evil, harm and destruction.

He crawled back to Esther. He lay down beside her and tenderly caressed her face running his fingertips along the wet gag and around her cheek bones. 'You aren't very

pretty,' he said. 'In the castle you looked like a sleeping beauty but in here you're just a common girl. You shouldn't have slept in the castle, you know. Everything changed when you slept. You left your keys for me in the grass. The old lady saw me with your car. She ran into her ticket box and I ran into it with your car and pushed it straight into the moat. It was like magic! The whole thing sank with her inside. Her own white coffin. Your car did it all.' Moving closer, he pressed his fist into the small of her back pushing her against his abdomen. 'Esther's a good name for a girl like you. A common girl who wants to be a queen. That's you all right, isn't it?'

She shook her head, no. The man rolled her away from the wall and crouched over her like a spider ready to strike. He grabbed at her shirt and then, with his thumbs, slowly investigated the edges of her bra, up and down the straps and over the thin edging of lace, finally pressing the underwire hard into her ribs. He wiped his face on his soiled cuff and smiled down at her. 'We'll have a little time for that later, after they leave.'

Esther trembled as she rolled onto her side and pulled her legs up as best she could. The man went back to the cave's entrance and slowly raised his head through the opening. There was a thud, and then another. He fell back into the cave silently holding his face and then he whimpered when he saw blood pouring through his fingers. The foliage over the cave ripped away and light washed over Esther and the man. A huge man jumped down beside Esther, kicking her captor as he landed. He leaned over, picked her up and pushed her above ground. Then he turned to the snivelling man on the cave's floor and thrust him behind some roots until he was securely entangled and caged.

He climbed up to Esther and pulled the gag from her mouth. 'You found me! You saved me!' she gasped. She wept against his arm as he untied her hands. He unwound the bindings on her legs and helped her stand. When she was steady, they walked to the edge of the woods where he helped her through the fence, and then turned away.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Thank you for saving me.' The big man nodded once and moved back into the woods.

Esther stumbled as fast as she could to the castle. The crushed ticket box was suspended above the moat by a yellow crane. Police and workers stood around watching it swinging slowly above the water. Jessop heard Esther shout to the police; he saw her waving her arms to get their attention. When they suddenly went into action and followed her towards the woods, he faded back into the branches and leaves of his home to return to his quiet life.

Stone Walls and Buttercups

On such a bright day you would think the buttercups would glow unhampered, effervescent in the clear air. It is the stone wall that keeps them subdued, unnaturally dull, when just a few feet over where the stone wall ends there bobs a family of luminous orange poppies. The sun makes all the difference.

Next to the poppies, in a gutter that runs along the potholed road where Danny lives, is a dried trickle of blood. Above it, the gutter is blocked with tiny sticks, bits of Styrofoam, a candy wrapper and mud. The whole mess is globbed together with coagulated blood gone very dark; it has lost its blood redness. As the sun heats the day, the road and the gutter, the scent of the blood that has lost its way floats up and hovers against the stone wall.

Danny wouldn't have notice it because he rarely walks up that way. Up that way the road has even more potholes that eventually contort into lumpy chunks of asphalt and heavy clay. The gutter is the only piece of civil engineering to have survived the neglect of the road. The road is steep and few people in town remember where it ever led to. A road that goes nowhere in one direction, and goes past Danny's cottage in the other. The stone wall is the transitional point where the road seems to change from going somewhere to going nowhere, and if you were to stand beside it, you would get the uncanny feeling that you were neither here-nor-there. The bright poppies, if they were in bloom, would draw you toward going places, but you wouldn't even see the buttercups in the shadows on the other side. Only the very curious or those with an unaccountable wanderlust for going nowhere would feel inclined to move up the road past the wall.

The blood scent draws insects. Flies lay fertile eggs in the globbed mass in the gutter, tiny masses of rice that by the end of on this warm day will hatch into hungry wiggling maggots. Wasps hover and dive to the dark mass and find the juicy transforming eggs. A crow drops to the road and hops over to the gutter. Eyeing the goo, this way and that, it jabs around the mess, dodging wasps and finds no satisfaction. It flaps up to the top of the wall and gurgles discontent, but goes quiet for a moment as it stands in the sun. Ants trail at its feet, down the wall, toward the bloody sticks and mud. The crow sniffs the light breeze that drifts above the wall and lifts into it toward nowhere.

As it flies up it aligns itself with the road, wings stretched out, the finger feathers shifting slightly, tail feathers lowering – lifting, adjusting with the breeze until it hears the muffled voice of Danny on the ground in the leaves. The crow passes closer for a view. It

answers the man's noises but, when it doesn't see or smell whatever it is looking for, it lifts higher above the trees, drifts back to the dilapidated road and trebles caws as it flies on.

Danny tries to roll over. In his mouth are old leaves and gritty mud, blood. He doesn't know where he is. His arm hurts; his hand is numb and his shoulder is jabbing with pain. As he rolls he moans and his eye pulses, his nose burns, his stiff neck clicks. He rolls over onto a cold jagged rock that jabs his ribs. Danny cries and halts his breath as if it has been knocked out of him. His body throbs, stings, bleeds but he stops breathing because as he rolls over onto the rock he spies a pale bruised face, small, muddy and quiet, cushioned in the leaves.

'Nissa,' he mutters. His mouth is swollen and the name hard to form. 'Nissa!' he tries again. 'Nissa!'

Her lips are still, nostrils still, eyes slightly open. A fly descends and Danny screams as he drags over the rock. He flings himself over her, as if to shield her, and falls unconscious.

The other side of the stone wall, where the buttercups languish, was once a warm room in a house with a family. The house grew old, then ancient and the people, after a time, did not refresh. Even the last one to live there was not allowed to die with the crumbling house but, for her safety, was taken away to live her last moments in a room that smelled of disinfectant, heavy flowery air freshener and urine.

The house was left with its curtains and beds. Its braided rugs, iron fire tools, its collapsed firelog – even the carefully stitched and framed samplers from its earlier inhabitants were left to the cold and damp. The chimney collapsed inside itself. One full moon all the little windows were smashed.

Every moment something fell off of the house, or caved in; or another vine grew through it or another stone stolen from it until all that was left was the stone wall by the road and a brick remnant of the chimney. On occasion, bums wandered through, and feeling easier than most with being neither here nor there, would set up camp for a day or two. Occasionally, rough men drank there and if a bum was unlucky enough to be there at the time, they would throw rocks at him as they had at the windows.

Danny kept clear of the place. He preferred to wander the field next to his cottage where an old oak had dropped a limb during an early autumn windstorm. The limb was the size of many men, or perhaps it was larger than that because Danny had been chopping it for winter heat for him and his wife for two seasons now, and the limb still had much more to

offer.

Some evenings, as he hauled the wood to their cottage and stacked it carefully in their courtyard, he would hear the drinking men trudging up the road to the wall. On such evenings the men would become boisterous and crash rocks, shout, break bottles and eventually fight, sleep, slump and sway back to the village. There were only three of them but they had the terrorizing intimidation of ten. Danny kept clear of them; the whole village tried to keep clear of them. Any active resistance in the past had received violent retaliation – broken windows, broken bodies, maimed or murdered pets, fires, threatened children – that the police had not been able to curtail. Three bad men and one of them, Gavin, just plain evil.

Danny wakes up and doesn't know where he is. He lifts his swollen head and through slits sees below him the pale muddied face of his young wife. He touches her cheek below a bloody scraped place, and sees that it still oozes. He touches the swollen marks of teeth on her lip. As he looks around at the trees he goes dizzy as images of the night before light up as if they are being spot lighted on a stage in his mind.

He hears a knock at the cottage door, hears it creak on its hinges, and a light seems to snap on in his mind's eye: he sees them standing before him, the three men over lit, their skin too bright, washed out. Gavin says 'Can we get a drink, mate?' and as Danny turns to look at Nissa in the kitchen, he feels a sharp blow to his head. He sees sparks and then the lighting in his mind goes dull and he feels himself slumping and then shoved away by the men as they enter the cottage. She sounds miles away, but he hears Nissa scream his name and his eyes suddenly focus and he's looking at his muddy boot where he had left it in the corner by the door. He struggles to stand, the light gets intensely bright and a dog is barking outside the door.

He steps toward Gavin who has Nissa by the wrists and feels a sharp thud across his shoulders, a striking pain on his shin. He reels and sees two men watching him fall. He catches a glimpse of the beams of his ceiling, hears Nissa struggling, hears Gavin saying 'Come on! Give me some!' And then there's a boot against the side of his head and the light goes off, though he can still hear. 'I'll kill him if you don't give me some! Come on! I'll show you!'

Danny tries to stand in what seems to be grey light but he's punched off balance and then dragged out the door into the road. He's shoved along, falling into potholes and tripping.

The spotlight pops and he's hunched by the wall up the road, Nissa is being held by two men and she cries 'No! Please don't!' Gavin finishes off a bottle and speaks and chokes on his drink, 'Too late! It's too late for you, for him.' He breaks the bottle on the wall and kicks Danny over and over. Danny's light starts to fade again, but suddenly flashes bright as he feels his arm, which was sheltering his face, being cut and stabbed. He tries to move away but is punched in the gut, the face and cut in the face, the hand. He screams and his life seems to move to one side of his body. He feels out of sync with his skull. He knows his body is against the wall but he feels slightly above himself and sees his blood draining down his hand into the gutter. Somehow, even in the dark, he sees the poppies closed for the night and he can't understand what he's looking at. A large dog sniffs his face and licks at his hand.

He's kicked from behind and he can just see Nissa being dragged up the road. He can see her dress in the night like an empty garment blown and battered around by the wind. 'No!' she keeps screaming.

Danny is hauled up by the armpits. He lags behind his body and watches the men who drag him. One chuckles and spits, the other looks serious and slightly bewildered. 'Gav,' he calls. 'Gav, I think they've had enough.' But he still pulls Danny up the road and into the trees. The dog is barking again but Gavin swears and yells and the dog yelps and goes quiet.

Nissa is whimpering somewhere in the dark in the trees. Danny hovers near her and feels her breath

'Help her,' Danny hears himself mutter and sob. But he is dropped and the other man steps on his arm and stands there watching as Gavin bares his teeth. The spotlight flashes, and Danny can see Nissa pinned against a tree. Her dress is torn and her eyes look up at the sky like saints, during their martyring, look up to heaven where their spirits will soon fly. She holds her breath. Lascivious growls pass through Gavin's teeth as he lowers them onto Nissa's face. He slurs obscenities as he moves from mouth to neck, to breast, to abdomen, to thigh. He yells and turns and Danny's spotlight goes out. But he hovers by Nissa again and watches in the grey light as steam rises from his body where Gavin's urine courses. The man kicks Danny in the ribs, the head, the legs and laughs, guttural, pitiless.

Two men stumble away through the trees. 'Come on Gav,' they shout. 'There's nothing left!' Danny is numb and silent but Gavin keeps on beating, yelling, swearing, jabbing, biting and thrusting. Danny feels Nissa exhale as if she is having the life crushed out of her and all is black.

Nissa sighs as a shaft of daylight warms her forehead. 'Oh!' cries Danny. He tries to cup her face in his hands but one hand is numb and as he draws it up to her face he sees tendons and muscle, and blood still weeping along his motionless fingers.

Nissa suddenly sobs out loud. She struggles under Danny, eyes tight, her hands come free and she fights and screams. Danny cries too and labours to roll away from her but she opens her eyes and locks her arms around his shoulders. 'Oh, oh, oh...' is all she says as she holds onto him as if she were clinging to the edge of a cliff. 'It will be alright,' she whispers as he cries. 'It will be alright, it will be alright...'

The savagery of the attack was reported to the police through the proper channels by the hospital. Had Danny and Nissa been asked, they would not have reported the horror to the police. They felt ever more intrusion as the doctors and nurses peered at their wounds and drew blood for tests, and the police pressed every bit of battered memory for information. They knew better, the whole village knew better, than to expect any good results from the interrogations and reports of the police.

The villagers began quietly thinking things over. Nissa changed the bandages on Danny's shredded hand; his cuts and punctures drew together and scabbed, pinked, slowly faded to white lines. His fingers curled and would not open. Danny watched the bite marks on Nissa fester while she grew feverish until the potent medication she was prescribed killed all the bacteria in her body and sores and rashes appeared in warm hidden places. Eventually their bodies mended, but at unexpected moments, the man and woman would despair, and breakdown in cheerless corners of their cottage or grieve in the field by the oak tree, alone.

After a while, they stopped crying, and as Nissa cut and split the fallen oak, and Danny hauled the logs and stacked them in the courtyard, it seemed that they too were thinking things over.

Until, one bright day there was an accident on the main street. One of Gavin's men was thrown to the ground as an ancient pensioner brushed him aside with her vehicle. She had seen a cat, she told a policeman, and had swerved to avoid it. This did not account for her having put her car into reverse and having backed over the man's leg, the officer had countered. She had always driven a manual transmission, she said, and her new car was an automatic. Her son had thought it would be safer. The officer wrote that into his report.

A week later, the men were set upon by waves of nausea and vomiting as they left the local bar in the late of night. They heard the doors lock against them as the porch lights

flicked out. They were too ill to get home and though they pounded the doors between spewing and gasping, they were left to themselves for the night. And the next day. In fact, no one came to the bar until the men finally found their stomachs and shakily left. A quiet young man arrived with a garden hose and sprayed the place down – even the roof – soaking everything through-and-through.

Gavin tripped in a cold muddy hole covered with sticks and leafy branches that had inexplicably formed in his back garden. His knee was dislocated, his ankle broken. He called the police from the hospital. Gavin's neighbour reported that she had no idea how a pit came to be in his yard and wondered if she should be keeping an eye-out for malicious vandals. In fact, all of the people the police interviewed in connection with the pit said the same thing, including a cheery little boy with blackened fingernails who volunteered that he found making 'tiger pits' fun. But only, he added after a second thought, in Africa.

A farmer absentmindedly backed his tractor over the wooden fence at Gavin's house. He was manoeuvring into his son's drive for a quick cuppa, as you do in a late morning after working in the field, he reported. He hadn't noticed the fence. It wasn't until he felt resistance - that would be when he had backed over the fence and into the house and he noticed the dog barking beside the tractor - that he realized his mistake. He was sure the insurance would take care of it, he told Gavin politely as he gave his address. He was sure, he told Gavin and his men, that the house and fence would be as good as new.

Two days later the same farmer absentmindedly ran into one of Gavin's men. 'Out there in the field on a later summer's evening, who would have thought there would be a man relieving himself? An industrious farmer has the right to work his fields as late as he likes without fear of pedestrians in his path,' he told his wife.

'Has he gone away with the Ambulance?' she asked.

'Ambulance? Nah, he's in the field now unless he's managed to crawl away.'

'Into the hole he came from!' she said.

'That's a thought,' he said.

'Hey! Where do you think you're going?' she called as she heard the door open.

'Here! You come back here and sit down to your supper. You've had a hard night of it.'

'Have a hole to fill,' he said. 'Won't take long.'

And so it was that Gavin's friends seemed to have deserted him and he was left with his dog that he was increasingly kind to. They walked up to the wall on an evening, ambling

along the road past Danny and Nissa's cottage. He slowed his pace and stared in their window. Stopping by it, and then tapping on the glass as he watched them sitting close together at their kitchen table, he sing-songed loudly, 'I see you.'

'See-you, see-you, see-you...' he sang as they directed their frightened eyes at him. And he continued to sing it to his dog as he approached the wall where the poppies had folded their petals against the darkness and chill of the night.

The moon was halved, waning in its arch as it coasted through the stars. In the crisp night Gavin lit a fire against the darkness of the wall on the buttercup side and drank with his dog braced against his thigh. As he faced the fire the front of him glowed golden, his eyes glittered as the orange flames rose and fell. 'I see you...' Gavin sang again softly as he dug his fingertips through the thick undercoat on the shoulders of his black shepherd. Gavin leaned over him and rubbed his face deep in the animal's fur. The dog's dark eyes had pinpoint lights in them as if his sight emanated from them, as if his sight was not passive.

Gavin finished his bottle and threw it against the wall where the glass shattered and showered on the buttercups. As he stood he pushed on his dog's back for support. He moved to the road and unzipped his jeans and urinated against the wall so that his scent ran down the wall into the gutter. He sprayed the poppies to see them bounce and jump. 'I see you, see you, see-you...' he said to the poppies and growled as he zipped his fly. He looked down the road to the cottage where a thin line of smoke wormed its way toward the half moon. He rasped, 'Come on!' The dog rose from beside the fire and the man and the dog moved down the road. Gavin slipped on loose stones and cursed.

As they approached the house, Gavin picked up a rock and tossed it from one hand to the other in rhythm with his steps. He stood at the window he had tapped at earlier and looked in. The curtain was drawn. He yelled at the window, 'I know you're in there!' and threw the rock as hard as he could. He threw with such effort he went off-balance and fell to one knee as the window shattered. The lights in the cottage went out from room to room until the house was dark.

The dog jumped back and barked as a door opened and Danny came out. He knew his yard, knew the path to the shed where he had left the axe and the hammers, the saws, shovel, and wheelbarrow. The half moon gave abundant light but Danny didn't need it.

The door to his shed was ajar and Danny could see the barn cat's eyes glowing in the dark. He heard her purring and the tiny sounds of her new kittens as he carefully stepped in and reached for his axe.

‘You go on home,’ he said to Gavin as he unlatched the garden gate.

‘Now why would I want to do that?’ Gavin laughed. ‘You have a warm house and an accommodating woman. You invited me in before; aren’t you feeling hospitable tonight?’ He casually stepped toward Danny.

Danny gripped his axe with one hand but, out of old habit, he lifted the axe and slid his hand down the wooden handle to accommodate a two handed hold.

‘What’s the matter with your hand?’ Gavin chuckled. ‘Had an accident?’ He lunged at Danny, grabbed the handle of the axe and wrenched it violently. Danny let loose and Gavin fell back hard into the road. He grunted as he hit the ground.

The dog barked loudly and the blade of the axe reflected a silvery bit of the half-moonlight. The dog barked louder and Gavin yelled and cursed, but the dog kept up. Gavin pushed himself up and leaned over to get the axe. The dog was backed up against Gavin’s legs, barking and growling, jerking this way and that as if fighting a lead. Gavin kicked it and the dog yelped and moved into the shadows.

‘Go on home,’ Danny said slow and low again, but this time he seemed to be speaking to the dog. ‘Go!’

‘Or you’ll do what?’ Gavin laughed. ‘I said I’d kill you before; remember? You remember that!’ He raised the axe and angled it toward Danny’s face. The whole axe head glowed silvery-white in the moonlight. It seemed to be floating above his head disconnected from the handle Gavin held tightly in his hands. Just after, it was Gavin’s head that floated for an instant, disconnected, and then the axe and head fell out of the light.

Nissa moved from the shadows; her arms cradling her stomach. Danny reached for her hand and prised away the handle of a reaper’s blade. He kissed his wife lightly as he caressed her hair. The dog had calmed and it sniffed at the gutter where blood was draining.

‘I’ll get the wheelbarrow,’ Danny said flatly to a group of shadows who were discussing how Gavin had fallen against the gutter while his head had landed face up in a pothole. The farmer spoke from somewhere, ‘There’s no need for that. I’ll get the tractor over here. My wife is waiting supper. Why don’t you all go and sit down to it. You’ve had a hard night of it.’

On such a bright night, the poppies and buttercups still will not open their petals until the sun rises up. The buttercups will make seed in the summer and the seeds will blow away from the stone wall to sunnier places where the flowers can bloom unhampered, effervescent in the clear air. The flies will lay their eggs and the maggots, the wasps and ants will consume

or carry away what they need. The crow will fly above the road to nowhere and eventually circle back, to take the news of nowhere home.

Jingleheimer-Schmidt

Have you ever noticed that no matter how loud you shout in your head to drown out some irritating tune that's stuck there, it never completely takes away the noise? The tune continues, keeps its beat, doesn't falter. You might not hear it over your mental screaming, but when your mind-voice goes quiet, there's that music still moving along having kept to itself: controlled, unabated, in tune, ubiquitous, annoying.

And so it was that I had been straining through several days and nights (yes, nights – in my dreams - always in the background humming away) of 'John Jacob Jingleheimer-Schmidt', that summer camp sing-along favourite. It had rooted into the spaces of my brain unsettling the crisp sparking off of my neurons. I couldn't drink it away, eat it away, sex it away...it couldn't be showered off or flushed down. Other music from the outside didn't affect it. In fact, if the tunes didn't clash then the one in my head would make an effort to incorporate the outside tune inside. Yes; contemplate that activity with Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 (the second movement), in mind.

It was with Jingleheimer-Schmidt in my head that I attended three job interviews. Ruth said I wasn't trying hard enough. 'You aren't trying hard enough, Kyle. Your qualifications alone should have gotten you all three of those jobs. What did you do: turn on your sarcasm and insult the interviewer; try to tell a joke – oh, I hope not; forget to shower?'

Ruth's intuition causes anxiety and instils paranoia in some people, but I've gotten used to it and, in fact, she was spot on but, in fact, I actually had wanted the jobs I had interviewed for. It was the music. I blame the Jingleheimer-Schmidt, joggling along in my head, for the sarcasm, bad jokes, and inattention to personal hygiene.

It was while preparing for a fourth interview that it became clear to me that my mind was surely unsettled. Up until then it had seemed to me that the whole situation was being inflicted upon me by something outside of myself. A hazy outer layer of me connected to the hazy outer layer of something else that was able to transmit or transfer or trans-induce Jingleheimer-Schmidt into my head.

But if this were so, (and this is when it hit me that it could not be so) then there was another something (a being?) trying to share the song with me, or unload the song on me - perhaps wanting rid of it as I did - or just intending to torture me relentlessly with it. I would have liked to believe that it simply wasn't me, but that was just too creepy, and unrealistic,

and kind of crazy, actually.

I 'saved' the material for the interview on which I had been working, Jingleheimer-Schmidt having just begun again. I sat watching the bubbles floating through my screensaver and listened to the merry voices singing heartily in my head. The voices were jubilant; they swelled with joy at having captured all of my attention. Well, not quite all of it; I was still *watching* the luminescent bubbles quietly ascending my monitor's screen. I still had a modicum of me for myself.

The voices in Jingleheimer-Schmidt carried on with their jubilation until one of them seemed to falter. It was one of the louder stronger voices, and although the other voices carried on as usual, this other voice, through its faltering, was setting itself apart from the others. It being a child's voice, I could not clearly identify its sex. It could have been a boy or girl and I wondered what would happen if the voice spoke, if I would know its sex and maybe something about it say, get a sense of its height and weight, or maybe even its racial origins. While I was wondering these things, my eyes trailed up the screen moving from one bubble to another and I thought how very life like they were, but maybe just a little better than real life because they didn't get caught by a breeze and blow away into someone else's garden or over someone else's house, or my house, for that matter. And they didn't blow over into someone else's monitor - as far as I know, they don't do that - and I thought I should ask Ruth if she'd ever seen a bubble blow from one monitor to another, when I noticed that Jingleheimer-Schmidt was swaying a little into a different rhythm.

The louder voice seemed to be trying to lead the other voices away from the strong, definite campfire song beat. The move from the usual to something different was causing the other voices some confusion; one would sing here, another there, a voice would trail off and seem to sigh, whilst another carried on holding a note far too long. I listened intently to the disarray and wondered if this was the end of Jingleheimer-Schmidt, if I was witnessing the dissolution of my torment?

A bubble moved up, a voice moved with it. A bubble floated to the side, and a voice followed. The louder voice became some sort of stream, or gentle flow, that the bubbles were caught up in. Although the other voices joined the flow, they each continued to identify with individual bubbles until Jingleheimer-Schmidt was not the song it had been before. It was disturbing, far more disturbing than it had been as a recognizable and persistent camp song.

Ruth leaned into my little cubbyhole of an office and said, 'It's just a song Kyle, and it's in *your* head, so get a grip!' See what I mean about her intuition? I would like to have

said that her sudden and unexpected definitive exclamatory remark surprised me into getting “a grip”, the way that hiccups can be cured by a sudden fright. I would *like* to have said that, but instead I have to say that the volume of the new unsettling Jingleheimer-Schmidt dilated with the noise of Ruth’s voice. I was doubly startled, and my whole body visibly jerked. ‘You have an over developed startle response, Kyle,’ she said as she leaned back out of my cubbyhole. ‘Na-na—na-na - - na nana’ the voices sang with the randomly floating bubbles in my screensaver.

‘This is unbearable!’ I muttered. Muttering felt unmanly, beaten, weak. **‘This is Unbearable!’** I shouted as I gripped my head at the crown and rocked around in my swivel chair.

Jingleheimer-Schmidt was still there, and I shouted again, only louder. This was better than shouting in my head. This involved actual breathing, and I hoovered in extravagant amounts of air only to aggressively propel it back out by shouting. **‘Get out! Get out of my head! You fucking kids with your fucking stupid song! Assholes, dirty bastards, stinking stupid idiotic nut breaking, ball bashing, head invaders...’** I went on for a while in that vein until I hyperventilated, which caused me to slouch back into my swivel chair and loll around a little.

‘Are you finished?’ Ruth asked. She had gone to the kitchen during my episode and had returned with a cup of coffee, decaf, which she handed into my cubby. ‘What song are you hearing, Kyle? What could possibly be making you so crazy?’

‘Ah Ruthie,’ I mumbled. ‘It’s mind numbing, insipid and insidious.’

‘Yes, I can see that. But what is it?’ she persisted.

‘It’s John Jacob Jingleheimer-Schmidt: That’s My Name Too’ and as I spoke the title, the song faded and went clean out of my head. It just slipped away.

‘Kyle, you astound me. THAT song’s stuck in your head? Of all of the songs in the world, THAT is the one song you got stuck with?’ She shook her head and walked away from my cubbyhole and me.

‘Thanks for the coffee,’ I said after her.

‘You’re welcome,’ she said as she closed the door to the bathroom.

I felt foolish as I got back to the research for the next day’s interview.

Ruth turned on the shower and I heard her climb in. And I heard her washing her hair and scrubbing herself down with her special exfoliating sponge. I knew that she would be shaving her aerobically defined legs (with my razor, mind you) while her carefully chosen

scientifically designed hair conditioner permeated every one of the shafts of the nearly blond hair on her head. I heard her put down the razor and I heard her humming 'John Jacob Jingleheimer-Schmidt.'

I was alarmed. Listening intently inside my head I heard something that sounded like bubbles floating. That's all, and it made me laugh.

'Hey. Could you hurry it up? I want a shower myself,' I called through the door. 'Ruthie, dear, what is that tune you're humming?'

She went quiet, as if listening to something. 'Curse you, Kyle!' she shouted back.

The Bedtime Story

Ok. Ok-ok-O.K!

Let me think. Let Me Think!

Lisa! Stop poking Harry and Harry – HARRY! Sit your bottom still!

Let me think.

OK! Once-upon-a time there was a --- a---

Look! Stop that! Silly Sally: you crazy thing – stop that NOW! Now, once-upon-a time there was an, a, hippopotamus. I was going to say an elephant but it seemed too big. Besides that, hippos have those chunky tee—tee-teeth! Now WAIT just a minute!

Harry. HARRY! Go over to the couch and get that blue cushion and bring it here – here – Right here! Yes. Put it there. Sit on it. Make your backside cosy and imagine there's super glue all over it. Yep! Now you're tight. Ok.

Once-upon-a-time that hippo was floating, in the water, it was chocolate coloured water and there was a bird with a huge wingspan flying, flying – Silly Sally, have you just poked Lisa in the eye?

No? Lisa? Have you poked yourself in the eye? No? Really? Oh, well, then, why are you crying? You've pulled a finger? What ? I don't think I heard that right. Say again?

A FingerNail. Oh. Better let me see. Bring it out. Umm, Lisa, stop sitting on your hand and let me see. No, there's no super glue on your bottom like Harry's, otherwise you'd be glued to the carpet and your Mom would be so mad! No! Not at You! At me! No Harry, she'd be just fine about you. I asked her before she left if it would be alright if I super glued you to the floor and she said it sounded reasonable.

Let me See Your Finger, please. Come on! ahh, well, that's pretty bloody. I can't even see what's going on here. Here, suck on it. It's your own blood, for goodness sake! It can't hurt you. I have Barbie Band-Aids in my purse. You want a Barbie Band-Aid, you'll have to suck your finger.

No Harry, you cannot suck Lisa's finger for a Barbie Band-Aid.

Okay. Oh! oh, um, were you trying to pull your whole fingernail off in one go? I recommend you give-up biting your nails before you reach the bones, dear.

Let me get my – Sally! What are you doing in my handbag? Those aren't the Band-Aids! Those are, they're just, Mine! They're mine and put them BACK into My handbag. No, no Harry. That's not what they are. WHO told you that? Your friend from school, well, that figures! Ok. Maybe your friend's right and they really are just weird balloons for grown-ups. He has a point: They are for grown-ups ONLY!

Here Lisa. Are you done sucking your finger? Let's get this band-aid on so we can finish the story.

There was a hippo floating in the river, once-upon-that-time, she was floating on her back and watching a bird, a big bird, with a giant wingspan that was wider than I am tall, it was, flying-flying - - How tall am I? You can see how tall am I - I mean - I am. And the wings were wider than that. Very-very, really-really wide! The bird flew closer and the hippo noticed that it seemed to be making a roaring noise - rrrrrRRRRRRrrrrrrr - and she lowered herself into the water so she could watch it without being noticed. She hid herself in some reeds and lily pads, like she was a submarine just under the surface, and the dragon flies that were humming around didn't even notice her because all that was visible was her eyelashes which looked like bits of dead grass with droplets of murky water and dirt attached at the tips. Her eyes were half showing, because they could adjust to seeing underwater and above water so it didn't matter if they were submerged or not.

Submerged means to cover in liquid, like water, you know the pool or the ocean. Yes, you're submerged when you hold your breath in the water in the bath. That's Right! No, Harry, your rear-end is not submerged in the cushion unless - YES! You have my permission to unglue yourself and run to the bathroom!

Phew, this story's going to take a while to tell!

Back now, my boy? Glued securely? Come here Sally and cuddle up with me. Lisa, how's your Barbie Band-Aid? Fine. Looks good.

OK. The hippo hid there in the reeds to watch the very noisy bird with the humungous wingspan and to her surprise, the bird flew around, roaring and growling and then it dropped its feet, which were rather strange round feet but being a hippo she didn't notice that. Does this hippo have a name? Yes. Yes she does. Her name is Hyacinth; Hyacinth the Happy Hippo. 3H.

3H watches the bird land, which, being smart kids, you have already figured out is an airplane. It bounced along beside the banks of the river for a while and then it swung around and bounced back up to close where 3H was hiding, and it stopped.

3H blinked but she didn't swim away. People climbed out of the plane. They looked around at the sky and the river, they looked along the banks of the river. They had cameras hanging around their necks and they snapped some shots. A man got curious about the reeds and snapped at them without seeing 3H. He moved closer and used his viewfinder - a viewfinder helps you focus on the picture you want to take - yeah, it *does* sound cool to just be walking around looking for that view, but it's not going to be so cool for him, I'm thinking!

He moves closer to the reeds, and one of the other people from the plane, the Travel Guide, tells him not to get too close to the river because there are hungry crocodiles.

Yes, I know, Harry! There aren't any Crocodiles in the water, as far as we know. Hyacinth doesn't seem to have seen any; you haven't seen any. Lisa? You seen any? Shhh. I think

Sally's asleep---nope! She's awake. You see any crocodiles while you were under there in your blanket? No? OK.

So it's pretty sure that the Travel Guide is wrong and for some reason, even though the man who's gotten interested in the reeds and lily pads has paid the Travel Guide to take him to places of interest and instruct him in the ways of the Wild, he ignores the warnings and moves closer to where 3H is hiding. He sees the dragonflies and just HAS to get a picture of them.

He moves closer - and - closer. The Travel Guide shouts but the man ignores him. He loves the shining, quivering shades of blue and green that flash as the dragonflies hover nearby. He carefully steps even closer; he thinks he's sneaky, that the dragonflies don't notice, and maybe they don't, but Hyacinth does.

3H blinks. She can smell him because the tip of her nose is just out of the water. She holds her ears still and they look like old, dead, broken rotting reed stalks. The foolish man steps with the tip of his new trekking boot just in the edge of the water and he squats - leaning just a little forward over the water - - looks through his viewfinder at a lovely, shimmering dragonfly and notices the gentle flaring movement of Hyacinth's nostrils.

3H was indeed a happy hippo then! She lunged out of the water with lightening speed and grabbed the man and his camera with her huge chunky teeth. He didn't have time to scream or anything but that was all right because the other people screamed quite a lot without him!

While and the others were screaming, the Travel Guide ran for his gun which he'd left in the plane. No one ran to the river until the Travel Guide had his gun, and then they ran behind him. But there was nothing to see. The water was like chocolate milk, and 3H had taken a deep dive down into it - yes! That's RIGHT Lisa! - she and the picture man were totally *submerged* and there was nothing to be seen from above.

Hyacinth the Happy Hippopotamus had a good day that day. She bounced the man around on the bottom of the river like he was her bath toy - Yep! Like Sally's rubber ducky - and when she was done, she went back to floating in the river, only there weren't any giant birds for her to watch, so she just watched the dragonflies and then fell asleep.

Which is what it's time for you to do.

Harry, you can now officially unglue yourself for the night.

Lisa, let's put another Barbie Band-Aid on you - you have GOT to Stop biting those nails!

Come on Silly Sally - I'll tuck you in tight.

No, no! No worries, dears. There won't be any foolish picture men sneaking in to your rooms tonight. You have 3H to protect you.

And me, too.

On the Train

There's a guy, he looks like an exhausted grim reaper, sleeping in the overhead luggage shelf on the train. There's nobody in the car except this guy and, though he's surely fastly and deeply asleep, it's creepy sitting here, watching his limp, dangling arm slowly swaying with the rattle-clap rhythm of the train. It's 'The Railroad Blues' gone weirdly Gothic.

The train car would have been pleasant enough, were it vacant, but here, now, in its partially empty state, it is edgy. The greasy film on the windows is grim. A window, one row over, holds the incomplete imprint of a sweaty child's face enhanced by what looks like chocolate ice cream, and a dirty hand print skids across the glass, blending kid sweat, snot and ice cream, dirt, spit and train window grease. Like a little bit of a ghost left behind to mix with the exhalations, perspirations and grimy damp of the previous riders, and those that are following.

The reaper stirs. He pulls his arm up and grabs his black hood, pulls it closer over his face. Sighs. Coughs. His arm slides over the shelf again, the black leather and dull silver studs at the wrist cling for a heart beat to the hard plastic ledge, then the arm flops back to its dangling slow dance. His movements have released odours that float into the swampy air adding last night's fried chicken, stale Lynx, week-worn clothes and a touch of dark mould to the blend.

A woman passes through our car trying to keep balanced as the train presses into a turn. She watches the reaper's swaying arm as she moves carefully by, holding with both hands what looks like a basketball hidden under her floppy blouse. She exits the car but straight after the doors puff open again and she's back, looking tired and weighted. Swings herself into a seat in the row with the smudgy window. Tries to pull off her long, blue jacket but it's caught underneath her, and she just puffs out, drops her elbows at her sides with her clothes lumped and twisted around her. The one flat mule in view is half off her foot, and her ankle is swollen, shiny there beneath the fayed edge of her worn, easy care pants. She slowly rubs the basket ball and says "Oh! --- Oh!" then lets her breath out, slow and even, and leans her head against the seat. Her light brown hair is flat. The heavy air has mashed it against her skull.

The reaper rouses a little. His face surfaces and one bright blue eye glances out from the hood, down at the woman, up to the ceiling of the car and wanders. The eyelid drops, his face recedes back into the hood, snuggles and nestles down into the dark comfort.

My hand rests on the back of the empty seat ahead. This ring here: How long has it been on this finger? From before the kids, from before the divorce, it's from before college. It's from high school, isn't it? That's a long time. A long time to have a ring, the same ring, on the same finger. And for no reason, except that it was a good day playing hooky and the ring fit, just slid onto a finger too chunky to easily find a comfortable fit. The salesgirl said it looked 'radical'. Yeah, a really good day!

The door puffs open again, and this time it's the conductor followed by several ruffled and bewildered looking people. He makes his way along the aisle, fiddles with his ticket machine but, irritatingly, doesn't acknowledge me when I give my destination. The machine whirrs. The man nods his head at the machine, rubs the very tips of his fingers with his thumb as he waits. The machine spits a ticket and he snaps it over to me. Turning to the woman, he does her the same favour but thoughtfully adds a stiff smile. Looks up at our grim reaper who impertinently rests his head on his hand as he watches the conductor. 'Come down now, sir,' the conductor says as he hands him a ticket. 'It's time to go.'

'It's not my stop!' the reaper says.

'It may not be your stop, son, but it's the end of the line.'

'But there's someone waiting for me at Llandudno!' He looks alarmed and disappointed.

'They will be notified. Now let's move it along here.' The conductor glances at the people behind him, looks at me, lightly touches the shoulder of the woman. 'We need to get moving everyone.'

The reaper lowers himself from his perch, reaches up and lifts down his black faded pack and battered skate board. The woman stands, wrestles with her jacket again as she starts to haul herself into the aisle. 'But wait!' she says to the conductor. 'What about my baby?' Her basketball seems to be deflating.

The conductor watches her go flat. 'She's not on the ticket. She'll be fine. Now let's move people. You don't want to be here for this.'

'*"She'll be fine!"* It's a girl? I really want a girl! I'm naming her Molly.' Molly's mother is beaming. She flushes happily through the sweat that shines across her cheeks, suddenly revived and energetic. She's light, lost her turgidity.

A man, about my age but slighter and lighter, is hunching behind the conductor. I give him a look, a what's-this-all-about-look, which he returns with a knackered smile and an exaggerated shrug. The shrug unhunches him somehow, unrumples him, gives him flow

inside his tan trench coat.

‘Please folks. Keep moving to the door. You do *not* want to see this. *I* do not want to see this!’ The conductor is starting to move around like a tense sheepdog trying to tend to its unwilling sheep.

The reaper bends and looks out the train window. ‘Oh wow! Look at that!’ he says.

Molly ’s mother says, ‘Oh — oh!’ She holds one hand open across her chest, keeping her heart safe. Her other hand rests on her belly, for comfort, and out of the recent habit of late pregnancy.

‘Keep MOVING PEOPLE!’ the conductor shouts.

‘Oh wow! Oh WOW!’ the reaper yells as he stands into a full silhouette at the train door. Dirty silver, another train car, like a whale, breeches before us, rising from an ocean of spraying dirt and flying sparks; diving up into the muggy air it strains for the sky. The sunlight, defused by humid haze, makes it hard to watch wide eyed.

The car pauses, seems to falter as gravity nudges at it.

‘Come on PEOPLE! GET OUT!’

Glancing this way and that: at the crooked ridge of the nose of a man beside me, at my ring as my fingers stretch for the doorway, back at the rows of empty seats in our car, I wonder : Who waits for the reaper

Never Come Back

Daniel, who was five, sat in the corner on the floor watching his mother taking pictures of his father who was packing some things with the intention of never returning.

'Would you stop that?' his father said.

'How can you do this to me; to us?' his mother said from behind her camera. 'How can you sort through our stuff - go through our closet - with me right here?'

'Just stop it Eileen!'

'I won't stop it!' She was clicking every two or three seconds. 'I'll follow you right out the door! I'll make you see what you're doing to me! I'll send these pictures everywhere you go. I'll send them to your work and to your parents. I'm sending them to all of our friends.'

'What friends, Eileen? We haven't got any friends!' He turned toward the chest-of-drawers and said under his breath, '... just such a bitch.'

Eileen pushed past her husband and screamed, 'I heard that! How could you say that in front of Danny?'

As she raised the camera to her eye, James reached forward and clasped the lens, smothering it in the palm of his hand

'Let go!' Eileen screeched.

Daniel ran from the room.

'Let go! I said LET GO!'

Someone bumped on the bedroom floor. There was slapping. The parents shouted. Dull thuds sounded as fists landed on flesh.

'Eileen! Get away from me!' James lunged from the room. There was blood running from his nose. There were claw marks across his cheeks.

Eileen was crying in the bedroom but she suddenly roared and ran after James screaming.

'I'm sorry Danny! So sorry.' James yelled as he ran from the house.

Eileen ran after him, her camera on speed click. 'Never come back! Never ever come back here!'

Eileen documented her return to the house. She climbed the steps of the porch shooting each individual one being careful to include the tips of her shoes at the edges of the shots. She focused on the open door, took a shot of her hand on the doorknob, and raised the lens to zoom on the petrified Daniel. He wasn't crying. He didn't look up at Eileen. He

hugged a yellow throw pillow and sniffed once. She clicked, moving around to get close shots of him from every angle.

The throw pillow beat her camera out of her hands. As the camera bounced on the floor, Daniel ran out the door, down the steps and into the street after his father.

She took shots of this, too. And of the rusty Ford pick-up that ran over Daniel. And of the blood and of his stillness.

As she looks at the pictures now, Eileen still cannot believe he will never come back.

A Normal Thing

The gilded angel raced toward me, in my dream, holding a green palm frond high-and-behind, as if he intended to throw it, javelin like, at something behind me. The palm frond wasn't the alarming bit. It was that the angel was moving so fast and he looked quite hefty, a substantial being, and although gold is supposed to be a 'soft' metal, there was no telling if he was pure gold or gilded (or brass, for that matter), all of which could have hurt me very badly. He was moving too fast for me to move away even though I was able to think slowly, and with much deliberation, about our impending collision.

So, when I jerked awake I nearly leapt from my bed. This caused Tilly to mumble from under her pillow, 'Another angel?'

Yes. Yet another angel engaged in sport. Tennis, rugby, discus, handball, baseball, basketball, Frisbee: a week's worth of sporting angels, each one hurtling toward me aiming to throw, kick or hit some form of sports equipment at a target behind me. The palm frond javelin was a new twist.

'Why don't you take the initiative and run at *him*, next time?' Tilly asked, as if I have control of my dreams; as if running at annihilation is a normal thing to do.

I told her about the palm frond. She rasped, 'Mythologically, that sounds heavy.' Dark short curls, black eyes, white-white skin and near naked, she looked like something out of a fairytale as she cracked out of the crisp white sheets of our bed. 'I'm not that deep,' I said.

The ninth angel might come tonight, and I don't know what it might mean or if it means anything, but today I'm running (literally) to the sporting goods store and running out of there wearing springy running shoes. I have my route planned. I'll run for most of the afternoon and right into the evening. I'll meet Tilly at a place two miles from home and, when we've finished eating, we'll walk home, rapidly.

And then we'll fall into bed. And I will sleep. Very hard.

Cosmetic Surgery

The needle was poised above her lips but she kept her eyes closed, pretending composure. Her skin was tightening where the blood had run down her chin from her mouth, from having been stretched far too wide. Even though the area had been disinfected for the procedure, and anaesthetised, she could still smell her blood, so she relaxed the muscles at the outer edges of her eyes to distract herself.

She could hear the nurse shifting surgical tools, needles, pads, stainless steel pans, she supposed. The nurse had nervous fingers that quietly drummed through surgical gloves on a sterile metal trolley; and nervous feet that shuffled on the green tiles of the operating room's floor.

The needle struck through her top lip, and it didn't hurt. There was some tugging, and then the needle went through her lower lip. That hurt a little. But she kept still by relaxing her calf muscles which had tightened with the pain.

More pressure on the top lip, more pain on the lower, alternating, until the last run through the lower lip became unbearable and she moved it, to cry out.

There, said the surgeon. The procedure is complete. Here, Mrs. Alden, see the results. Isn't it exquisite?

In the mirror she watched her eyes - large and searching, her nose - small nostrils taut, her lips - stitched tightly closed. Delicate knots tucked, equipoise, at the corners of her mouth.

You will never put your foot in your mouth again, he said. Isn't it superb?

Looking To Ride

Luanne has a bicycle she loves to look at. She does not ride it; she sits on it now and again. After she rolls it out of her garage and gives it a thorough dusting, she swings her leg over and lowers her rear-end onto the smooth black seat. Luanne likes the way the hand grips squish slightly when she squeezes; she likes the shine of the broad chromed handle bars.

Angela Ferris lives across the street from Luanne. Whenever she sees Luanne pushing the bike out of the garage she says to her son Jaxon, 'There she goes again. She won't ride it - Just watch her! She might sit on it but she won't ride.' Angela stands at the kitchen sink washing the glaze off of her coffee cup until it's raw, watching Luanne through the voile kitchen curtains. Jaxon turns up the volume on his mp3 player as he leans closer to the pages of *Kerrang!*

Luanne walks around her bicycle as she dusts it. The black fender's glassy surface bends the reflection of her face and in it it's hard to see just how middle aged she is. She stands back and admires the luscious curves of the retro frame; moves up to it and gently flicks her dusting rag around spokes and rims.

'There's just something so wrong about that!' Angela says as she leans closer to the curtains; her breath makes them tremble. 'Watch, watch. There she goes! She's sitting on it.' Jaxon stands, picks up his magazine and leaves the room. Angela sighs into the curtains and turns to say something until she realizes she's alone.

Luanne gets off of her bike and wheels it back into the garage. She closes the garage door from the outside and walks down the street toward the convenience store two blocks away.

Angela dries her cup with a grip that would have snapped a nail. She slams it down on the counter, moves quickly to her front door and steps out into the shadows of her porch. It is quiet on the street. No traffic; no people in sight. Angela jogs across, hauls open the garage door and hops onto the bicycle. She rides it back to her house where she pushes it through the door and into the kitchen. She pets it as if it's alive. 'You need to be ridden,' she says.

'Mom!' Jaxon yells from the next room. 'Mom, was there someone at the door?'

'No, sweetheart.' Angela pushes the bicycle to the door that opens into her garage. She pushes the bike into the dark and hides it behind some boxes of old toys, flat balls, rackets missing strings and dusty Christmas decorations.

Outside there's a shout. Luanne has discovered her open garage door and the empty

space where her bike had been. She runs into her house and comes out talking anxiously to her phone. Angela can't hear exactly what Luanne's, saying but her tone of voice says all Angela needs to know.

The police arrive and look around. They notice hand prints on the dirty garage door and tell Luanne not to touch it again until they can take some prints.

Angela has cracked open her kitchen window just enough to hear what they're saying. She gets a sudden burst of dread that starts in her head and drops to her chest where it constricts her lungs and causes her heart to miss a beat, before it races.

The police look over at her house and Angela can't get her breath. Two of them walk up her driveway toward the garage and along the sidewalk outside of her kitchen. Angela watches through the voile curtain as they pass by. As they ring the doorbell, Angela starts to shake. They ring again.

'Mom!' yells Jaxon. The police hear him and knock on the door.

When Jaxon opens the door the police ask if his parents are home. 'Sure,' says Jason. 'Mom!' he yells into the house.

Angela leans against the cupboards and tries to smooth her ragged breathing.

'Mom! The police are here!' Jaxon yells. 'Just a minute,' he says to the police. He peeks into the kitchen and sees his mother clinging to the edge of the counter looking as if she is going to vomit into the aluminium sink. 'You alright?' he asks.

Angela doesn't answer but she reaches for Jaxon and he helps her to a chair. He gets her some water and goes back to the police officers. 'Mom's not well,' he says. 'Can you come back later?'

'There's been a theft across the street,' the female cop says. 'We're interviewing the neighborhood to see if anyone saw anything - like an unfamiliar person, or a theft in progress, or just anything unusual?'

'I haven't seen anything. What got stolen?'

'Your neighbor had her bicycle stolen from her garage.'

'Huh? Wow! When? Mom was just watching her cleaning it! - Mom!' Jaxon steps back to the kitchen. 'Did you hear that? Someone stole the bike from across the street! Did you see anything?'

Angela rests her forehead on the bony backsides of her hands on the table. She rocks it from side-to-side on the ridges of her knuckles and whispers 'no'. She tries to find a way out of lying to her son and the police, and her quiet 'no' is more of a protest against her

predicament than an answer to the question.

She rakes her right hand up across her forehead, and drags her fingernails straight over the top of her head. She sits up and as she stands she blasts her chair away with the backs of her knees.

‘I did not watch anyone steal a bicycle.’ She holds the tips of her hair where last summer’s titbits of bleached mayhem cling. She faces the police as she reaches for Jaxon’s shoulder with one hand; she twists the tips of her hair with the other. As she gazes out of her door, over their shoulders, she sees the morning’s events as if they were a story from long ago; a story her great-grandmother might have told about the olden days, or the old country, or once-upon-a-time.

There had once been a girl, a good girl who did as she was told, and back in those times, that meant doing whatever the grown-ups said. They were hard times full of hard work, but the work was what kept the girl good. She grew-up and married and had a son. And she did as her husband said she should, and she was a better person for it. But after a time, because her husband succeeded at his work, as a good breadwinner should, she didn’t have as much work of her own to do. And she should have known, because her elders told her so, that she should make herself useful to the community – volunteer at the old people’s home or join the PTA – to keep her goodness active and intact. But she didn’t, and her goodness lost its freshness and became docile and thick. Until one day, she noticed the smell of another woman on her good husband’s shirt. And then, on another day, she was signing divorce papers, and then, on yet another day, she was living in her neighborhood with just her son and the alimony cheques weren’t as good as having a husband.

A princess lived across the street from her. She was a kind, although timid, princess with a beautiful, black mount that she seemed afraid to ride. The woman, who was no longer a girl or good, coveted the mount. She imagined herself in the saddle racing away through romantic landscapes to adventures and lovers and all kinds of non-sense. She watched the princess caring for her mount, cleaning it and petting it until one morning, the princess carelessly left the gate open and the mount escaped. Just like magic, it went straight across the street, to the woman and she knew that she and the mount were meant for each other. She knew in her heart that the grown-ups had been wrong about hard work and goodness, and she took the mount and rode away to live happily-ever-after.

‘Ma’am,’ said the policeman. ‘Ma’am, is there anything else you could tell us?’ ‘No. I can’t think of anything else,’ says Angela. She lets go of Jaxon’s shoulder and

stands up straight, her feet firm against the ground, her knees slightly bent.

Late at night, she checks on Jaxon. He's a knot in his sheets and blankets, his mp3 player still shuffling tunes through earphones plugged into his ears. Angela enters her dark garage through the kitchen. She swings the door open – it is noiseless because she oiled the hinges after the police left – and moves carefully around the boxes to where the bike is hidden. In the dark she runs her hands over the polished fenders and tests the springiness of the seat. She opens the side door to the garage, the door that leads to the outside of the house – it is noiseless because she oiled the hinges after she oiled the hinges of the kitchen door – and pushes the bicycle out into the night.

She walks the bike in the deepest shadows of the neighborhood until she comes to the end of the street, and then she mounts the bike and rides as fast as she can. She rides with the night air pushing against her face and rushing passed her ears until she is breathless and away from the houses. She peddles carelessly to the aqueduct. Angela walks with the bike on the path beside the water and listens to the watery sounds quietly flowing past them, and then she rushes sideways and heaves the bicycle at the dark flow. She watches the chromed handlebars sinking, silvery, beneath the water, and in the dull dawn light she sees tiny bubbles rising from the ends of the grips. Then she turns to walk home.

Coy Smiles

There's a sliver of a picture of my great aunt's face attached to the edge of my PC monitor. It's as if she's peeking around having a look at me while I work. She's not snooping - although, she was, in essence, a perpetual snoop - she's watching cheerfully as I clatter around on my keys, mistyping nearly every other word and correcting them, again and again. When I glance up, to inspect what I've written, her peeping eyes often catch me off guard.

Like the time she phoned and said she had a gift for me, and I should come over to visit and get it, soon. So I went to see her on the Monday, and on the Tuesday she collapsed, and on the Thursday she died in hospital.

That caught the hospital staff off guard! My aunt had stabilized and was expected to go home on Friday. Apparently her collapse hadn't been as minor as they had supposed.

The funeral was organized and well attended. When it was over, after a day or two, I went to her house and let myself in. There was a note on her console table addressed to me that, owing to the busy work of getting her to the hospital and arranging her funeral, I had overlooked. The note was on a thin brown package. It looked as if she had been getting them together to post.

Her haphazard, friendly handwriting gushed: *I forgot to give you your gift on your last visit. It won't be of much use soon, as the days keep slipping by. I'm posting it so you can start using it straight away.*

In the brown package was a calendar of naked Welsh farmers. I cannot know what inspired her to give me such a surprising gift. Perhaps it wasn't the naked farmers' coy smiles that induced her generosity. I'm thinking they sparked the idea of sharing a year's worth of days.

That takes me off guard.

Not a Chance

There are cracks in one large paving stone on the corner of 7th and Lincoln. I walk over there most days. There are bits of grass trying to grow in the cracks, but the stone is in a heavy foot traffic area. The grass hasn't got a chance. I watched a well-dressed woman in heels stab cross the grass and break a heel in the cracks. I saw a guy slump over the grass and spit chewing gum into the deepest part of the crack, right where most of the tiny bits of grass are hiding. It was a lucky shot.

That paving stone is at least one hundred years old. The streets are lined with big, old, stone houses with grand steps that climb up to the front door. These doors are so substantial they'd make an elephant feel minute if it stood in front of one. But what would an elephant be doing on Lincoln Street among these stately homes?

Cracking paving stones, perhaps.

It is the nature of seeds to grow wherever they can. Hence, weeds. Hence the grass that hasn't got a chance. Had the stone not cracked, the grass would have grown some other place, perhaps in someone's garden where it would have been eradicated by trowel or chemical. Or, it might have made its way to a vacant lot and grown there surrounded by other grasses, thistles, dandelions, broken bottles, ripped plastic bags, fag ends: you get the picture. Or, maybe it would have been eaten by a bird and through the wonders of digestion become an element of birdiness cruising the neighbourhood on wing, tweeting around, procreating through the wonder of eggs instead of through the grass seed compulsion to grow. Until, the bird lands in that garden where as a seed it would have been eradicated anyway, and is pounced by a cat.

That would make a feathery mess.

But, maybe, the cat would leave a bit of bird foot. Cats never eat everything they catch; there's always a bit of gut, or tail, or the tip of a snout lying about after a cat finishes. So, maybe the cat leaves a single, tiny bird foot. And the gardener comes along with her trowel and though, if she had seen the bird food lying there, she would have thrown it in the trash (she understands the necessary deadness of compost, but dead animals leave her cold), she actually turns the ground it's on. It would be buried, there. In her garden. The place where the seed might have found purchase is now the place where the bird has taken hold.

So to speak.

Or, maybe the cat wouldn't catch the bird and as the tiny creature flitters away from

the garden, and turns instead to go the vacant lot, it flies into the leg of an elephant that is just about to stomp on the paving stone at the corner of 7th and Lincoln. The bird is stunned and plops under the heavy foot of the elephant, only to be squashed there, an integral constituent of the cracks as they formed. Perhaps it had just eaten grass seed and because it had been frightened by the cat it had narrowly escaped, its digestion had momentarily stopped (fright does that) and the seeds were wholly intact.

The seeds might have used the warm blood of the bird as a stimulus to grow, and even though they were in the crack under heavy foot traffic, because the bird's body was so rich in nutrients, the grass would grow stronger than most other grass.

But what about that elephant?

It's hard to determine where an elephant would come from to arrive amongst such a stony stately neighbourhood. It would be too cliché to think it had escaped from a circus though, of course, I think we have already thought this because that is the first thing that comes to mind. There's a zoo about 10 miles from here. That would be a long way for an elephant to come unattended and unnoticed. Perhaps that is where I'm seeing it all wrong. An animal like that would have been spotted and tracked.

At the corner of 7th and Lincoln the trackers might have finally been enabled a clear shot. Bang! The gardener might have been out with her blower - she would have had headphones over ears for protection and wouldn't have noticed the hubbub in the street - and if she had yanked the starter on her blower just as the tracker shot, he'd have jerked from the sudden sound as he pulled the trigger on his dart gun. He could have shot the tranquiliser dart into the elephant's foot instead of its shoulder or its side. And hence the elephant would whack its foot against the paving stone, crash over in a stupor, smash the bird and inadvertently plant the grass seed.

That would have been years ago, surely. I have never heard of anything like that happening recently with respect to this neighbourhood and I have been walking here a very long time. And thinking, and watching. And that grass hasn't got a chance.

But I step over it anyway, just in case

H&M's Groceries and Other Good Stuff

She lived around the corner on Highland Avenue. I lived, still live, on Ford Street about two blocks away from my neighborhood grocer's, a place that actually carries green groceries. The owners there were young and innovative; they hadn't fallen in with the bags-of-chips-premade-sandwiches-and-candy-bar mentality that had taken over so many of the other neighbourhood stores.

It was at H&M Groceries and Other Good Stuff that I first saw her. She moved through the vegetable aisle caressing carrots, gripping cucumbers, testing the firmness of deep red onions – lifting one in each hand simultaneously. She would press her face into a bunch of flat leaf parsley and pull away chuckling, tiny droplets of water adhering to lips, nose and chin.

She was just as involving in the fruit aisle, flipping bananas on the tips of her fingers this way and that, checking. When avocados were in season she'd roll them across her forehead, over her cheeks and down her neck. When watermelon came in season she would carefully stroke and pat their rinds before giving them several firm slaps.

When I saw her doing her shopping that first time, I left my place in the fresh bread section and stood at the counter where Mike was. It was his turn at the register. Harley pounded down from their flat upstairs where he must have been monitoring the CCTV. He tip-toed down the last three steps as if to not disturb the mood. Her relationship with the produce was something spiritual.

A woman came in with a child and bought up all of the cinnamon snails and the last loaf of Russian Rye. As the woman with her child and her danish was being checked out, and bagged up, we three men watched the seductress selecting produce. Her produce.

When she was ready and standing at the counter with her choices, Mike and Harley casually talked with her about her particular methods for assessing the produce. I moved over to the fresh bread section and stared ruefully at the spot where my Russian Rye had been. The door bell jingled, more merrily it seemed, when she went out. Mike turned to Harley and asked 'What are we having for lunch?'

'I don't know,' he said as he climbed the stairs. 'How about a fruit salad?'

Mike stood swaying slightly as he watched me finishing my shopping. He checked my stuff, bagged me and herded me to the door.

I said, 'Who was that woman? She's, she's, well, she's –'
'Really something else?' Mike asked.

'Can't you do better than that?' I said.

'Hey man, at least I came up with something! She lives around the corner. She's one of our most delightful regulars and she's extraordinarily tactile with our produce, which she should be as it's the freshest produce found anywhere in this fair city. Now go home and think up your own descriptive adjectives.'

As he flipped the BACK IN 15 MINUTES sign I said, 'I thought you guys were gay.'

'What does that have to do with anything?' he said. 'I'm having lunch. We close for 15 minutes when we have lunch. Get your mind out of the gutter, you smutty man! She was picking produce, not pricking produce!'

Well, oh ha-ha. Clever Mike.

I had never looked at my neighbourhood the way I looked at it as I walked home that first time after seeing her. Every door seemed interesting, because it might be her door, and she might be putting her produce away behind it. Every window was interesting, because she might appear there, and I might glimpse her playfully tickling strawberries or vigorously rubbing rhubarb. I spied a bit of green leafy something on the sidewalk and wondered if it had been a part of her carefully chosen produce that had come loose and gotten lost from her caring embrace.

In my own place of residence, the 2nd floor Victorian apartment next to Peter's Musical Instrument Repairs and Antiquarian Music Shop (Catering to Collectors), which has high wide windows at the front that not only let in loads of sunlight, but also allow me an expansive view of the street and the houses across the way, I set about putting away my own groceries.

Ford Street is not a place of high automobile traffic, but instead draws quite a lot of foot traffic. The sidewalks are broad and, though old, have been well maintained. The roots of the mature maple trees have not been allowed to lift the paving slabs. Our little neighbourhood has a quiet self respect. And as I thought about that, the respect I and my neighbours shared about our neighbourhood, I couldn't help thinking about that woman and her respect for the fruit and vegetables.

I noted the time, and marked my calendar, hoping that I might eventually discover her routine so that I could continue to admire her tactual and marvellously entrancing appreciation of her provisions. Then I set about making my lunch, Onion Soup Au Gratin

from homemade beef stock, my own, of course, and the au gratin, of course, was sourdough bread crumbs and Gruyère.

A week later I was at Mike and Harley's casually doing my shopping, reading the labels of things I would never think to buy, like: pre-mixed 'Italian' spices; canned Pasta sauce (the White sauce made me shudder); Twinkies (a confection I'd eaten well into my teens but had never thought to read the appalling ingredients list) - you get the idea. She hadn't shown up as I had hoped. Finally Mike said from across the store, 'I'm hungry. If you're going to be here much longer, would you mind watching the store? I mean, I don't want to kick you out or anything - You know I wouldn't! - but I just don't like eating at the counter, and I like eating together, with Harley.'

Mike's a straightforward man. I bought the things I had come for and listened slightly guiltily to Mike's rumbling stomach. As we walked to the door, his tummy still complaining, Mike said, 'If you're waiting for someone, I think you might like to know that we have a regular customer who doesn't regularly visit us on this particular day, or at this time. She's a Thursday customer and she likes to arrive just as we're putting out the morning's fruit and veg deliveries.' I smiled at that, because I am so lacking in opacity and Mike so lacks finesse, and I hadn't had to work hard to discover the seductress's routine.

Thursday morning I headed over to H&M Groceries and Other Good Stuff. It hadn't occurred to me to ask at what time in the morning they put out their deliveries and I couldn't remember the opening hours. I have always been more concerned with closing times than opening times. Opening times seem to happen without effort on my part, but to miss a closing time means inconvenience, having to wait, missing out, in short: discomfort.

I missed her. Harley had a quiet chuckle and pointed out that the produce arrived before opening hours and that their opening hours were fairly early ones. I bought a loaf of crusty sourdough and three tomatoes. The tomatoes looked about the same degree of freshness as the ones I normally bought in the early afternoons days later, so I wondered what all the fuss was about; why she had to have it so fresh. Harley shrugged. 'Some people like to have the first pick, to be the first ones to choose. Maybe it's not about fresh so much as about first.' But somehow they seemed very close to the same thing to me, fresh and first, and I wondered about the authenticity of vegetable freshness when the veg wasn't straight off the vine straight out of your own garden. Being the first to inspect the produce as it went on display in the shop, wasn't being the first one to see it harvested.

It was a misty day that day I got to thinking about fresh and first. In the late morning I

sauntered back to my apartment with my cooling sourdough bread and three tomatoes. In the mist, I wondered if she had touched my tomatoes and passed them by for others, and what she was doing with her fresh first tomatoes or bananas or whatever it was that she had lovingly chosen that morning. I started thinking about opening hours and what they might mean. And then forgot everything as, in the mist ahead and on the other side of the street, I thought I spied *her*.

As I said before, the maples on our streets are old; their trunks are large. I moved among them, a shadowless figure in the fog, seeking glimpses of the woman as she moved along the sidewalk. She slowed and turned to glance behind, but I anticipated her and didn't move away from a sheltering tree until I heard her regain her pace which wasn't nearly as quick as my thundering heart beat. I realized that for some reason unknown to me, I was playing a one-sided game of hide-and-seek.

She walked steadily on into the mist. I took a wild chance and dashed across the street to the door of my apartment building where I could hide in the deep, tiled entryway. My keys were in my pocket, well, one of my pockets, and certainly not to hand. 'Oh, oh, oh, come on!' I whispered as I shifted my groceries from arm-to-arm and patted every pocket on my person.

The sound of shuffling behind, like little ballerina shoes twisting on coarsely ground black pepper, caused me to start and drop my tomatoes. No: They didn't roll away like some comic affect. They just dropped with a thump and splatted.

'Your tomatoes!' she said, alarmed. And there she was, bending forward, her dark hair spilling over the shoulders of her blood red velvet coat, her pale hands reaching down tenderly to the smashed tomatoes in their clear plastic bag. She scooped them up, myself transfixed and flustered, and held them out to me. 'Your tomatoes,' she said with sympathy.

The first four words she had ever spoken to me, and they were actually only two words twice that embraced far more emotion and feeling than I had ever noticed two words could.

All I said limply was, 'My tomatoes.'

The first two words I had ever spoken to her, and one of them was a repeat of two of hers, but lacking in emotive resonance.

She pushed the smitten tomatoes forward for me to take, which I did. This somehow stirred my courage and I said, 'I think I've seen you at H&M's; is that right?'

She cocked her head, looking closely at my features. 'I thought I'd seen you somewhere before,' she replied. 'Even in the fog back there you seemed familiar. What were

you doing, anyway? Is there something wrong with the trees?’

Did I wince? I felt my face starting into that familiar twist but I think I managed to transform it into an expression indicative of contemplative thought as if pondering her question. ‘The trees are doing very well this season,’ I said. ‘I’m pleased with how well they’re coming on, considering their age and all.’

‘Are you an arborist, then?’ she asked.

‘An amateur, only. I do take a keen interest in the trees of our neighbourhood...’ but I was already beginning to bore even me! How was I going to get out of this with my true identity intact and a chance of successfully asking her over for a meal, although I desperately wanted to be cooked for by her. Her attentive produce inspection and selection could only connote her intentions regarding future flawlessly created cuisine.

The smashed tomatoes looked pathetic in the plastic bag, cracked and dripping, and I abruptly said, ‘I’m Tony Frederickson.’ She said, ‘It’s nice to meet you. See you around sometime,’ and slid away into the thickening mist! I was saying ‘Nice, nice, to meet y---’ but she was gone. And I was left there standing on my Victorian tiles, wondering what had just happened, with my sourdough gone cold and my tomatoes seeping out of a tiny hole in the sagging plastic bag. ‘Wait!’ I called into the mist but all that replied was a dull, subdued, one-off echo bounced from the houses across the street. It was as pathetic as the tomatoes.

Found the keys. Climbed the stairs. The front curtains were pulled open but the mist was so tight and thick against the windows that the lively colours of the sitting room had gone dark and grey. The mist, attached to my windows, had become parasitic, a colour sucker draining everything around me. I shuddered and pulled the curtains, turned on the floor lamps and shuffled to the kitchen to try to salvage my lunch and my sense of self, whatever that was.

As I worked over my tomatoes and warmed the sourdough, my determination to get to know her began to seep back. At least we were half way introduced. The next step was to get *her* name. Then give her my number. She already knew where I lived while I was still left with my fantasies of her kitchen.

The sight and smell of my completed meal of roughly chopped ‘fresh’ nearly ‘first’ tomatoes mixed with finely chopped mild onions, flavoursome balsamic vinegar and dark green cilantro piled on slices of sourdough that had been crisped in my warm oven then brushed with nutty olive oil (salt and pepper to taste, of course) revived me. I began to form a plan. As I ate, and planned, the mists thinned and beams of the noontime sun split through the gaps in the curtains. With the sunlight came the colour. As I swept open the curtains my

sitting room lit up like the proverbial light bulb over the head.

My plan did not involve stalking. A man who cannot successfully stalk in a heavy mist is a man who unequivocally hasn't the talent for stalking. I simply walked into H&M's, started a conversation with Harley while I shopped for this and that, and then, as I checked-out, asked what her name was. OK. That doesn't sound like much of a plan. That was just the beginning of the plan, and I don't know why I hadn't just been that straightforward before. I suppose I thought it would sound too 'eager', or too 'lustful', or too 'snoopy.' And now, with that thought in mind, I suppose that is why I didn't just ask him where she lived when I asked her name. It took me another two weeks to accomplish that.

Two weeks of mulling over her name as I cooked and worked (I'm a self-employed accountant), when I fell asleep, or read, or watched the news. For two weeks, fourteen days and nights, my mind was full of Charmaine. Somehow having a name connected to the red velvet coat, that long dark hair, those white delicate fingers caressing fruit and vegetables, riveted Charmaine to my imagination and spurred it into action. She became my never-ending fantasy, to the point that I discovered doodles of her name, that I couldn't remember doodling, on my note pads, and I played games with letters in her name. For example: If you remove all of the letters in Charmaine's name from Peter's Musical Instrument Repairs and Antiquarian Music Shop (Catering to Collectors) you end up with Ptr's usl stut ps d tqun us sop to oll tos. The shop's name was rendered senseless without her and this inexplicably became how I viewed my life for two weeks. My life was, and had always been, senseless without Charmaine in it.

After two weeks I sensed that I was slipping along on the thinnest slice of rationality, and had better try to grasp something more substantial before I cracked through to oblivion. I casually walked to H&M's. My eyes dodged all written material, to avoid constructing Charmaine's name everywhere, a difficult thing to accomplish in the city. At H&M's I desperately tried not to act like some infatuated unhinged driveller. I made idle conversation with Mike. Without buying anything I left the shop. I also left without getting what I'd come for. In my panic to appear sane, I had forgotten to ask where Charmaine lived. As I swung around to re-enter the store, Mike opened the door and said, 'She lives around the corner from you on Highland Street. About a block and a half down. On the right.' He laughed as he walked back over to the counter where Harley had just arrived from upstairs. All I could see was the back of Mike's head, but Harley's gaze shifted from Mike's face and in my direction. They went into an affectionate huddle. I saw this all from the corner of my eye as I bounded

away toward home.

But, at the hole-in-the-wall Mexican on the way towards Highland Street, I stopped. I was too excited to cook for myself that night, and too tangled up in euphoria. Mildly spiced refried beans and shredded pork with cheese, sour cream and guacamole rolled in warm corn tortillas, with fried rice on the side with that little bit of thinly sliced iceberg (sometimes called salad) on a thick, white paper plate was just the antidote to calm me. I had to calm down to think because that evening, that very evening, I and my plan would go into action. I couldn't go into action with an empty and over excited stomach.

I walked over to Highland Street confident that I would be able to locate Charmaine's place. It was supper time and it was a warm evening, so I expected the smells of her cooking would float out of her open kitchen windows and drape invisibly in the trees and hover around her apartment as if reluctant to leave her presence. As I rounded the corner my anticipation leapt to my nose. Just before the first street I started sniffing the short quick searching sniffs of the animal on the prowl. My pace slowed, my head cocked back and shifted this way and that, searching for the scent. There was a car ahead, a diesel that needed a tune up. My search was stalled while the air cleared of the bad smells it left around me. I knew it must be there, the smell of Charmaine working her magic on her enchanted produce; her dark hair piled high revealing a slight dampness at the crook of her neck from her efforts over the stove. It was a distracting image and difficult, but necessary, to shake off in order to concentrate on the air that surrounded me as I walked to the middle of the block.

Then, on to the end of the block. Then across the street and back down to my street corner. And, back up again. My plan wasn't going to plan. There wasn't the scent of cooking food of any kind. The heat amplified other odours that registered high alert with my olfactory system, complete with flashing red images behind my eyes and blasts of loud sounds. This was all in my head, of course, but an entangled couple walking past me, quickly disengaged and hurried by single file. Revulsion is hard to keep off the facial features. I know I wasn't speaking out loud: My face said it all. I must have looked like a madman.

My plan in shatters, and with whiffs of purification accosting my nose, I rounded the corner onto my street and ran straight into Charmaine. This was not a subtle brush of an arm against a sleeve, or quiet tapping of elbows; this was a full-frontal slam that sent us both down onto the sidewalk. A concerned driver laughed out his window as he drove by, but I was too stunned to respond to his kindness, and Charmaine, the poor woman, slowly lowered her head to the ground as she tried to retrieve the breath that had been slammed out of her. A

couple of tangerines rolled to rest by her head. For a few seconds those bright orange orbs were the only thing I could see, but I could not make any sense of them. As my brain slowly stopped sloshing against the inside of my skull, the tangerines registered as fruit in an incongruous place. And still, I could not make sense of them. My eyes circled around Charmaine's gasping lips, and followed the trail of her hair splayed across the hot sidewalk, before I grasped what had happened.

Her eyes spun around until she abruptly focused on me, caught her breath, and rasped 'You!' I was trying to scramble up but couldn't seem to get my balance in-order and staggered around, nearly falling over on her, head first, as if diving into the public pool! Charmaine squealed and kicked her legs up. Her arms thrashed. And, then, I was upright and standing straight (albeit with a crushed tangerine under one foot) with Charmaine below me couching her head in her arms. Her elbows were exquisite, sharp points of white against her tumbling tresses. One of her sleeves opened away from her arm revealing a smooth line of white flesh running right up to her armpit.

Let us take a breath.

Mike swung around the corner scooping the one uncrushed tangerine in his hand as he slipped his other arm under her back and lifted Charmaine up, straight up! We were standing face-to-face, she and I, and Mike laughed. He handed me the tangerine. He said. 'Come, both of you, over to me and Harvey's. Sunday at 4:00 o'clock.' He shouted from way down the street, 'Four PM! Four peee-emmm! NO Morning Hours...'

Yeah, right. Clever Mike.

Charmaine's Peruvian shopping bag was still on her shoulder, and most of her evening's shopping (Evening's shopping?) was still contained within. She looked at me and said, 'OK, Fred, isn't it? Fred, yes. Four pm tomorrow. See you Fred...' She didn't look back as she moved toward her house. I watched her walk around the corner as she reached into her other, leather, bag to get her keys. I saw her check the contents of her colourful shopping bag, eyeing each item, as her fingers sorted through her keys. She chose one, stepped up to a dark purple door, and inserted the key.

As she closed her door I turned toward my house, thinking of what she might be doing next. Surely, she would go straight to her kitchen where she would remove the various contents of her shopping bag, one by one, compassionately inspecting each piece for dents and bruises. Perhaps she would have to sort them in order of degree of injury, for injured produce decomposes more quickly, which would cause her to rethink her dinner menu in

order to salvage as much of the goodness of the hurt ones before they became inedible.

I was in a reverie that carried me along my street under the shadows of the maples without even noticing where I was until I reheard her call me 'Fred.' With a start I snapped back to consciousness to find myself on the other side of the street from my apartment, gazing up at my own window. It reflected the setting sun as a piercing light that seemed to jab painfully in my eyes the way the word 'Fred' was striking pain in my heart. For although I had managed, despite the total failure of my inept plan to search Charmaine down through the scent of her cooking, and thereby 'happen' to ask for some small assistance (a cup of sugar, perhaps; I was leaving room for the spontaneity of the moment), to find where she lived, I had not managed to make a favourable impression of any sort.

'Fred' was not the kind of man I wanted to be remembered as.

Why Mike wanted us over at 4 pm was a mystery but I was game. Although feeling sheepish and disheartened, I wandered over, taking the back streets in order to avoid having to walk with Charmaine. I didn't want to jeopardize any small chance of making a better impression, out there on the streets, as the outdoors was surely turning out to be a dangerous place.

She must have had a similar thought because I saw her, as I rounded out of an alley, walking rather slowly, perhaps reluctantly, ahead of me. The right thing to do was to turn back into the alley, which I did, to give her time to get out of view. A couple passed by and saw me in the alley's shadows. (Could it have been the same couple from the day before?) They hurried their pace. I waited what seemed long enough to give Charmaine enough lead time to keep us apart, then walked out of the alley as if I knew what I was about.

No Charmaine in sight. But I'm not sure why this seemed like such a relief because soon enough I'd be at Harley and Mike's with Charmaine who would surely have our run-in incident still fresh in mind. This whole get together suddenly seemed like a very bad idea, that seeing Charmaine so soon would just reinforce an association between her, me and calamity. In other words: Fred.

I thought I might just go back home and avoid Charmaine, to let the memory fade. Perhaps in six months or a year I could try again, slowly, to get to know her and her cookery ways. My ruminations blinded me to my location and I abruptly realized that I was at H&M's open door. And there was a crowd inside. And just inside the door was Charmaine with her back to the crowd. Her eyes were wide-open and disturbed. Her body had gone angular, with elbows and knees making corners and points in an alarming sort of way. It was clear she was

about to bolt from the place, and I'm not sure what overcame me, (PE drills from high school sludged in the non-verbal parts of my brain, or some primeval instinct to chase prey, perhaps?) but I had an over-whelming urge to tackle, her.

She bolted.

It couldn't have been a pretty sight.

A member of the crowd took a video as he rushed out of H&M Groceries and Other Good Stuff; it really was *not* pretty. Even Charmaine, with her long dark hair and white skin, was not pretty with her face smashed against the grimy grey sidewalk. I was making uncouth wide mouthed expressions of disbelief and anguish, shame, horror, and whatnot, while still atop the gasping and nearly unconscious woman. A triumph of humiliation! And all of it ended up on the local TV channel KYB24.

In the early video, before it was truncated to highlight only the fall, Mike steps into the frame and manhandles me off of Charmaine. He is wearing a black t-shirt with H&M Groceries printed in large white letters on front and back. I am so traumatized by my own actions that I appear to have lost my grip on physicality. A large woman leans over me while Mike helps Charmaine to sit up. The sound of a siren grows louder. Everywhere Mike moves, always in the frame, H&M is clearly in view.

In the background, Harley stands in the doorway of the shop with a platter piled high with bite sized, homemade goodies – the reason for the crowd. As people mull round watching the action, they eat delicious morsels, examples of what they too might concoct in their own homes from products purchased from H&M's. There the videos end, at least on the news and in short critiques from food critics praising the exciting things going on over at Harley and Mike's. It was good stuff. Charmaine's phobia of crowds combined with my animal response brought them exposure and success like they had never imagined.

I wasn't charged with assault. As far as anybody knew or saw, we had run into one another accidentally. Charmaine had been in a panicked state of mind from the surprise of the crowd and she couldn't have known that her agitation had set off something in me. From her point of view she had run straight into *me*. She doesn't even remember hitting the sidewalk. She doesn't remember Mike helping her up or the paramedics flashing lights into her eyes. She remembers refusing, forcefully, to go to the hospital, and taking hold of my arm. She said, 'Fred, please take me away from this!'

I made macaroni and cheese while she chatted across the counter in my kitchen. It takes at least two kinds of cheese to make that dish rich and satisfying, and finely chopped

onion sautéed in a little butter. Bread crumbs mixed with black pepper, grated farmhouse cheddar and a little paprika make the perfect topping. When it comes out of the oven the whole affect is golden – pure comfort.

‘Would you like peas or a light garden salad with your meal?’ I asked Charmaine.

‘Let’s leave the vegetables alone tonight,’ she said.

We sat on the couch with our bowls of mac-and-cheese, and watched the twilight exaggerate the colours and shadows in my house. The colours were in constant flux as the sunlight moved, the beams angling this way and that, an entertaining wall show. A smoke like dusk settled in the room, and Charmaine said, ‘Ah. That’s nice, isn’t it? The colours get a chance to rest, and so do we. I’m so full. Thank you, Fred. You’ve been very kind.’

We fell asleep on the couch , top-to-toe. In the morning we were full of ache. I hadn’t noticed the evening before, in darkening room, that Charmaine’s face had bruised down one side and that both of my knees had oozed from the fall. Black-and-blue and crusty we creakily removed ourselves from the couch to go soak in the bath.

She moved in that afternoon.

This is the end of the story, but you’re probably wondering about something: Charmaine is a talented textile artist who is inspired by the colours and textures of garden produce. The fresher the produce, the longer it lasts for her to study. She weaves and sews and dyes, creating textures and colours, shapes and images, wonderful sensuous things. But she does not apply her expertise to creative cooking. Charmaine is a lousy cook which you might think bothers me, considering all the time I spent fantasying about what kinds of things she was cooking up in her kitchen. It doesn’t. She may be a terrible cook, but she has an eye for good produce. There are many benefits to loving Charmaine. Fred is a pretty lucky guy.

The White Flower

(Narcissus and Echo, updated)

Ashley is shattered. I have never seen anyone so broken up; broken up.

Ashley is the most beautiful person I have ever seen. I saw him first in an unlikely place: the woods; he collecting plants; me just wandering, as I do, in the woods.

It is the best place to find my mind, to calm my thoughts. Through their inexorable hold of the ground, the trees sooth me. The ferns, their feet entangled in the earth, their leaves like feathers in gentle quiet breezes, caress my mind. The occasional bird, brave enough to enter my reveries, is a nuisance. Deer bounding, squirrels frittering, slugs smudging are all un-earthbound intrusions on my tranquillity. I have, in times before, felt the impulse to strangle their movements with my hands, or crush them underfoot. Most times, they escaped.

Ashley was on his knees bending over a plant. I had no idea what he was doing when I first saw him, in fact, was startled by his movement; he was held in such a rigid hush as he examined the flower. He was dressed in browns and greens, not camouflage, but ribbed corduroy and brushed cotton, moleskin. Like a hunk of decomposing tree trunk covered in moss and mushrooms, he seemed earthed. I was transfixed and watched him until he moved, and then I gasped, 'You move!'

He stood and turned to me, his pale face flushed with surprise. 'Say again?'

'Again: You move!' But I was no longer startled. I saw him for what he was and, for an instant, felt annoyed, until he faced me squarely and I *saw* him. Dark and rumpled curling hair, wide dark eyes, broad shoulders, small feet. He held a field book (of plants and flowers, I later discovered: a rare print), and on the ground over which he had been bending was a trowel, a plastic bag full of wet burlap and smaller plastic bags and tags, and a pen of indelible ink. A white flower bobbed beside his leather boot.

'I didn't see you there,' he said.

'Yes. Didn't see you there. Sorry. I'm just walking. I'll just walk...' I left the woods without calmed thoughts. My mind was riveted to a kaleidoscope of images of the man - his skin, his hair, the depth of his dark eyes - convoluting in and out and around. I wondered if I'd ever see him again, or if I'd just be haunted by the inaccessibility of his beauty, because I was sure he was lost to me, forever. Forever, lost.

There was mud all over my boots from walking distractedly through the woods. They wouldn't wipe clean on the grassy lawn outside my apartment building and some pisser

walked by commenting unsympathetically on my having stepped in tenaciously clingy dog crap.

‘It’s mud,’ I said.

‘Of course,’ she said. She smirked. (Smirk is not a word I have often used.) She shouldn’t have.

The second time I saw Ashley is as vivid, in my mind as the first. Surprisingly, he was just as beautiful as before even though we were in completely different circumstances. I said ‘surprising’ because I have never seen a person for the second time and thought they looked as good, or as bad, as the first time. They lose their initial ‘boom’, are less distinct, have lost some animation.

I have to move swiftly, as if in a terrible hurry, when I am in town. The town is why I go to the woods because in town there are windows reflecting every movement and through most of the windows you can see the movement within. All the movement seems unconnected as if it has no source, with light dashing here and there from this place or that, and sounds bouncing, bouncing, bouncing and intertwining, fading, swelling, swooning everywhere. I dash to dodge the noise and when I do I become like the reflections: unconnected movement, un-calm.

Ashley was standing at a bus stop. I didn’t know it was a bus stop until later because I glanced him in a reflection, in a window I was hurrying passed, on the other side of the street. He stood clearly, waiting against a brick wall, and I stepped backwards back to the darkened window to look at him before it was clear to me that he was on the other side of the street.

A bus came between us just as our eyes met. A frenzy caught me, a desperate one, and I ran around the bus, around the front of the bus, but the driver slammed the bus door and drove without me. I was crying ‘No! NO! NO!’ and running down the road, with all the noises of automobiles chasing around me, when I heard, in the swirl of sounds, ‘It’s You! It’s ME! Come Back. I’m here! I’m HERE!’

Autos stampeded behind me, moving towards me and around me, with many drivers urgently signalling my predicament through words, blasts, and gestures. So I closed my eyes and tip-toed to the side as quietly as I could. Ashley caught me when I was nearly there, and pulled me onto the curb. That was the first time he touched me; it felt like walking in the woods in a warm mist.

When I opened my eyes they were immediately filled with him, only him, and the only sound I heard was his voice, just his voice. All the noises of the town went blank and the

movement held still.

He held me by my shoulders at arm's length and looked me all over. 'Are you alright?' he said. 'That was scary, seeing you running in the traffic. You could have been hit. You could have been killed!'

'I thought you were on the bus and I didn't want you to be,' was all I could think to say. What he didn't know, what he found out later, was that, in a way, something in me *had* been killed, but not by the traffic, but by his beauty; and the spirit of that dead something was impulsive and possessive. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight until he said, 'You're strangling me. Let me go!'

It had not been my intention, to hurt him, it wasn't what I'd had in mind; just to keep him close, feel him near. And as I let him go the sounds of the town swooped in with a mighty gush and it was time for me to hurry again, to duck around the noise and get on my way.

'I'll be on my way, thank you. Good to see you, got to go!' I started off but he caught me by the hand, by my ring and little fingers, and pulled back gently.

'But wait,' he said. 'But you haven't said your name (I'm Ashley, incidentally) and it might be a long time before you see me again. How often do you run into someone in the woods? I'm there often and you'd never seen me before, had you?'

His eyes were dark and imploring and I wanted to tell him everything in my heart, every feeling that was pouring through me, how beautiful he was and how perfect he was, from his petite white hands with forest soil outlining the tips of his fingernails, to the toe tips of his fraying high-tops.

'Effie, I'm Effie. My name is Effie. Effie. It's Effie.' O! Sun in the sky—Earth below, my name is Effie and babbling is, unfortunately, the form my verbal communication takes. It is ineffectual, and absentminded. By keeping my lips tight, suppressing my flapping tongue, I am able to produce cryptic transmissions that, in order to be fully understood, require thoughtful examination. Unlike babbling, cryptickizing does not incite the impulse to either cover ones ears or run away, the way that babbling can.

Ashley stopped me. I will never know if he stopped me because he intuited that the babble would ramble in rapid unpredictable ways, or if he just had other things on his mind. Later I learned that he often, usually, had other things on his mind when I spoke. While my mind flies away to other spheres when I speak, his mind stays focussed, centred, pinpointed to the spot of his subject, his single minded subject, when he speaks. It stays on his subject when

he doesn't speak too. This has worked out well for me.

My world is my own place. Not the world that is Town where hurry and motion are in extreme and getting through and around it is exciting but exhausting. The place where I inhabit is another kind of place in which unheard-of, I'm told impossible, things happen. If you look around me you will see that they are not impossible at all for they are happening, they have happened, and Ashley is proof of it. Ordered, becalmed, with few words, my world moves like a low slow breeze or a clear smooth spring, continually moving just enough to prevent stagnation, and that is all.

We left the bus stop on foot. Ashley suggested a walk through a nearby park, 'Do you have a little time?' he asked. As we walked, he talked, his mind exactly where he wanted it to be. It was perfect: the walking kept my thoughts with him and his talking calmed me too. It was exquisite strolling beside this graceful preoccupied man whose body swayed with his voice, his dark curls snatching golden flecks of sunlight as he looked at me, the park, the sky, the path, the grass, the shrubs. He said my name, 'I hunt rare plants, Effie, and propagate them to sell on to collectors. I collect rare plants myself, and have several that are difficult to cultivate. They are, Effie,' and he whispered it close to my ear, 'illegal to take from the wild. I see my efforts as a way of protecting them, you know Effie? Like preserving them in a zoo.'

Before I realised how far we had gone, we were standing in front of a tidy greenhouse, with an old wooden frame, in a secluded courtyard. Ashley was quiet. He stood with his hand on the door looking in at the rows of tiny seedlings and cuttings, and the larger mature plants, the parents, of the little ones. He looked at his own reflection and I saw the strangest image of him, his pale face hovering amongst rows of plants in identical pots, the long rows stretching into infinity.

'Ashley?' I said. He didn't move, seemed transfixed. 'Ashley? Ashley!'

He was struggling with something. Whatever it was had a grip on him and he appeared locked into a compelling staring competition with himself. The face in the reflection had lost all expression and liveliness; the man standing beside me did not blink, twitch, or sniff.

His palm was locked over the handle of the door but his little finger and ring finger came loose, so I pulled on them until his hand was free of the door. He turned toward me but his gaze did not rest on me. It was as if I wasn't there; I wasn't there.

I took him by the shoulders and shook him; his blank face frightened me, and I

shouted, 'Are you alright? 'you alright?'

Suddenly he was animated again, and he saw me there, and felt me, because he took my hands off of his shoulders and said, 'That hurts!'

'That was scary seeing you like that!'

'Like what?'

'Like what? Like that!' and I pointed to his reflection, 'Like silent and staring, without movement, without expression.'

'I don't know what you mean,' he said. He turned the handle of the greenhouse and then changed his mind, and let it go. 'I've taken up too much of your time. I need to get to work now. Hope you don't mind.'

It was a gentle rejection, walking me to the road and then to the crossroads, where I knew the way home from. He didn't say much and my mind wanted to drift, but my mouth stayed shut and the words stayed inside me, my mind stayed close. I stood at the corner and watched him walk away, walking so gracefully and thoughtfully that the beauty of it made me want to cry. I didn't cry. A skulking snail slipped under the sole of my boot and crunched dully into a slab that dragged back-and-forth into the dirt until Ashley was out of sight

The day was a shambles and nearly all gone away. The way home from Ashley's crossroads was long, longer than it should have been, to avoid the noise and scurry of the town. I had not completed my morning's errands and didn't feel up to finishing them in the darkening day, my hours spent with Ashley having drained me away. Drifting was the way, just drifting along was the way I went, until my apartment building was in front of me and inside my flat was an egg, a single egg, for supper, and a tin of quartered peaches. The sight of Ashley had pushed everything out of my mind.

In the night a dream occurred to me. I was in the woods and Ashley was not there. It was then, as a dreamer and as an awaker (for it is often simpler to be awake in a dream), that the memory of the white flower nodding by Ashley's foot was remembered. There was something about that white flower that had caught his attention. In the dream I examined it from every angle, from above it and beside all its sides and even from underground, where there were tiny bulbs forming along spidery white veins. In the dream the earth just fell away and let me have a thorough intimate look. Earthworms squirmed, suspended in air where their earth had been, which made me nervous for their comfort, and I hurried to finish the task. When I was finished, the earth tucked neatly around the worms and roots. The flower nodded, fine, white and lucent, hanging tightly to the top of its spindly stem. And, I woke up.

This dream made me exceedingly happy even though my examination of the flower had not produced any revelations about its particular qualities. I woke up hungry, and early, and took to the road as soon as I had washed and dressed. My image in the bathroom mirror looked lonely when I thought of Ashley's image in the greenhouse glass with the rows of his plants inhabiting so much of the space. All those plants to keep him company! There, in my mirror, was only me with a pink towel hanging restlessly behind on a hook.

The way to the woods runs past a bakery, and there I got food for my journey. There is also a garden centre, and even though it was closed, it being so early in the day, there were discarded pots and broken tools in the skip in the back.

It was quiet at the woods except for the birds, but they kept their distance sparing me the any further distractions. At the spot where I had discovered Ashley, the flower still grew. The ground was lightly damp but it was comfortable and seemed warm, and I lay down beside the flower, where Ashley had been kneeling, and caressed its petals with the tips of my fingers. Such a sweet thing it was, both to see and smell, and like in my dream I inspected all of it, even the roots, because I dug it up with my broken trowel and looked and touch all of it. When it was planted in a black plastic container, we sat together by a grand old tree where I finally ate my bakery goods.

I adored the flower. It was the gateway to my love of Ashley; the starting point of all that had come after. The one single flower changed everything. Its darling bobbing head had held him transfixed in unmoving contemplation and, had he not discovered it, I might never have seen him. It was with a happy and grateful heart that I left the woods with Ashley's flower, his lovely flower, cradled in my hands.

It stayed with me for a day, then two, until the third day, when it looked a little droopy and I reasoned that it needed the care of two of us, Ashley's and mine, to keep healthy. The roads were busy with people and cars but I wanted to get to Ashley's as quickly as possible and dodged through town.

He wasn't in his greenhouse. The dear little flower looked haggard from the frantic trip, so I tucked it in the crook of my arm to protect it and waited, sitting on the concrete with my back against the greenhouse door, for Ashley to return.

We were there a long time and I got restless, was restless, restlessness being foreign to who I am. The greenhouse door was locked but I watched the plants and flowers inside, protected and warm, with their heads and arms raised up to the light that nourished them. Perfect rows, all evenly spaced, sorted by size and variety, all of Ashley's plants, in there,

while the little flower hunched with me outside, languishing, because Ashley wouldn't come back. 'Come back!' I shouted. 'Ashley, come back, come back!'

'What are you doing here, Effie?' he said.

He was watching me from over a fence, his head just above the frame, so that it seemed to float there on its own. His head floated along the edge of the fence to a gate until the gate opened to show all of him, standing in the gateway looking puzzled. 'What have you got there?' He nodded at the flower.

I held it out to him. Our flower. He took the pot and said, 'It's a narcissus, narcissus papyraceus. Paper-white, just a common little flower that grows everywhere.'

'It's the flower that you were looking at the time we met in the woods. Don't you remember? You must remember; you had a book and you knelt by this flower.'

Ashley pressed the soil in the pot with his thumbs. 'It's blooming a little out of season.'

'But the book. You checked it with the book. It must be special.'

'Oh, the book is special. My grandmother gave it to me. It's what got me collecting flowers,' and he talked about her love of him which he had invested in the desire for rare flowers. He talked about the greenhouse which she had preserved and bequeathed to him, her love for him at been so strong.

He talked to me but he looked at his reflection in the greenhouse glass, as if it were talking to him and watching him, gesturing to him, with pleasure and attentiveness. There were two Ashley's to watch and they held my full attention, but not the words of the one, not the meaning of the words so much as the continual running of them like a brook, a sparkling brook...

He nudged me. 'Hey, I have to get back to work. Here's your flower.'

The flower was limp. 'It's yours,' I said. 'It's for you.'

'I can't keep it, Effie. There are certain steps I go through when I collect plants, to catalogue them, to protect them and protect the greenhouse. Things have to be done correctly; everything has to be done right. You understand.' He tipped his head at the Ashley in the glass. 'Besides, these are a dime-a-dozen. You can pick them up anywhere – they even sell them in supermarkets.' He took my hand, his had a chill on it, and put the flower in mine. 'Papyraceus. For you.'

He went back through the gate. His head bobbed along the top and when it was gone I peeked through a knothole. He opened a screen door and watched himself rearrange his curls

in the window of a door before he went inside.

The edges of the flower's petals were turning in on themselves. They were the colour of weak milky coffee. It looked very wrong to me, and I knew that Ashley was wrong about this flower, that it *was* rare. It was in fact as rare as the ones he kept inside. The ones he sterilized and labelled, kept in tidy rows in their safe environment to flourish, would never match the singular rarity of this languishing fading flower, for it was our meeting point and our beginning. No other plant in the whole world had that distinction.

Abandonment is a heavy word that with its weight describes its effects on those who inflict it and receive it. As usual, I felt my way through my mind and walked away from the flower, heavy and sad but hopeful – there's always the hope – that Ashley would recognize the value of our flower and take it loving into his house. I did not know how to care for it. In my care it would surely expire so it stood at the door of Ashley's warm and humid greenhouse waiting for him to return, to place it with the others, those precious others, where it belonged.

For a day, it was at Ashley's, then another day and on the third day I woke up from a terrible dream that splintered away from me before I could grasp it, leaving me parched, desperately thirsty and alarmed.

It was early morning, with the sun hanging back on the horizon, and the moon still clinging doggedly to the sky. There was a dry and persistent wind that whisked along behind me, pushing me tenaciously, and I felt borne along by it and trammelled by it, its pressure forcing my body always towards Ashley's house.

The greenhouse had a demure light barely aglow but it was enough, just enough, to illuminate the plants within. A small bit of glow seeped from the moon and I saw, crushed on the ground, on the concrete, the white flower. It was containerless, its roots dry and exposed and trampled with dried dirt stuck here and there. The petals were shrivelled, stuck together in a mashed clump of dirty yellow and grey. Its stem was no more, no more.

In that moment, as the moon's light gave way to the sun's light, Ashley's beauty shone more than ever before. Our flower's destruction showed to me the fragility of life and beauty, and the terror and horror of what was surely to come, and it was clear to me that there was a way to suspend it, if needs be.

I lay down on the concrete beside the greenhouse behind a pile of deck chairs. I lay there until I heard the screen door open, and I heard Ashley speaking. 'Yeah, put on the coffee, would you? I've got to check the greenhouse.'

And I heard a familiar voice answer something muffled. And then clearly she said ‘Of course.’ I jumped to the fence and looked through the knothole and saw her, the smirker, leaning out of Ashley’s door.

He opened the gate but I was against the fence and he didn’t see me as he walked through, walked right passed, his spirals of curls bouncing softly as he passed. His reflection in the green house glass was clear, and he looked at himself as if transfixed, like before, he slowly moved his head to view the angles of his face and shifting twinkles in his eyes. His lips pouted then tuned up slightly, he was so pleased to see himself, but then he grew still, and looked hard into his own eyes until he appeared to collapse into a terrible insatiable yearning.

Ashley didn’t notice me as I stepped out from behind him, didn’t see me at all, not a flicker of his eyes, as I lifted a shovel that was propped against the fence. As the shovel hit the glass, crashed into his reflection, for just an instant, our eyes met and he looked relieved. He looked *relieved*.

He was there and he was gone. The smirking woman came out in a silken bathrobe and shrieked, ‘Where’s Ashley? He’s going to kill you for this!’ She wouldn’t believe me when I said ‘He’s here! Look he’s here!’ And she didn’t look, wouldn’t look, where I was pointing at the shards on the ground, or at the shiver of glass balanced in on hand. She ran back into the house shouting ‘Ashley! Come quick! That crazy girl has broken your greenhouse! Ashley! Ashley?...’

I gathered him up, all the radiant pieces of him, and swept up the tiny bright nuggets and sparkly dust, and took him to the woods. He’s there, everywhere, beside flowers, in the crooks-and-crannies of trees, and atop rocks. Some shards mirror each other so he can see *him* over and over, and some of him reflects the sunbeams that trickle between leaves to skim along the floor, the luscious floor, of the woods.

When I walk through the woods he glances me from every angle, from every direction he sees me; he sees *me*.

One Dark Morning in the Middle of Winter

The coal bucket can be hard enough to handle on dark mornings in the middle of winter when it's windy, cold, and pelting down rain. But when the coal bunker is nearly empty and I have to drag the bucket along the bottom to scrape out the dregs, it is particularly difficult to manoeuvre.

One morning last winter was the worst it has ever been. Ever. For as I dragged the bucket around in the dark, wearing only my bath robe and underwear, my ankles bare and chilled above floppy slippers, my scuttle bumped into something large and uncoal like. I was immediately frightened by whatever it was, and left the bunker and the scuttle without ascertaining what was in there. It seemed to me, at the time, that the situation required more clothes; that a skinny, cold, half naked middle aged woman simply wasn't what the doctor ordered.

I hurried back into the house, pulled on my jeans, wool socks, thermal undershirt, T-shirt, slowly. Then got out the convection heater and turned that on. Went down stairs and made a coffee, then some toast, and after I had finished that, I pulled on my boots and my coat, grabbed a flashlight, and ventured out.

It was odd, shining the light into the bunker and seeing the head of a man. He was face-up with a sleepy expression, his eyes half open and his jaw a little slack; not gaping, mind you, just slack. He looked fresh and didn't smell. His hair had been recently combed and he'd had a close shave. In fact, considering his condition, he looked pretty good. I had the impulse to ask him just what he thought he was doing in my coal bunker, don't you know?

I didn't ask him. I know now that what I did probably wasn't the thing to do but he looked a little tired, and I blame the shock of finding him in there for my behaviour. I tipped him in the coal bucket and carried him inside.

Heads are surprisingly heavy. Or, I was surprised by the weight of him as I hauled him into the kitchen. He fit nicely in my roasting pan although I had to tweak him a little by removing a bit of his spine that was causing him to list forwards. The slit of his throat was very clean and there was very little blood. That surprised me, too, because I thought that with all the weight of him must be loads of blood, and had half expected it would pour out, like a tipped pitcher of fruit punch, all over the place.

He was smudged. Well it was to be expected, him having been in a coal bunker and

then in a coal bucket. I sponged him off and tidied his hair. He had strips of grey at the sides, even and symmetrical, and a few grey hairs in his eyebrows. His long eyelashes swept above the delicate pouches below his eyes. His eyes: flat brown. (Curiosity got the better of me and I prised one of them open and flashed the flashlight it.) His teeth were even on top and crowded in front on his jaw, and cared for. His ears were without rings or the tiny scars of piercings. No wiry hairs spiralled out at odd angles and no earwax oozed. He had lobes (some people don't), nicely formed and not too meaty.

Whoever he had been, he was well groomed. He looked surprisingly well- placed in my shiny stainless steel roasting pan, but I wasn't sure what to do with him. After having inspected him so closely I felt strangely protective of what was left of him – this head on my countertop – and felt a certain intimacy with him. I admired that he had been through such an horrific experience and still looked presentable if slightly tired. He wasn't fresh as a daisy, to be sure, and there already seemed to be the beginnings of a 5 o'clock shadow, but what could you expect?

As I watched him I started to feel a little sick. Until then I had not really stopped to think about it all or to ask some important questions about this rather strange incident that I had unwittingly become involved in. The most obvious questions to have asked would have been: How he had gotten into my coal bunker and was I in danger?

I didn't think of those questions. I wondered if I had compromised 'evidence' by bringing him into my house and touching him, a lot. And if anyone would discover what I had done if I took him back to the coal bunker and left him for my coalman to find. Considering all we had already been through, this penultimate body part and myself, it seemed an insensitive thing to do. (As I have said before, I think the shock had done a number on my rationality.) It wasn't as if he was some smashed road kill left in the open for everybody to avoid or inspect, or pick over like a scavenging crow. He had ended up in my own coal bunker, a specific and privately owned place hidden away from public inquisition or acquisition.

With that thought in mind, I rearranged the contents of the fridge, sorted through the jars of things that had gone off, and inspected the vegetable and the cheese drawers. When it was all tidied and wiped down, and smelling of anti-bacterial cleaner, I slid the man on the roasting tray onto the middle shelf. Tidying always gives me a feeling of satisfaction, and it was with a keen feeling of relief that I made a cup of tea and went upstairs to take a shower and get ready for work. I was already late and didn't have anytime time to spare.

It was during the drive to work that it dawned on me that I could simply have phoned in sick. You see, I was owed the sick leave; had been stockpiling it in case of a flu epidemic. It was always in the news – bird flu, Asian flu, swine flu – and I needed the security of knowing that if I contracted one of them, I'd be able to recover at my own pace, pacing seeming to me to be a key to full recovery. If the pace gets off, if you try to sprint to recovery while the disease is taking its time with you, you'll just end up backtracking and backtracking leading to exhaustion and a longer illness, perhaps even death!

For some reason, the thought of that head in my refrigerator overrode my need to reserve my sick leave for real sickness. I pulled over and phoned the office, told them I wasn't coming in, made a quick U-turn and headed home. (No pun intended.) Thinking back on it, it seems to me that was a pivotal moment in our relationship: I made a choice to jeopardize the possible future of my health to be with a man in my refrigerator. He didn't stay in there long, mind you. But, thinking back on it, it seems a ludicrous choice to have made.

The coal bunker was nearly empty, my delivery not due for another few days. The shop on the way home had a couple of bags. I grabbed them and the kinds of food you would eat if you felt poorly: soups and juices, noodly things and the like. When I got home I put on the kettle, changed into my jeans and wrestled into my chunky cosy sweater, stoked the fire and made coffee.

I like my coffee milky. I hadn't really intended to look at him just at that moment; was more intent on getting the coffee made and settling myself down before commencing with him. But there he was on the middle shelf. He was arresting. He looked very bright, over lit, in the roasting tray and there was a little juice collecting in the 'drippings' channel that encircles the inner edge of the tray. His eyes had lost a bit of their glassiness, in fact, they were going flat and dull like a fish that's been kept on ice but has been there entirely too long to be called 'fresh.' He still smelled fresh. Of course, he hadn't been without his body for all that long, as far as I could tell. His having been in the confines of the fridge had consolidated his scent, and I caught a whiff of after shave or cologne, a nice enough smell except I have never been one for aftershave. The clean residual aroma of fresh soap pleases me just fine.

My kitchen has double stainless steel sinks. Nice deep ones. I'm proud of them: it was quite a search to find the 'perfect' ones, and they cost more than I should have paid, but I had just come through a divorce and the sinks were the perfect symbol of what I had achieved through surviving it. During the divorce I felt angry and dirty, guilty and grimy inside. But afterwards, when it was all over, I felt clean and shiny, solid, ready to be filled, useful, and

attractive. That sink is always clean and the ceiling lights are trained on it just perfectly to enhance the sheen.

The man's head bobbed in the bubbles in my sink. I washed his hair and conditioned it, being sure to drain the water between actions. This had an uncanny affect on his skin. He warmed up and became less waxy. Except for the violet tinge around his evenly balanced lips and darkening half-moons under his eyes, he looked alive. Water spilled around in his mouth and sparkled. I pushed his jaw closed and wondered what he had been like. And then I knew it didn't really matter what he had been like. He was here in my sink now, and this moment was all there was of him. I kissed him on his warm forehead, and then I kissed him on his warm blue lips. He didn't kiss back, of course, but it felt good anyway.

Afterwards, I blow-dried his hair, which didn't do much to help his drying eyes. I put eye drops in them which also didn't do much. The emollient cream absorbed quickly into his skin, so I made a second application.

It was clear that my man was running out of time. This got me wondering about his brain, that blob of tissue that was surely decomposing in its hard skull box. He wouldn't need it ever again and I didn't want it, so I set up my laptop and began to research. I started with skull and nasal anatomy and moved to ancient Egyptian embalming techniques, and went back to anatomy again. This was going to take some study! Luckily, YouTube was one overflowing river of knowledge. I could only stand on the sappy banks of it, to have jumped in would have meant a drowning, and I didn't have the luxury of that.

The ancients had been faced with the same problem as mine: How to remove an organ you don't want from a tight enclosed place. They were as reluctant as I was to crack open a head, and they didn't care one bit about preserving, intact or otherwise, the grey stuff inside. They preferred iron hooks.

My anatomy studies showed me that I couldn't just push a hook up his nose and lock onto the brain. This was actually a relief to me, because, had it been that simple I would have been alarmed that all of my life, from the time I was a toddler to the time I finally died, I might have been able, might still be able, to blow my brain right out of my head every time I caught a bad cold. As good as the information was to know, I still couldn't figure how those clever old Egyptians had gotten their hooks up through a nose and snagged into a brain. (It sounded like it might have been a misapplied secret and mysterious fishing technique that all fisherpersons would have sold their souls to learn. Only, the ancients had died with it and the fishing world would forever be bereft of it.)

And then I found a site that gave more specific directions, along with a larger list of the tools required, and I knew what had to be done. At that time, I wasn't sure it was worth doing. Would removing this man's brain actually preserve him longer? It had been the first port-of-call for the Egyptians – out the brain, toss it and move on to the important organs – but that doesn't mean it needed to necessarily have been so.

The head is at the top. It seems like the first place to begin just because it's usually the first place you look – at least when looking at a man – and there is nothing to remove at the other tip.

This being only our first day together, I decided to wait and see. He was here, clean and smelling good. No matter his eyes were drying. He was going cold again. I carried him to the living-room, wrapped in a fluffy towel, and got us comfortable on the couch. I didn't cradle him like a baby, but put him beside me, tucked under my arm. I braced him with cushions, where his shoulders would have been and pulled my fluffy faux leopard throw up to my chin. It had been a long day already, even though it was only early afternoon.

It was dark when I awoke. The last embers in the fire glowed gloomily and that was about all I could see. The room was cooling but I was warm in my covers. The head was beside me and as I felt around in the covers, and touched the top of him, touched his hair, I felt that thrilling anticipation, like the one just before Christmas, at the thought of playing with him again.

The light switch was within arm's reach. As I reached for the light switch the leopard throw lifted and cool air reached down between him and me. This was entirely unpleasant and alarming – my side was wet, soaked – and I jumped away from the couch clutching the towel. He rolled and thudded to the floor. The sound made me sick and I had to hold still and hold my breath to keep from gagging. In the dark I was frightened to turn on the light and see what had happened to him.

The kitchen was the place to go and find my courage, where the light could cascade into the living-room but not blast that room with illumination. While I was in there, turning on the lights, I made a coffee and put on the oven; took off my sappy sweater and threw it into the washing machine; got a shirt from the drier and put it on, noting that one elbow seam was unstitching; and rinsed the sink just because I like the way the water beads on the stainless steel. After all that, I went back to the living room to see him, coffee in hand.

The fall hadn't harmed him as badly as I had anticipated. He was on his side, mouth a-gapping with sagging lips, eyes even drier than before with a haze of faux leopard lint

fuzzed on the lashes. His nose was bent, not much, just enough to see that it was not as straight as it had been. The disconcerting thing was that he was quietly dripping from the neck and had formed a little puddle on the wooden floor. It wasn't bloody. I think it must have been brain juice.

I knew then that the brain was going to have to go.

My tummy rumbled. My cheeks felt cold. I picked my head up from the floor and gingerly (at arms' length) carried him to the kitchen where I set him back in the roasting tray with a pile of paper towels to keep him upright. Somehow, during our sleep, he had again lost the ability to stay erect, and I didn't have time to tweak him before supper because I had decided that the food I had gotten on the way home, the food for when I was acting like I felt poorly, just wasn't what I wanted. I craved nourishment, something filling and enriching, infused with flavour and aroma.

It was odd feeling as if I was cooking for two when I knew full well that he wasn't having any. I sat him on the counter beside the chopping board so I could keep an eye on him. His eyes were increasingly disturbing, peeping out of their slitting lids as I chopped onions and crushed garlic. I commented to him about them and realized as soon as I had spoken that talking to him about them was just an irrational thing to do. Voluntary motor control was beyond him now. If I wanted something done with him, it was up to me.

The beef stew was delicious, and eating it somehow took away my irritation with his parching eyes. Besides, when I propped him in a certain way, they looked at anything I wanted him to. It was in this way that he watched the bookcase while I browsed for more material about brain removal. The thought that his eyes might be trained on the screen that might show explicitly how his brain might be hooked from his head, seemed a cruel indignity. What if the last thing to imprint on his retinas was the image on that screen? Forever, or until his eyes were thoroughly decomposed, that image would literally be stuck in his head.

And then, I happened upon a fascinating article in "Radio Graphics: The journal of continuing medical education in radiology." Not only did 'Common and Unexpected Findings in Mummies from Ancient Egypt and South America as Revealed by CT' answer many of my questions about brain removal, it showed, pictorially, some of the techniques and 'mistakes' that had occurred in those early embalmings. Some of the mummies still had their brains, the two shrivelled lobes looking like over-baked, cold potatoes nested in an old Bakelite bowl. One pictured showed a stick lodged in the nasal passage of one mummy as if

his embalmers got distracted and moved on to attend to other things before finishing their business with the head. A mistake, or an afterthought, it's hard to know; the brain was gone – the job had been done – and the rough stick probably wasn't the tool that would have accomplished the task. Had there been a cranky embalmer, or an aggrieved one, an individual who couldn't resist 'sticking it to' the deceased as a final act of revenge or one-upmanship?

Whoever he was and whatever his reasons, he had done me a favour. That stick showed exactly where I'd need to prod in my man.

By the time my research was finished, it was around midnight. I repacked his neck with paper towels and popped him into the fridge. I was used to sleeping alone and couldn't see any reason to break that habit although he did have many advantages over other men. For one, he couldn't possibly snore! He wouldn't hog the bedding, toss-and-turn, or fart. These were my idle thoughts as I brushed my teeth and changed into my pyjamas. When the bedclothes were turned down and the pillows fluffed, I went downstairs to have one last look at him.

He looked content. We had a lot of work ahead of us the next day. We needed our rest. I kissed him on the forehead, ran my fingers through his hair and closed the refrigerator door.

You might think that with so much ahead, so much to learn and experience, I would have been up before the sun (an easy enough thing to do in the middle of winter when the days are so short) but I slept longer than I had intended. I felt cranky and sore. My shoulders were tight. I couldn't remember dreaming and it seemed like I hadn't moved all night, that once I had fallen asleep my body had lost the ability to shift or turnover. In such a stiffened condition I tripped on the stairs and slid a few steps on my hip.

My coffee burnt my mouth. The milk had just started to go off.

Funnily, the man still looked content, with the slightest hint of a smile, and I felt peeved at him for his contentedness.

After a long, very hot, shower, I dressed in my grubbies and collected my equipment: three embroidery hooks of various sizes; a small mallet; a long screwdriver; a bucket; a bowl; a new roll of paper towels; a bright light; and an old pillow. Somewhere in my studies I had read that in some cases of excerebration the embalmers had used a long spoon to scoop out any remaining bits, but the more I read, and thought about it, that whole procedure seemed fiddly and improbable.

The man settled into the pillow, comfortably, his lips only slightly parted. His eyes

were still open. They looked more open than the day before, and duller on the surface but their colour was clearer. I positioned the light so it aimed up his nostrils and slid the screwdriver at an angle as near to the one of the stick in the CT scan as possible. I really wanted to avoid hitting his eye. The screwdriver went up farther than I'd expected and finally pressed against a firm surface which, when leaned into, refused to budge.

Here's the disconcerting point: His eyes. The man's eyes were looking straight at me. He has a metal screwdriver up his nose, with my hand gripping the handle, and he's looking at me, less contentedly, but certainly unperturbedly.

It all went smoothly once he was blindfolded. The brain pulled out of him like an impaled marshmallow. The embroidery hooks weren't quite long enough but it didn't matter. A hook wasn't necessary. Eventually what was left turned slushy from all of the prodding and was easily tipped out into the bowl. One of the facts I discovered in my research is that the brain is seventy-five percent water. Through empirical experience, I came to believe it.

I gave him a good flushing out in the sink, and blow-dried his hair again. One of my nieces has a doll head, a bust, that she styles the hair of and applies make-up to, and I've always thought it was rather creepy: a full-sized, plastic human with weird synthetic blond hair; but I have to admit that blow-drying that man's hair was fun. I came to understand my niece's attraction to her toy.

He was lighter without the brain. And drier. He was easier to carry around and certainly less messy. His stubble was growing and it looked good on him. There were splotches of grey in the dark brown, and they sparkled in the lamp light as we moved from room to room. I propped him here and there, posing him this way and that trying to find his best angle. The circles under his eyes were spreading and this was giving him an uncanny resemblance to zombies in movies. Not as bad as the ones in Michael Jackson's 'Thriller', but more like the newly turned ones in 'Sean of the Dead.'

Concealer solved the problem although applying it, or actually, finding the correct colour match, took up the rest of the day. His skin was naturally darker than mine. Even in his cadaverous state it was darker than mine, and a bit on the pasty side like unbaked rye flour dough.

We went for a quick trip to the cosmetics counter, not at my local druggist's, but at a place I had never been where the 'cosmetic consultant,' a girl of about sixteen years wearing a strange shade of orange-ish foundation over fields of pimples, insisted on assisting me. She said she was there to help me in my pursuit of the 'exact augmentational component' to

enhance my complexion.

The man rested in my hemp carrier bag which was looped over my shoulder. This cosmetic consultant was thwarting my plan to surreptitiously compare different shades of concealer and foundation against his skin. I suspect she saw the size of the carrier bag and was hoping to prevent me from possibly being tempted to shoplift. She need not have worried. Shoplifting has never appealed to me. Too much risk for too small of a reward. But as she recommended the different products, extolling their individual virtues – porosity, translucency, opacity – I slipped my hand into the bag and gently played with the man's hair. She explained the different complex hydrational systems of her product lines, and the options for younger skin as opposed to maturing skin. She focused quite a bit on maturing skin and what maturing skin needed to keep from maturing too quickly.

Playing with his hair was engrossing. As my fingertips rolled his strands around and around, I got warm all over. The girl bored me. The shop was too bright, there was an irritating gritty substance on the floor and I couldn't remember what I had gone shopping for.

The girl said something about '...shades that subdued red tones in the skin and evened the texture...' and for some reason this snapped me out of my reverie. 'I'm getting this for a friend, not for myself,' I said. She wasn't pleased by that and I'd had enough of her impositions, so I walked away. I walked out the door of the shop while she scowled, walked a city block to another shop and bought several darker shades of foundation and concealer from a friendly but not helpful woman who commented that whatever was in my carrier bag gave the impression of being a face. (!)

It was true. It was unnerving. There, in a large mirror behind the woman, was our reflection and you could see his face pressing against the hemp bag. He looked like a real Egyptian mummy. It was ghastly. I couldn't rearrange him in front of her so I laughed and commented that it was certainly uncanny, don't you know?, and left as nonchalantly as I could.

I wonder if she ever thinks about it and regrets not getting a picture. In her mind, it might be like when someone spots the face of Jesus in a potato chip, or the likeness of Saddam Hussein in a mouldy place on the kitchen ceiling. She might have moments on slow days when she's behind her cosmetics counter when she wonders if her fifteen minutes of fame slipped by because she didn't think to document what looked like the face of man bulging out of the side of a carrier bag.

Back at home, I had my work cut out for me. It had been in my mind to conceal the

dark circles under his eyes, and maybe the tinges of violet that were spreading around his lips but none of the colours matched him. He looked odd with the colours of life covering the deepening colours of death. I thought of my niece and her bust, and wished I'd taken the time to understand the theory behind the colours of cosmetics.

There was no time to loll around in idle regrets; the man was 'turning' faster than I'd anticipated. I mixed all the foundations together and added minuscule amounts of food colouring (particularly blue). It wasn't bad, actually. When he was all made-up, he looked good, natural, and not alive, but good in a dead way.

We, I, ate my supper in the living-room with him dapperly propped in his roasting tray on the coffee table. The stainless steel reflected the quivering candle flames while the fire glowed warm. The man was nearly grinning now and I took no pleasure in it. None at all. I had given him another thorough washing and reapplied his make-up before making supper. During his blow-dry I caught a whiff of something that made me cringe. The fresh smell of soap wasn't enough to hide the inevitable.

How is it that my butcher is able to 'hang' beef for weeks and it doesn't rot? Does he hang it in near freezing conditions, in a place so cold it delays decay? I suppose it might have been nice to have known the answer to that when I first found the head. But if the cold is the answer, I don't imagine I would have had the self-control to have just left him in some very cold place, alone. Besides, what would have been the point in that?

By next morning it was clear that the head was going to have to go. He looked saggy and maniacal grinning in the light inside of my fridge. I simply didn't want him anymore. He was like a bad Christmas gift that I hadn't asked for and would never have thought to ask for and had kept around to avoid hurting someone's feelings. You know what I mean.

It was as I was having a second cup of coffee that I started asking myself all of those questions I should have asked in the beginning. Who was this man? Why had he ended up in my coal bunker? Was I in danger? Was I being watched? What was I to do with him?

Surely my DNA was all over him. But certainly the authorities needed to know that he'd been killed. I regretted my hasty intervention in his retrieval. It gave me the creeps that he was grinning in my fridge. With no ideas as to what to do with him, I took a very hot shower. When I was red all over, I dried myself off and cleaned the toilet and the sink. As I scrubbed I saw in the splashing toilet bowl the answer to my problem.

I bleached him. He fitted neatly in my bucket (the one I had emptied his brains into – they were long gone, mind you, had flushed easily down the toilet) and poured bleach all over

him until he was immersed. His nose bubbled. It was sort of sweet and I felt a mild wave of affection for him which I quickly suppressed. I knew that if I got sentimental over him, I'd never get him out of my house. How little we really know as we work our way through life. As it turned out, sentimentality would be the least of my problems.

He looked dull compared to the sheen of my kitchen sink. Pragmatically, I gave him a thorough rinsing off, just to make sure all evidence of our involvement was removed. Blow-drying him had lost its novelty and appeal but I did it anyway, as a final gesture of goodwill, so to speak. I put him on a clean platter and placed him in his accustomed place in the fridge. And then I went to work.

It was dark when I got home and I was hungry. It had been a busy day which suited me just fine. Any distraction was a welcome relief to thinking of him lolling around, pasty and grinning, in my fridge. First thing, before settling in for the evening, I put on my rubber gloves and lifted him out of my refrigerator, straight out of the kitchen and right out the front door to the coal bunker. He hit the bottom with a thud.

The last few days had taken a lot out of me. I hadn't been aware of it until after he was out of the house; being around him was draining. The noodles and things I had gotten on the day he'd arrived were just the simple fare I needed as exhaustion set in. But as tired as I was, it was still a restless night for me filled with dreams of blackness and dull eyes, and irritating cosmetic consultants droning on and on.

In the early morning I heard the slam of the lid of my coal bunker and I felt relieved because I knew it was nearly over. I rolled over and fell into a deep undisturbed sleep.

There was a problem and it irritated me as I rose out of my rest to turn off my alarm clock. The coal man had made his delivery hours earlier. There should have been a kerfuffle of some sort, shouldn't there? He would have notified somebody, wouldn't he? Might even have called a friend or two before calling the authorities, wouldn't he? How often do you find a severed head in a coal bunker?

It was cold out. There was frost on the ground. I slid along the path in my slippers and trembled at the thought of what I might find. The bunker was filled to the rim, no head insight, no sign of anything unusual. The coal man had left his bill tucked in the glazing in my front door; the place he'd always left it.

Now I felt sick, really poorly, like I'd actually come down with the flu after all. It was the thought of the head crushed under the weight of dusty coal, smashed against the cold metal container, waiting weeks to eventually be lifted to the light again, that made me feel

woozy. 'Waiting weeks' and the thought of the smell of it. Oh, I was despondent for a while. But I knew that my wooziness wasn't the flu and I went to work, shakily, and got over it.

My coal bunker is in the shadows on the north facing side of the house where moss grows easily in the spaces between the cobbles. It took weeks for the smell of him to peak and when it did, it was getting close to the time of my next coal delivery. Every time I went to the coal bunker, day or night, I took my torch with me and shone it over my waning supply of fuel before dipping in. I wasn't sure how I'd react when he appeared and often wondered if my reaction would be based on his appearance, or my ability to forget that he was there. For, although I *knew* he was there, I also am very good at forgetting things when they have to be forgotten.

Amongst a group of the black, square, pillow-like puffs of smokeless coal, on the left side of the bunker, a tuft of hair sprang up. It was evening and I was still in my work clothes. Blood rushed to my face, the same kind of giddy flush as when you've been thoroughly embarrassed by tripping in the street and falling into the arms of a man. The coal tumbled away when I brushed at it, and there he was, smudged and ghastly, very grey and yellow with tinges of green. I screamed.

I had forgotten deeply.

The police arrived and they brought an ambulance with them. (A whole ambulance for a vacant head!) I moved out of my house for a few days until the yellow tape was removed. There were questions and I answered then as honestly as ever I could, bearing in mind my forgetfulness.

They never found his body. They did find his wife and her lover. I didn't follow the trial. I never heard what happened to them but I wished I could have asked them why they had thrown his head into my coal bunker? Of all the things they could have done with a head, mind you, they could have left it with the body and he would never have been found. So many things they could have done...

It was in the middle of Spring in the very early morning, just past the time when it's night, and in my sleep I heard, outside, a quiet, metallic thump. I didn't bother to dress, just pulled on my robe and slipped my feet into my chilly slippers.

My torch was to hand, and the coal bucket was by the door. I walked in a cloud of my own condensation as I shuffled along the path to the bunker. The cold lid pressed rigidly against the palm of my hand, and then I opened it, quickly, and splashed light inside.

The surprised face of a young woman gaped at me. Her eyes were wide, mouth wide open, long black hair splayed across over the coal. 'Oh no you don't!' I growled as I gathered her up by her hair.

In the quiet and dark I placed her in my neighbours' bunker, just next door.

There were hours left for sleeping but my bedclothes wouldn't settle. My legs were restless, my ears too fine-tuned to the gathering sounds of the morning, and the image of that girl's mouth bubbled around in my head.

I pulled on my jeans, wool socks, thermal undershirt, T-shirt, quickly, and loped down the stairs. Pulled on my boots. I had the presence of mind to click on the kettle before clutching my coal scuttle and noiselessly slipping outside.

A commentary:

The impulse towards unity

This is an eclectic collection of short stories. When I started this project I thought to explore fragmentation and the urge to restore, or create, unity. ‘Not a Chance’, ‘The Writing on the Walls’, and ‘Connecting with the Curb’ were the result of that preoccupation. As I progressed with my work, I experimented with micro fiction in an attempt to shatter any connections with longer narratives. I sought to capture fragments of experience in the extreme, and ‘Never Come Back’, ‘The Cool Dark Groves in Summer’, and ‘Father’s Boots are Walking’ were the result.

It seems to me that throughout our lives, all of the time, we observe fragmented incidents that our minds then place into context, the context itself having been formed from the brain’s repository of past experiences (our memories). The constant adjusting and readjusting of the action in a context that is adjusted and readjusted to form an interpretation of action and context, is the beginning of story. As the neuroscientist Chris Frith has said, ‘perception depends upon prior belief [...] perception is a loop’ (Making Up the Mind, 126).

I tried an experiment - albeit a very small and non-scientific experiment - with myself being the one participant. The Pocket Oxford Dictionary’s definition of ‘experiment’ is ‘Procedure tried on the chance of success, to test hypothesis etc., or to demonstrate known fact.’ (1978. Oxford: Oxford University Press.) I like that it doesn’t refer specifically to scientific experimentation even though at the time, strangely, I felt my experiment was vaguely scientific. It was my intention, after I had completed the experiment, to pass it on to other writers to get their responses.

The start of the experiment involved writing fragments of text that were as unlike as possible. This took several weeks. I was careful not to refer back to the texts I had written on previous days, although I did try to gently hold the gist of them in mind to make sure they did not relate to one another. I did my best to make them solitary, random incidents, as unrelated to one another as I could possibly manage. I wrote them quickly, spontaneously, often when I was already deep into some other activity like housework or packing for a trip. I hoped that this approach would keep them from embedding in my long term memory.

Here is fragment number 9:

There wasn’t much left except a headache stabbing at her temple, and an ache at the far end of her oesophagus. The moon was only half there; the stars blinked feebly from behind the mist. She rolled over in the grass and absorbed more dew.

And here is number 3:

The fire was slow to light. It didn't even gasp when the bellows was applied. Resisting the fuel, lighters, oxygen, it seemed to have turned its face to the wall in resignation from the life it had hardly tasted. It was at this point that Murray's inspiration overtook his good sense. He removed a canister of petrol from the trunk of his car and proceeded to blow himself to kingdom come.

There were a total of ten fragments because more than ten felt like too many. When they were finished and without reading them, I printed them up, cut them apart and set them aside. I hoped to distance myself from them – to forget them – with the intention of approaching them as events out of context and new to me. After several months I brought them out and read them. I attempted to construct a story from them much the way I believe our minds construct stories (although without effort and without us knowing what is happening or how it is happening) out of random events.

No matter how I tried, no matter how many ways I rearranged my fragmentary texts, I couldn't construct a coherent story. There were too many sunsets and sunrises and night skies and snowy days and hot dusty days – just way too much material for one short story. I couldn't form a pattern that could be interpreted as a short story.

As a result of the frustrating response to the experiment, I never carried on with it. After trying to make a story out of all of those bits of text for over a week, I threw them into a folder and forgot them (again). Years later, while sorting through the 'reject' pile(s) of folders and notes for this study, I discovered the text fragments.

My investigation of fragmentation and the impulse towards unity continued with 'The Last Story'. As I was writing it I realized that the unwritten stories that had happened *before* this last story were pushing through, that a story cycle was in order; especially since the titles of other stories had popped into the text. This was an intriguing prospect, having never written (or even *thought* to write) a group of connected stories. I saw each story, although complete in itself, as a fragment of the bigger story – the family story – with each story representing a portion of the memories retained by the family as a whole.

This group of stories was not written as a sequence (its time line does not progress from A to B to C etc.). It was written over a rather long time while other stories of a different sort, on unrelated subjects, were being written. Now I am writing more stories for the group that include villagers from outside of the family.

The Story Cycle

These stories stem from anxieties conjured as my children have approached puberty. They seem oblivious to the changes they have gone through but their situation has kicked up myriad emotional memories. Some of these memories are ones I lived through, while some are stories told to me by my relatives (including my great grandmothers) and friends. They have brought up issues of security and safety in the home, and the importance of remembering and transferring family stories for the family's good health, instruction and, therefore, survival.

In these stories I explore the effects of cyclic upheaval. The stories are parts of the familial cycle much like the approaching hormonal cycles of the girls and the established cycles of the women.

There is a physical, see-able aspect of the stories – they are physically in print and in this state are discrete events that are part of the larger cycle of stories – that underlies the content and implications of the stories.

Each story introduces different aspects of the challenges involved with an eye to how the particular individuals in the families deal with them, accept them, or fight against them. Each generation in the family has its own pressures with working through the upheaval of the aggressive and invisible visitor, a visitor that is as much a facet of their family as the human members are.

The stories have to do with the mystery of spirit attached to a specific place [home-kitchen] and family. How such a mystery cannot and should not be driven out because it is from an ancient time, its prehistoric nature being part of the essential purpose and survival of that family.

It is through the accumulation of a remembered history – the stories – that the purposes of the mystery [visitor, spirit] can be understood. The cyclical retelling of the stories when the visitor returns reinforces the idea of the importance of history, in this case family history, which binds the generations.

Each story is transformational in that each particulate encounter with the visitor brings about realizations about changing family attitudes, person inclinations, the application of ingenuity and trust, or distrust, amongst the family members. No matter whether the changes that occur as a result of the visitations bind the family members closer together, or pull them apart, the visitor will still become active at the anticipated time.

Magical realism seemed to me to be the best way to explore what has turned out to be

a large subject. This matter has grown to involve community, religion, prehistoric intuition, trust and distrust, the role of the matriarch, the role of the patriarch, the importance of place and the land, the home. It involves feelings and landscapes and weather. It needs a big space to be explored, so I chose the village by the Red Hills, a bright, hot and arid place that also has tremendous storms. It is in this place, in this village, where there is an established community who knows the characters, knows where they live, how they generate their income, knows of their particular familiar anomalies and accepts them as any other thing that goes on in life, that I have found the place to situate these stories.

This desert village came to me as I sat in my home in North Wales, while my fire glowed warm and the rain splattering against the windows, driven by cold wind. It could be a village in the United States South West; it could be in Spain or Mexico. It has come to me (or with me) across national boundaries, and cultures, to settle with me here in Wales. It is a bit of magical realism in itself: a village from another land (my imagination that has been informed by my childhood) situated in my writing that is being performed on my PC in a village in Wales.

This desert village that has slipped the boundaries of the Americas and Britain is a hybrid of my past and present. It is through the slipping and sliding of the real and the magical that I find the space to contemplate the anxiety of approaching the boundaries of adulthood and the mystery of family and generational ties.

The village by the Red Hills stories which rove across generations are not the only stories in this mixed bag collection of stories that have fantastic or magic realistic elements. Moving from strictly realist writing into the magical or the fantastic happens easily with me. For a writer to suddenly discover that the words on her monitor have a life of their own, as in 'Too Many Words, although surprising, still seems absolutely plausible to me textually. It isn't fantasy, written in another world or 'Once upon a time...'; it is right here in this world.

And while it may not be happening in my own house, it could very well be happening in the house next door as in 'The Hatford House' a Gothic story that tips its hat to Dr Seuss *and* Edgar Allan Poe. Once again, the landscape has been informed by my early life in Southern California where big rains would hit after droughts and, as a result, houses would slide off of hills, or mudslides envelop highways.

Themes

Themes of invasion, spirits, and possession (of sorts) seem to be the norm for me.

Threat and danger, injury and death abound. Even ‘The Bedtime Story’, a story being told to kids by their babysitter, contains invasion and danger, and death. But I suppose most good and interesting kids’ stories contain those elements. What would Hansel and Gretel be without betrayal, loss, danger and death? (And how satisfying, indeed, to be able to push your tormentor into her own oven and listen to her shriek as she dies! And how chilling.)

So for me, danger is good for a story, and death is all right especially if it seems to resolve problems of invasion, threat and, even, revenge. But these ‘resolved’ problems also bring up their own problems. For example, the vigilante villagers in ‘Stones Walls and Buttercups’ resolve their bullying problem, but at what cost? Will their resolution be as gleeful as Hansel’s and Gretel’s might have been? Or have they created a future that is even more painful than the past?

I enjoy writing and reading short stories because of the questions they don’t answer. While stories can, and do, answer questions, my stories seem to bring up more questions than they answer. It doesn’t bother me that I still don’t know exactly why the spirit is attached to the women in one particular family line who live in a particular house. The mystery of it keeps me reading and writing about it. At the end of each story I want to know more even though I will probably never know the answer to the origins of the spirit. It seems to be as old as the earth. The mystery is important to those stories, and to me.

And perhaps that is the appeal of magical realism and the fantastic for me, because mystery is integral to those modes. Writing the magical, with the understanding that it is as real as eating breakfast every morning or driving to work, casts the whole production into the lap of the mysterious.

Short stories, with their limited size, do not have the luxury of time and space to slowly build the mystery, or to examine it very closely. One of the challenges in deploying a mode like magical realism for a short story is the richness and texture that the mode elicits. As mentioned before, it is unlike minimalism, or dirty realism, those tightly constructed, sparse and highly referential modes that are often without explicit detail. Even the name of it, Magical Realism, conjures ideas of something that is ‘more than’ or bigger, a mode that surpasses the merely real by virtue of its mystery, its magic, and its imagery. Compressing this largeness and richness into a short story offers the potential for a creation that is bulging with meaning and life.

The challenge for me with this mode has been to stay on track. There is so much there, in my imagination, that has to be filtered and refined to high imagery, without cutting

away the fullness of the experiences. Because of it, my characters are sometimes not as fully developed as I would like them to be. Perhaps this is a weakness in the stories, although placing a character in a fully described environment and supplying careful details of their movements within it, can be good indicators of what those characters are about.

Invasion

Invasion of private spaces from within and attack from without seem to pop up a lot in my stories. An interesting concept, invasion from within, as I think 'invasion' is more usually first conceived of as something coming from the outside. From the New Penguin Compact English Dictionary: **1** a hostile attack on a foreign territory by an army **2** the incoming or spread of something harmful, e.g. a tumor.>>invasive *adj.*

An invasion from within, particularly a psychological one, would certainly pertain to private spaces. But I find it interesting that in some of the stories, the invader from without is actually within its own territory, and those who have been (seemingly) invaded have entered the attacker's space. They cross over the boundaries and become the invaders.

For example, the hikers in 'I Wonder How Long' are out in the wild where they stumble upon the deer that are in their environment and territory. The hikers are, in a sense, the unwitting invaders and they suffer as a result of it.

Threat and Danger and Injury (the police)

Most of my stories contain some sort of threat of injury, or menace. Nearly all of my early stories had incidents involving the police or paramedics, or both, and so I made an effort as I progressed with this collection to write stories that did not involve them. It has been difficult for me as my mind just wants to include them in every situation. In 'Stone Walls and Buttercups' the villagers find the police ineffectual. Perhaps this was my way of not involving the police in the story but, ironically, by not including them, I have still included them. They are there in the story, being left out of the action while the townspeople carry on without them.

This preoccupation with the police may stem from when I was fifteen or sixteen years old and, unfortunately, attracted the attentions of a stalker. This person entered my family home and tried to kidnap me. Although he was unsuccessful, he continued to harass me and my family. This went on for over a year and during this time we were involved with the police, sometimes on a daily basis. The police even did stakeouts in our house. The amount

of effort they put in to help us, their good natured attention as we went through that stressful, unsettling, and creepy experience, have stayed with me. And I'm sure it informs my stories. (Incidentally, they never caught the stalker.)

I expect the stalker had an influence on my mindset; threat and menace were in abundance during that time. But he doesn't get all the credit, no. It was around that time that *The Exorcist* was released and everyone I knew became fascinated with the idea of demon possession. Demon possession became an obsession of my father's. It was a very real phenomenon for him, and he invested quite a lot of time researching 'legitimate and authentic' material about it. He believed in mental and spiritual vigilance, that in order to protect ourselves from possession we had to be on constant guard lest Satan slip in and take us over, heart, mind and soul.

The tension and threat in my teenage years were relentless and seemed to be coming from every direction, visible and invisible, but until I started writing, I hadn't thought much about how those years might have affected my mindset. And I didn't start writing until my father was dying of cancer, and my eleven year old son was involved in a car vs bicycle accident (he survived). During this time I gained firsthand experience with ambulances and paramedics, and lived through gore and horror. Strangely, my stories then were sweet and full of light.

It wasn't until I started university in 2003 that the menace and gore, cops and paramedics started showing up in my stories. And it wasn't until I started working on this thesis and this story collection, that I started wondering why they kept showing up with such regularity. The presence of police and paramedics is tightly linked to intense emotion for me. Even if they are ineffectual, their presence at least implies some sort of order or an effort toward recovering balance. They show up in my stories less frequently now (there's not a cop in sight in any of the Red Hills stories) and with smaller, quieter parts. They are taking on the feel of movie 'extras'. You know they're there, and they fill in and move around spaces, but they have few speaking parts these days.

The menace is still there in my stories and will continue to be. Raymond Carver was right when he said, 'I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation.' (Carver, Raymond (1968, 1989) 'On writing', in *Fires*, New York: Random House. 26). Even in the 'Jingleheimer-Schmidt', in which the menace is a repeating song in the narrator's head, that menace of a harmless camp song relentlessly looping is threatening his interviews and possibly his relationship with his partner. Such a small thing

becomes an overwhelming matter that Kyle seems unable to escape.

Sources and Influences

As I mentioned before, the landscape I was raised in has certainly influenced the landscapes in many of my stories. The area of Southern California I came from wasn't just dry and agricultural (we were surrounded by orange groves) it was close to the desert and the mountains, and only a little farther away was the beach. It was layered with the histories of Native Americans, Spanish, Mexicans and Victorians (my hometown was a Victorian resort). My family spent quite a lot of time camping and backpacking, so both northern and southern California, Nevada, Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah were my playgrounds. We took trips to Mexico and spent a summer travelling across the States visiting as many National and State Parks as we possibly could. Occasionally we popped over to Montana to fish and visit friends.

My reading material in the early days, before I hitched a ride with a friend and got myself a library card, was the King James Bible, books of missionary adventures, The Collier's Encyclopaedia, my dad's Chemistry and first year medical school books, and various books about animals and the natural world. We also had a copy of *The Bounty Trilogy* and *Treasure Island* and *Tom Sawyer*. My mother read magazines, *Good Housekeeping* and *Better Homes and Gardens* were a couple of her favourites, and there was always a fresh copy of *The Readers Digest* hanging around. We also had our Sabbath School weeklies that we picked up at church.

There wasn't much fictional literature in my family home, the one large work of Literature being The Bible, except, in our house, it wasn't literature as much as it was God's holy word. It certainly wasn't considered a collection of myths and legends and for the most part was understood to be literal and accurate both historically and spiritually. It was the right and true manual of how to get along with God.

When I was nine or ten I discovered, in the attic of a friend's Victorian farmhouse, a triple-decker novel. As I recall, it had been published around 1866, but I cannot remember title or author. I was astounded! What a story!

It was at the same friend's house that I was introduced to *Dr Doolittle* by Hugh Lofting (and was allowed to borrow the book) and then read Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Soon after, my third grade teacher read to our class *The Little House in the Big Woods* and *The Little House on the Prairie* (Laura Ingles). I finished the series on my

own. But the big one for me was Melville's *Moby Dick*. I loved the book and hated it. Then I found a book of Washington Irving's stories and after that Nathaniel Hawthorne's. (I didn't discover that Melville had done short stories until I was at university, or I would have read those, too.) Jack London caught my attention, and of course so did Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Edgar Allan Poe and Fred Gibson (I still have my copy of *Recollection Creek*).

My reading was grounded in American Literature and short stories. As a young adult I read Henry James and anything that had to do with the (so called) occult because the New Age had swung into view. I read Raymond Carver and Richard Brautigan. I discovered E. M. Forrester and read everything of his I could find. I suppose everything I have read has had an influence on my writing, but I cannot point to any one writer and say I see a direct influence on all of my work.

The End of the 'Experiment'

In the end (that is, about six months before this writing) I went back to my 'experiment' and re-read my fragmentary texts. I still didn't discover a unified story. I have come to the conclusion that sometimes it is not possible to make sense of all the fragments of our lives. Sometimes all of the stuff is not meant to coalesce and never will. But I have discovered something else: those ten fragments represent ten stories waiting to be written. The experiment has offered me some unexpected, exciting opportunities. I am looking forward to accessing the final results when the ten new stories have been written.

A critical commentary:

Threat, invasion and dread: The short story and the home

Home:

a. A dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests. Also (chiefly in later use): a private house or residence considered merely as a building

b. The place where one lives or was brought up, with reference to the feelings of belonging, comfort, etc., associated with it.

c. With *the*. The domestic setting.

d. The family or social unit occupying a house; a household.

(Oxford English Dictionary. online version June 2012. <<http://0-www.oed.com.unicat.bangor.ac.uk/view/Entry/87869>>; accessed 09 September 2012.)

This criticism examines five short stories in which the home and domesticity are not the main preoccupations or themes, but which nevertheless bring into question - through the use of the home as background and setting - the assumption that the home is a safe and secure place. The homes in these stories become the locations of anxiety, threat and dread, and even injury and death. They are: Steven Millhauser's 'The Way Out'; Salman Rushdie's 'The Prophet's Hair'; John Cheever's 'The Enormous Radio'; Bernard Malamud's 'The Jewbird'; and Franz Kafka's 'The Country Doctor.'

The home, the place one is born into and raised from, is the formative base of identity. 'For each of us, it was in the environments of childhood that the person we are today began to take place' (Marcus 18). Conceptions of the home are an integral part of self identity. The physical home can take many forms that reflect culture, levels of society, environmental issues, mobility and institutional attitudes (among many things) but the most basic aspect of home is that it offers protection; it is a shelter from the elements. A home may be established in an ancient estate, in an apartment complex, or in a mobile home but the varying shapes, sizes, and locations of residences do not affect the perception of the home as a safe and private place, a place worth defending, if needs be, by those who reside within it. As Clare Marcus says, the home is 'a place of self-expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard' (2). Or as Gaston Bachelard has said

'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. [...] It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. [...] Life begins well,

it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house' (6-7).

It has been argued that the proper name is 'a fixed point in a turning world' (Ziff 99). Without going into all the ramifications of this argument, it could also be argued that the home, or the house in which one lives, is literally a fixed point in a turning world. Homes are the fixed point of family life and family identification. As Bachelard says, the home is 'our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word' (4). Within this universe one is a member of a particular family that lives in a particular residence, in a neighbourhood, a town, county, country. 'Starting with childhood, our explorations in and around home allow us to develop a sense of self as individuals' (Marcus 10). With the home as the specific starting point of physical self-identity, it is not hard to understand how 'home', in its varying contexts, has come to mean a place of residence; a family unit; and the place of one's ancestral heritage. The concept of 'home' places upon the occupants of each particular home different forms of identity.

This study focuses on the short story form and how it uses the home to examine issues of threat, from within and without the home. It discusses threatening aspects of movement to and from the home; invasion of the home; how using the home as the background to a short story elicits ideas from readers – assumptions of home and its environments – that can be used advantageously for various foreshortening effects. The study considers how aspects of characters in short stories are reflected in their homes, and how the physical characteristics of houses are used for story advancement, character delineation, and to depict vulnerability.

In these stories the 'cocoon' Marcus speaks of is often breached by some menace from the outside world and the home becomes a threatening place. This study considers how the invasions are often unintentionally aided by the protagonists, and the threats that have come from outside of the home are actually perpetuated from within.

Pertinent to this study are Sigmund Freud's notions of the uncanny, and its interpretation of the 'homely' and the 'unhomely.' David Huddart proficiently explains Freud's concept of the uncanny:

[...] the uncanny contains its apparent opposite: if the canny is homely, what is close to home, it none the less has a tendency to morph into the profoundly unfamiliar, the unhomely, which alienates or estranges us from what we thought was properly our own (83).

Invariably, when a threat or invasion occurs in these stories, it soon elicits a feeling of uncanniness. Some characters respond to the feeling by trying to adjust to the situation. Others seem to want to ignore it, and shrug it off as if it is of little importance. Still others seem oblivious to the threat and the accompanying uncanniness, and they carry on thereby blundering into danger. Whether or not the characters realize its importance, the sensation of the uncanny fleetingly appears causing alarming and uncomfortable dreams, or raising the scary monsters of childhood, or delivering haunting ancestral memories.

Nicholas Royle says in his comprehensive definition of the uncanny and uncanniness, that the uncanny

it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light. But it is not 'out there', in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality (2).

The uncanny in these stories is also signalled through strange encounters with doubles. Animals; messengers; master thieves; antagonists who appear to be two sides of the same coin; or the same tune played over from an unknown source: the appearance of these doubles heightens the threat and deepens dread. They invade and distort boundaries, confuse the issue, and destabilize perceptions.

The stories in this critical commentary employ the situation of night time and darkness to define and deepen character and represent feelings of isolation, anxiety and dread. Since context in the short story form 'depends to a large extent on what the reader can supply' (Pickering 51) the writer is able to tap into the universally experienced condition of 'the dark'. The mere suggestion of being in the dark of monochromatism and restricted sight of varying intensities. The short story writer need not emphasise the darkness itself, for the movements of the characters in the dark, as opposed to the light, give their actions more emphasis. Propelling a character through the dark creates tension and anxiety. A character that uses the dark as shelter is either hiding from danger or is, in fact, a danger to be hidden from (for the thief, the darkness is his element and his safety). Being alone in the night deepens a feeling of aloneness or isolation. Being with someone who cannot be seen because of lack of light can be terrifying. This criticism observes how these

ideas about the dark are drawn from the reader's own experiences, whether real or imagined, and used expediently to tell the story.

In these stories bedrooms are informative settings. Like the use of the dark for setting, the reader's knowledge of the uses of bedrooms is exploited to foreshorten and intensify action. The bedroom is a protected space within the home that we inhabit while in vulnerable states (sleeping, illness, physical intimacy), and at other times requiring particular forms of privacy.

These stories effectively incorporate situations in bedrooms that destabilize the security of the private space to heighten anxiety and develop feelings of isolation and mounting dread and threat.

These stories demonstrate that threat is often brought on by the protagonists who inadvertently make regrettable choices and then suffer progressive and deepening threat, and consequently dread. The home environment itself is unable to save or protect them as the uncanny appearance of their own hidden agendas and fears appear. Although the opportunity for change and renewal is presented through the revelation of what has been hidden, the protagonists become overwhelmed.

Short stories are particularly well suited to examining these instances of threat and dread. Anxiety easily mounts in the short story's constricted space. For many of the characters in these stories it seems as Jean Pickering has said, 'that the short story, emphasising stasis as opposed to process, lends itself to depicting death, that moment that fixes human beings, removing us from time altogether' (Pickering 48-49).

In **'The Way Out'** Harter, the protagonist, is a single, 30 year old, community college history teacher who lives on the top floor of a three-family house. Throughout the story he rethinks and rehashes the events of his break-up with Martha and the subsequent discovery of the affair by her husband. He is caught in a compromising and compromised position. Harter is in jeopardy from the very beginning of the story.

The story opens with Harter sitting, while buttoning up his shirt, on the edge of Martha's bed. She is in tears over the break up and sprawled across the bed beside him. Her husband, a small man, 'strides' through the bedroom door. Harter leaves the room, and goes down the stairs and through the living room, to pause on the porch. It is here that he realises that the husband was shaking with rage.

It is late and Harter is tired. He scarcely notices where he is driving and he is 'startled

to see his block suddenly before him. He had left the light on over the kitchen sink—the only yellow window on a dark, sleeping street’ (Millhauser 68).

After his arrival home he climbs the flights of stairs to his house and falls asleep. He has a dream that he is at his childhood home playing the piano with Martha beside him on the bench, which he finds comforting. Then he realizes that her little husband is standing behind her twisting her ear.

Harter always finds the women he is sexually drawn to unsatisfactory, or flawed, in some way or other. And it is interesting that when he was in seventh grade, the first girl he was ever attracted to finally consents to ‘let him walk *home* with her’ (69: *italics mine*). It is during this walk that he starts noticing her flaws, and he immediately loses interest. In high school he goes out with a girl and while he reaches up to the top of her stocking ‘on her living room couch at eleven-thirty at night’ (69) he starts thinking of another girl. While in college a girl ‘surprised him into bed with her one afternoon’ (69) but while they’re having sex he thinks about her roommate. This is quick movement through the years uses references concerning the home which involve walking home, then laying on the couch in another home and finally being surprised into bed (in student accommodation). None of these events occur in Harter’s own home. He prefers to keep his sexual encounters separate from his home life; he distances himself from the women by not allowing them access to this area of his life.

In the early morning after the break up with Martha, two ‘friends’ of her husband’s awaken Harter at his home. They enter his house, take only two steps into the kitchen and stop. This causes an awkward moment in which Harter, in his bathrobe, and groggy from sleep, notices with ‘distaste’ the remains of yesterday’s breakfast which is still on the kitchen table.

The two men are unsettling, uncanny. They are doubled, wearing similar clothes which are uncannily appropriate for the traditional costume of undertakers. They speak formally and politely, echoing one another almost apologetically, but they are subtly threatening. They use guilt to manipulate Harter: ‘You have been the cause, for reasons of your own, of great pain and suffering’ (74). Harter feels angry and has the thought that he should throw the men out of his house, but he does not. Standing two steps into Harter’s kitchen, holding their hats in their hands, they arrange for a meeting between Harter and Martha’s husband.

Harter is told that he doesn’t have to agree to the meeting, but in this awkward, one down position, and perhaps feeling a bit outnumbered in his own kitchen, Harter agrees to

meet with the husband at a time that is inconvenient and uncomfortable for himself.

He spends the day driving to a book barn and skimming through used books. As he daydreams and meanders through early memories, he tries to remember everything about the previous night's incident. He drags up tiny bits of information Martha has told him about her husband, and reinterprets his impressions of what had occurred.

In the early morning of the next day, Harter has a dream that takes place in the library (the place where he first met Martha and had continued to meet her) that has dark sexual undertones. He is awakened abruptly by a voice in the dark. He is frightened and becomes aggressive as he realizes that the husband's two friends are in his house.

They claim to have knocked, twice each, and that Harter had left the door open. They had assumed it was for them. And so it would seem that Harter has left the way open for these men to invade his home and intrude into his dreams. Although he is frightened and defensive, and he even comments that, 'All this is wrong' (79), he lacks the ability to see the full extent of his predicament and the will to stop what is happening. By leaving his door open he has effectively invited the intruders in, or so they convince him.

In a mirror image of the earlier scene in which Harter goes down the stairs in Martha's home after being discovered by her husband, Harter leads the two friends out of his home and quietly down the stairs. As in the earlier scene, he pauses on the porch, except this time it is not the rage of the husband that Harter notices but the 'sight of his [own] feathery frail-looking breath' (81). It makes him 'feel cold, and a little strange, as if someone his size ought to have breath more solid than that' (81). As he leaves his porch the pace of the story changes and it becomes evident that Harter is indeed in danger although he does not seem to realise it. He allows the friends to drive him to an unspecified destination. As they drive along he focuses on many details, small and large, of the town and road.

They eventually leave town and the suburbs to arrive at a wood. Harter notices Martha's car parked nearby. He imagines her tied and gagged inside, and does not go to see if Martha is inside. Harter is in no way physically constrained by the two men and he could have easily detoured to inspect the car. Instead, he follows one of the men along a path that leads in another direction while the other man walks behind Harter.

As they climb the path to meet Martha's little husband, Harter is enlivened by the vibrancy of things he sees, hears and smells in the woods. He suddenly feels 'a warm, melting friendliness for these men who had shaken him out of his torpor' (84). Just before he realises what is happening, he has a memory of his childhood home where he is safe in bed

recovering from the mumps. '[...] suddenly he remembered his father striding into the room with a new comic book' only Harter is no longer safe at home: the irate husband who had just a day and a half ago come 'striding into the room' (65) is not benevolently bringing him a comic book. In his memory he looks down through his screened bedroom window at the backyard at his play areas, and at the tidy vegetable garden and crab apple trees. Even as he experiences his memory of home Harter is standing out in the wild grass, in an remote field; he is isolated and away from home; he is exposed and vulnerable, and he dies.

The notion of liminality when experiencing the uncanny is in evidence in the 'The Way Out'. The liminal state can offer the opportunity for change. If the experience of liminality is understood as being positioned at a 'threshold'ⁱ then Harter's uncanny experience with 'the friends' in his home in the dark appears to have opened just such an opportunity for him. As he leaves his home to meet with Martha's husband, he suddenly sees his situation as a juncture for change. He examines his life and is not satisfied with it. He seems to understand that he has lost touch with who he is; that he has become alienated from his own life as evidenced through his inability to commit to his lovers or to carry through with long-term projects. As a result of his new insights, he decides that he will make his meeting with the Martha's husband a pivotal point in his life; a new beginning, an impetus for getting 'stuck in' to his life.

But his uncanny memories and associations, which have occurred throughout the story, do not offer a way, or the impetus, for him to save his own life. As he passes through this liminal experience he is filled with elation that is inappropriate to what he is about to encounter. Harter feels comradeship with the two men who have plainly stated that they are not his friends. He continues to misunderstand the extent of Martha's husband's rage, even though he has been given ample opportunity to understand and avoid confrontation. By the end of the story he cannot understand, or even clearly hear, the vital instructions that one of the 'friends' is telling him: when he realizes he has been given a gun, he throws the gun down; when he finally understands the predicament he is in, he wonders 'whether he should shout or run away, but a giddiness seize[s] him' (86), and he does nothing.

Most uncannily, as the husband raises his stiff arm, the arm reminds Harter of a childhood memory of a 'cowboy in the penny arcade' (87) but this man is not an old, familiar, harmless entertainment. Harter's last uncanny association proves to be tragically fatal. What he had envisaged as a clean break, a confessional, cathartic encounter that would

lay clear his future to an improved and truer life is, ironically, the death of him.ⁱⁱ

There are several instances when feelings of uncanniness come to play in 'The Way Out'. Sometimes both the reader and Harter experience these feelings, while at other times the reader experiences what Harter should be experiencing but somehow manages to by-pass. I will focus now on three experiences of a physical nature in which his body signals alarm to uncanny situations although Harter does not acknowledge the importance of these ominous internal signals of danger. The reader, being in a position to observe how Harter reacts, notices his ambivalence and experiences the growing tension, but also might well experience increasing dread: this is the feeling that Harter should have been feeling, but unfortunately manages to avoid.

The first incident happens in his home during the first meeting with the two friends of the husband. They have just crossed over the threshold of his kitchen and refused to enter any further into the house. The two friends are uncanny in themselves, with their matching outfits and similar demeanour; they are doubles of something familiar yet uncannily, hard to place. They seem slightly comic and unsettling at the same time. But then they say something that causes Harter to feel threatened and then angry: 'a little burst of fear rippled across his stomach' (73). Harter seems hardly to notice this indication that something is not right. When he should have been continuing to feel fear and apprehension about the purposes of the men in his home, he mentally talks himself out of defensive action. He allows them to talk him into meeting with the husband.

The second time Harter's body tries to alert him to impending trouble also happens in his home and on the afternoon of the same day. Harter has awakened from an impromptu nap in the later afternoon. He had fallen asleep while going over tiny details and trying to rehash the incident of the husband's unexpected entry into the bedroom. He remembers that 'He had hissed out some words' (77). This comes at the end of a long paragraph in which Harter has once again gone over the incident, and has re-evaluated and tried to remember everything Martha ever told him about her husband. Martha had not said much because Harter had made it clear that he was not interested in the relationship or in the man.

It is a frantic paragraph with Harter grasping at bits of details as he attempts to build a profile of a man he knows little about. In a rehearsal or daydream of the upcoming meeting with the husband he consoles and reassures the husband that the affair was 'nothing serious' (77). That short, telling sentence, 'He hissed out some words', is tagged onto this reverie. This is not Harter's self talk but a flash of memory that pops into his fantasy

conversation. It is alarming – menacing - and one wonders why Harter has not focused on this detail and, more importantly, what exactly it was that the husband had said that Harter had missed.

The next sentence in the next paragraph starts with ‘Harter opened his eyes and saw by the yellow light coming through the window that it was late afternoon’ (78). Coming on the heels of the memory of the hissed words, it is apparent that Harter has fallen asleep through mental exhaustion and has continued his frustrating attempt to understand the situation even in his sleep. And it is here, as he lies on his bed, that the second emotional ripple crosses over his stomach. This time it is a ripple of nervousness. But he bypasses it by becoming angry because he has been manipulated into promising to meet with the husband. He tells himself that ‘He had nothing to fear from the rigid little man and his peculiar friends’ (78). Martha’s husband has gained entry to Harter’s home even though he has physically kept himself clear of Harter. By manipulating Harter through the agency of the two friends, he has introduced an insidious, low lying threat, the consequences of which Harter seems unable, or unwilling, to avoid

On the third occasion that Harter’s body attempts to alert him to danger, he is full of elated thoughts and feelings of how he will change his life as a result of the meeting with the husband. He and the two friends walked through the woods in the morning to meet the husband and Harter becomes heady with the sensation. Everything around comes alive: ‘The world was opening up, bursting with details he had never bothered to notice’ (84). He has a passing doubt and this causes a funny feeling – a non-descript feeling – to ripple across his stomach. He takes action against this last ripple by checking his elation and trying to ‘get a grip’ on himself (84). Unfortunately, as he has done previously, he acts inappropriately, misunderstanding this vital ‘detail’ that his own body has given him. Harter continues on with the two friends, blindly participating in the husband’s sinister plan for restitution.

Harter’s home, on the third floor with its single yellow window, could be visually interpreted as a lighthouse of sorts. It is a singular and isolated light atop a three-family house. In the darkness of the neighbourhood, after his emotionally exhausting evening, the light in his kitchen window offers the expectation of safety and comfort. Continuing with the lighthouse analogy, lighthouses warn of imminent danger: in this situation, the yellow window both warns of danger and signals a safe haven.

The movement from Harter’s exhaustion and subsequent climb to the third floor to the relaxed security of his childhood home (in the dream) to the invasion of the husband into the

family home—and also Harter’s dream—is disturbing. Where Harter can be seen as the invader into Martha’s husband’s home (even though it was Martha who ‘invited him to her home for a cup of tea’ (72)), the husband becomes the invader into Harter’s home.

Later in the day, when Harter awakens from his afternoon nap, he sees the yellow light of the late afternoon sun through his window. This time the yellow light is outside, low in the sky shining in. It does not offer safety but indicates imminent fatigue and stress.

As characters move through rooms in stories, the furniture, fittings and fixtures denote the functions of the rooms thereby orientating the reader and thus establishing a sense of familiarity. Certain things normally happen in certain rooms. Some rooms are public spaces while others are shared private spaces, and others are not meant for sharing except under special circumstances. Most short stories do not construct comprehensively detailed descriptions of rooms, but instead use the basics of a typical room to express or intimate what might be expected to occur in such a room.ⁱⁱⁱ

For example: typically in western societies a bedroom has a bed or some sort of arrangement for sleeping. Adults sleep alone or with their partners, while young children with siblings share rooms but sleep in separate beds. If they are of differing genders, there usually comes a point when the boys and girls are segregated in to separate rooms, or if there is enough space, the older children will have rooms of their own. Thus, in a short story, a room with many beds and toys scattered around would indicate a bedroom shared by many young children. It would take very little detail to get this point across to the reader.

‘A Way Out’ opens with Harter ‘on the edge of the bed, grimly fastening the buttons of his shirt’ (65) with his lover sprawled across the bed next to him. Her husband unexpectedly opens the door and steps into the room. Had her husband discovered Harter and Martha in a different room, it would have created a different effect. This story is narrated closely from Harter’s point of view. He believes that he is ‘going to get away with it’ (65) because Martha’s husband is ‘small and neat, almost delicate, no match’ for him (65). But the reader knows that the situation involves more than just physical one-upmanship owing to the placement of the scene in Martha and her husband’s bedroom. The bedroom, in this case, with its bed for two, is a private space shared by a husband and wife. In this room for only two, Harter is an intruder (at least to the husband). The reader recognizes the ramifications of the breach that has taken place. Harter is the threat, the invader, in this house.

Harter may be bigger and stronger but he knows nothing of the depth of the husband’s feelings. He knows very little about his personality or character, and does not

understand the husband's relationship with Martha. Harter escapes from the other man's home but he does not escape from the man. It is telling that Martha's husband arranges for the meeting to take place away from his own home (a place where his power, or control, has been compromised by Harter's presence) and Harter's home. In this neutral place which he has chosen, with friends to assist him, the husband is free to exercise control.

Harter's own bedroom is as minimally described, as well as the kitchen (79; 73 and 75). He has a bed with covers; a chair on to which he has placed his shirt and pants; and a clock that he leans towards to see in the dark. (Presumably he has a bedside table. The reader easily fills in the details allowing the story's momentum to build.) When the two friends wake him in the extremely early morning hours, in the dark, there is no mention of a bedroom light. From personal experience the reader knows that bedrooms generally have lights. This leaves an intriguing gap between what one would normally expect to happen and what actually happens. Harter talks in the dark with the strange men who have entered his home uninvited. This gives the eerie impression of Harter conversing with disembodied voices. This alarming notion is played down by the comical banter although the danger of Harter's predicament is still clearly evident.

Harter moves to the bathroom where he washes his face and dresses in the dim glow of the nightlight. Once again, Harter chooses not to turn on a light that the reader knows must be there. This neglect of illumination presses home the precarious circumstances Harter has allowed to continue to transpire in his own home. He is metaphorically and literally 'in the dark'. He has the thought that he should postpone the meeting and 'deal with it in the clear light of morning' (80) but he continues on in the dimness of the nightlight leaving the reader with a mounting anxiety that Harter himself should be feeling.

The description of Harter's kitchen is sparse but revealing. While the privacy of the bedroom space can easily be understood as having been infringed upon by the husband's two friends, it is generally acknowledged that a kitchen is a more public, shared space. This perception of the kitchen could cause the alarming nature of the intrusion of the men to be less obvious. But as the men will step only two steps over the threshold, they indicate that they know they are intruding. They refuse to share what is normally a shared space with Harter, even after being invited in. It is a small, intimate kind of kitchen with 'frilly white curtains,' a 'flowered sugar bowl,' and a door with a 'fluted glass knob' (75). Harter's kitchen has a feminine feel to it. In this cosy kitchen Harter - groggy, dishevelled from sleep and uncomfortable with the leftovers of yesterday's breakfast which is still on the table -

faces two strangers who are fully awake and formally dressed. Presumably they have eaten breakfast. Having entered Harter's territory, so to speak, where he would normally have the upper hand, they, instead, have the advantage.

'The Prophet's Hair' is a story rich with colour, sensation, light, darkness, and abounding in threat to the home. It is bound up between two homes, and perhaps a third, if the shrine from which the Prophet's relic has been stolen, can be considered a home. Had the hair remained securely housed in its shrine in the mosque in Kashmir, the calamities that befell the two families would not have occurred.

In the first home live the prosperous moneylender Hashim and his courteous, contented, and congenial family. But their secure and pleasant life turns abruptly to violence, tyranny, and dread when Hashim finds the stolen relic of the Prophet's hair. He does not return it to the shrine where it belongs, but instead takes it to his home where he intends for it to become part of his varied and extensive collection of valueless objects. He contemplates the hair all day until he experiences a drastic, threatening change in mindset. He becomes a religious tyrant who beats and abuses his wife and children. He beats and threatens those of his customers who are unable to pay their debts on time, and generally seems to have gone from being a respectable, although greedy, small minded, and shallow man, to a hideous monster. His obsession with the relic causes him to confess his deepest secrets to his family (completely without remorse) and the dread his family experiences, the suffering and shock they undergo, cause the children to seek dangerous remedies to their unhappy circumstances.

Hashim's son, Atta, takes the relic from the safe in Hashim's 'sanctum', or his study, and tries to return it to the shrine. When he arrives at the mosque he discovers that the relic has slipped through a hole in his pocket. He is relieved to be rid of it no matter how it goes away. When he gets home he finds his sister crying and bruised. The moneylender had again found the relic in the same place he had found it before. He had gone into a 'rage to end all rages' when he realised the relic had been taken and he beat his daughter until she told him what had happened. Atta is filled with dread and believes 'that the hair is persecuting them' (Rushdie 50) and that it has manoeuvred its way back to continue what it had started. His sister, Huma, comes up with another plan.

The naïve brother ventures deep into the dark and criminal part of the city to find a professional thief. There he is robbed, severely beaten and then dumped, in the extreme cold of a winter's night, on a sandbar at the edge of the lake. Since he has gone into a coma, his

sister takes over and goes into the city herself. She is terrified but she is prepared and she achieves their goal which is to hire a master thief to steal the relic. Through this act of desperation she unwittingly spreads the threat associated with the Prophet's hair to another household.

The master thief, Sheikh Sin, agrees to take the job. He has a terminal disease and wishes to spend his last days in comfort and to leave his blind wife settled and cared for. The plan goes wrong: During the night of the burglary, the moneylender's son dies suddenly while inexplicably shouting *'Thief! Thief! Thief!'* (54: italics as written) which sets his mother wailing. The moneylender wakes and not noticing the thief in the darkness of his room, grabs a sword he keeps by his bed and rushes out into the hallway where he stabs a shadow in the heart. The shadow is his daughter. Upon seeing what he has done, Hashim turns the knife on himself and dies. His wife goes mad and has to be placed in an asylum for the rest of her life.

The thief snatches the relic and escapes to his home. He takes the hair into his house and unknowingly transports the threat to his family's wellbeing into his home. He tells his wife he will be going away for a while but he is shot by the police and dies. The police find the relic and return it to the shrine, but its short stay in Sheikh Sin's home has left its mark. Miracles have occurred. The thief's four sons, who made good livings as lame beggars, have been healed. Their income is lost and they are 'ruined men' (58). Their mother's sight has been restored. She appears to be the only one who has a happy outcome for she is allowed to see the beauty of her valley for the rest of her life. But she has lost her husband and her sons have lost their incomes, so one has to wonder the true extent of the happiness this 'miracle' has brought her.

Concentrating on this story's familial preoccupation, we can see that it oscillates between two families in two houses. The mosque that the relic was stolen from could also be thought of as a third home, the home of the Prophet's hair and the 'home' of the religious 'family' who regularly gathers there to pray. In this respect, the theft of the relic would represent an invasion of home. The theft did indeed cause a considerable threat to that particular home, judging from the reaction of the 'throng of the distraught faithful' (49). The theft could even be likened to a kidnapping for, as we shall see, the hair comes to take on a self determining power of its own, at least in the minds of some of the characters. No doubt research into this aspect of the concept of 'home and threat' in this short story could prove to

be a profitable study, but this criticism will focus primarily on the homes of Hashim the moneylender and Sheikh Sin the master thief.

It is a story of high contrasts. If we visualize the structure of the story it could be imagined as being set on a 'vertical polarity', as Gaston Bachelard would say (17-18).^{iv}

The 'large house on the shores of the lake' (36) occupied by Hashim the moneylender and his family is situated on the top of the vertical; it contrasts with the thick darkness of the house of the master thief Sheikh Sin and his wife which is situated at the bottom of the vertical, 'in a gully as dark as ink' (38). It is a house that is deep in the 'most wretched and disreputable part of the city' (35). The contrasting locations of the houses emphasises the disparate societal positioning of the families. As the story progresses, these apparent differences would appear inconsequential as it becomes apparent that the families have more in common than one would have suspected. The story spirals between the extremes of the two polarities until it finishes in-between them, in the middle of the pole, so to speak: the relic is 'restored to its shrine, and the state to equanimity and peace' (43); the events that occur through the relic's journey back to the shrine blur the boundaries between the two homes and raise questions of identity of a familial and individual nature.

But before that balance is achieved, the threat that causes the dread and fear which Hashim is instrumental in bringing into his house (and he does it twice) will eventually spread to the other home where it will cause comparable damage. The two families have fundamental similarities, not the least of these being that the Prophet's hair affects them both in disastrous ways.

Because of the moneylender's obsession with the relic, his home is no longer 'a refuge from the outside world' (Marcus 2) for his family. It becomes a bewildering and terrifying place, much akin to a miserable prison. Hashim beats his family and demands that they adhere to extreme religious practices. He demeans and humiliates them through confessing many wicked thoughts and deeds for which he is not apologetic: he blames his family for his contemptible behaviour. As he spews 'long streams of awful truths' (Rushdie 45) he feels unburdened of his hypocrisy for having hidden the shameful things he has done. The family is horrified to hear his true thoughts and feeling; the children are left 'stunned, in tears' (46).

In an attempt to remove the disruptive relic (which could be understood as an intruder into the home, OR as a captive as it has been stolen from its shrine – its home – and not returned when found, but taken into the home and secreted away as a collector's trophy) the children decide on a drastic plan. Their decision to hire someone from the darkest part of

their ‘outside world’ to solve their problem, once again changes the nature of the threat in their home. To remove the terror and dread that has overwhelmed them in their home they conceive and set into motion a plan that inadvertently causes more danger and ultimately death.

It is a desperate plan, indicative of the desperate events that have befallen them. But as in ‘The Way Out’ the trouble has been allowed into the house by someone who lives within the home, the threat from without becomes the threat from within.

The *household n.*

1.a. A domestic unit consisting of the members of a family who live together along with nonrelatives such as servants. **b.** The living spaces and possessions belonging to such a unit.

2. A person or group of people occupying a single dwelling: *the rise of nonfamily households.* (freeonlinedictionary.com).

‘Household’ is word that comes up three times in ‘The Prophet’s Hair.’ In light of the fact that ‘household’ is not used in any of the other stories discussed in this criticism, but appears three times in Rushdie’s story, it will make for a profitable investigation into what its meaning and nuances mean in this particular story.

The household in this story is always Hashim’s household; Sin’s domestic arrangements are not referred to as a household. When Huma starts to tell her story to the thief Sheikh Sin, the narrator speaks of the ‘household of her father, the wealthy moneylender Hashim’ (41). This idea of the household, in this story, of a wealthy man implies quantity.

The family and servants live in this house. We discover that the house has gardens and is gated with a guard (however ineffectual he may be). This spacious house, positioned on the lake, is a large, busy estate with an active family, servants and Hashim’s clients coming and going. Hashim’s household encompasses quite a few people and covers quite a lot of ground, with views over the lake that add considerable visual space to his holdings, his *household*. It also holds his extensive collections which he displays in cabinets and across the walls.

When he brings the Prophet’s hair into his house, the household it will come to affect involves everything which that house holds. Although it is Hashim’s children who take action against the intrusion of the hair, the turmoil and havoc that he inflicts upon ‘the glassy contentment of the household’ (42) concerns more than just his abuse of his immediate family.

Sheikh Sin's house is a very different matter. His home situation is not referred to as a 'household.' His house is 'gloom-wrapped' (38). It is 'in a gully as dark as ink' (38) and has a doorway 'from which darkness seemed to be pouring like smoke.' It would seem that Sin's responsibilities are considerably less than Hashim's, and that the effects of his decision to bring the vial with the hair back to his residence will not be as widely felt. His house does not hold much besides a blind wife; his sons appear to live on their own and are self-sufficient, and his home has no grand aspect. In fact, it is situated tightly in an area of dark, narrow alleys and 'houses of wood and corrugated iron [that] seemed perpetually on the verge of losing their balance' (35).

The use of the word 'household' in this story highlights and gives substance to the degree of threat that the family feels in the Hashim household. The lack of 'household' in reference to Sheikh Sin accentuates how little he believes he has to lose. The reader may not consciously think about the full ramifications of the word, but that subtle lack of a 'household' when referring to Sheikh Sin in contrast to the way 'household' is emphasised as a possession of the wealthy hoarder Hashim, aids in understanding the enormity of his children's dread. It gives weight to their desperation and commitment to be rid of the threat of the hair and thereby save their household.

As Huma ventured into 'the most wretched and disreputable part of the city' (36), she was directed to the dark house of Sheikh Sin. When she was finally able to see his face she was shocked to see a man who looked remarkably like her own mental image of 'that Sheikh Sin – the Thief of Thieves!' (40) a bogey man that she had been threatened with by her ayah (nanny) when she was a youngster.

This uncanny occurrence momentarily flips the story into the realm of the fairytale. With this huge, fairytale-like being, 'a mountainous figure' (38), sitting before her, Huma struggled with her 'nostalgia' (a sweetly ironic description of this uncanny association when being confronted with childhood terrors). The reader at once sees the humour in the situation but cannot help feeling slightly uncomfortable. As Huma struggles to keep her composure against this surprising and fearful discovery, the uncanniness of the circumstances are brought fully home.

This man is the striking image of the very person who would have been summoned to steal her and her brother away if they had persisted in their childhood infractions. She is asking for assistance from a man whose eerie visage draws up deep insecurities about loss, separation, punishment and harm. She is asking this man to enter her house in the night and

trusting him to save her family from the torment of the hair.

The presence of the early image of Sheikh Sin in Huma's mind, superimposed upon the living master thief she faces, adds to the impression of the relic's mysterious power. The hair's negative influence over her father drives Huma to hire a criminal to invade her house. As Huma's childhood self blurs with her adult identity in the image of Sheikh Sin, Huma momentarily sees herself as a criminal. He becomes a double for her. He is Sheikh Sin the master thief and he is 'Sheikh Sin, the Thief of Thieves.' He appears to be an imaginary being that has taken physical form in her life. Huma manages to maintain her composure and she determinedly tells the thief her story.

As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that what she has experienced in the last six days has been disconcerting and disorientating. The girl's extreme response does not seem quite so farfetched when we consider her father's sudden change from an affectionate, genteel, civil, and generous man to a wantonly cruel, violent, and miserly fanatic. Her father had rationalized his extortionist practices to his wife by claiming that he did it 'to teach these people the value of money; let them learn that, and they will be cured of this fever of borrowing all the time. So you see that if my plans succeed, I shall put myself out of business!' (41). Huma's father's own professional thievery, stripped of its thin veneer of civility, reveals an aggressive and violent man intent on using threat and force to achieve his goals.

As mentioned before, these two families have some fundamental similarities. Their dissimilarities, which at first appear to be located at the opposite ends of the vertical pole, begin to lose their distinctiveness as the story progresses. The higher, rational end suddenly deteriorates into irrationality, while the lower, irrational end moves towards rational cohesion. Hashim topples his household into chaos while Sheikh Sin attempts to save his by agreeing to rob Hashim of the hair.

Hashim's family is healthy; Sheikh Sin's is diseased, scarred, maimed and blind. Their houses, as previously discussed, are in very different locations in their valley which indicate their economic and social disparities. Despite these differences, they have some fundamental similarities. Both patriarchs of these families claim that the Prophet's hair, as a religious relic, has no significance for them. Hashim's family is not religious but when he reveals the newest acquisition to his 'collection' to his son, the young man is troubled. He eventually becomes convinced that 'there will be no peace in our house until this hair is out of it' (49). Later, after his failed attempt to return the relic to its mosque, he 'sobbed his

opinion, which was that the hair was persecuting them, and had come back to finish the job' (50). He is not religious, not a believer in the Prophet, but the dramatic effect the hair has had on his father has caused him to believe that the relic has malevolent power.

Neither Sheikh Sin nor his 'blind wife had ever had much to say for prophets – that was one thing they had in common with the moneylender's thunderstruck clan' (52). Even so, they fall 'under the hair's thrall' (50) just as Hashim's family does. Just as Hashim had scooped the relic out of the lake and carried the threat into his home, so Sheikh Sin removes the hair from its hiding place under Hashim's pillow and escapes with it to his home. Had he waited, he might have taken the treasure-boxes that Huma had intended as payment for his services. He had been supplied with a plan of the house and knows exactly where her room is, but instead he leaves the treasure and takes the hair. In the uproar of wailing and stabbing, death and suicide, he abandons his plan to achieve financial security. Perhaps on impulse, he continued with the plan to steal the relic. This choice, like Hashim's choice, brings disaster to himself, and to his family. For apparently, once the relic has entered a house, those under that house's roof will be affected (58).

One of the fascinating (and thoroughly entertaining) features of this story is how it taps into various storytelling modes, slipping from tall tale to fairytale to the fantastic to journalistic commentary and magic realism. It is permeated with black humour that often juxtaposes catastrophe. This mixing of literary modes creates a playful story full of surprises with unexpected plot twists and humorous mode jumping that ends with the kind of death drenched extravaganza one would expect from an early modern tragedy play. With the principle characters dead and others left bemused, 'ruined', or driven mad, it is an accomplished feat of literary hybridity.

The next story, '**The Enormous Radio**', features a family that encounters quite a different kind of breach to their home. It threatens their beliefs about propriety, community and self. Like Harter, they will be exposed, but within the 'safety' of their own residence.

Jim and Irene Westcott are, according to the narrator, satisfactorily 'average of income, endeavour, and respectability' (Cheever 49). This is initially and primarily illustrated by the facts of their home life: they have been married nine years, have two young children, live in an apartment house in a respectable area of New York City, and hope to live in the suburbs someday. Their home and educational background are integral parts of their identities. Irene's perception of 'home', in particular, is the physical and mental location from

which they conduct their lives. The rather long first paragraph of this story puts considerable emphasis on the couple's relationship to their home and belongings. They have one thing only in which they differ from 'their friends, their classmates, and their neighbors' and that is that they appreciate 'serious' music (49). Consequently, they spend a quite a lot of time listening to music on their radio.

Their radio is old 'sensitive, unpredictable, and beyond repair' (49). One Sunday afternoon it breaks, permanently. On Monday Jim buys a new one that will be delivered to the apartment on Tuesday. Irene asks what it looks like but Jim refuses to tell her; he says he wants it to be a surprise. When the radio arrives the next afternoon, Irene uncrates it with the help of the handyman and maid, and they carry it to the living room. She is impressed by how ugly it is. Irene is proud of the care and thought she has put into decorating her living room, and the ugly radio does not fit in. She sees the radio as an 'aggressive intruder' standing amongst her 'intimate possessions' (50). The radio confounds her and she studies its instrument panel before plugging it in. It is set on high volume and makes a tremendous sound before Irene is able to turn it down. The radio in its ugly case makes her uneasy. When her children come home from school she takes them to the park. It is not until the late afternoon, when the maid is supervising the children's baths, that she returns to the radio.

She goes to the living room and sits down to listen to a 'Mozart quintet that she knew she enjoyed' (50). She believes that the new radio has a 'much purer tone' (50) than the old radio had, and that the tone is the most important thing. She decides that she can hide the cabinet behind the sofa. As soon she has 'made her peace' (50) with the radio it starts to making a crackling sound. It transpires that the radio is sensitive to the electrical currents in the building. The sounds of the elevator, and of the appliances of her neighbours all over the apartment building, are being 'reproduced in her loudspeaker' (51).

Unable to control the 'powerful and ugly instrument with a mistaken sensitivity', Irene goes to the nursery to be with her children. When Jim comes home from work he confidently tries the radio and has a similar experience to Irene's. He turns the radio off and tells Irene that in the morning he will phone the people who had sold him the radio and 'give them hell' (51).

The following afternoon, when Irene returns from a luncheon engagement, the maid tells her that a man had come and 'fixed the radio' (51). In the evening Jim and Irene discover that although the radio no longer plays the sounds of electrical appliances, it instead transmits the conversations of the people in their apartment building. Irene is alarmed when

she starts to realize this and abruptly tells Jim to ‘turn that thing off’ (53). Irene is afraid someone might also be listening in on them. He turns the radio off. He decides to try a little test to hear if Irene might be right. Jim turns the radio back on and tunes into the voice of a neighbour’s nanny. He shouts into the radio and gets no response. Jim and Irene are easily satisfied that the radio is not transmitting from their home to their neighbours’ and spend the evening tuning in on many of them. At midnight they go to bed tired from laughter.

Later in the very early morning, ‘when all the lights in the neighborhood were extinguished’ (54), one of the children calls for a drink of water. Irene tends to the child, and while in his bedroom, looks out of the window at the dark street and quiet neighbourhood. She goes into the living room, turns on the radio, and listens in on a melancholy conversation of a middle-aged couple. Irene shivers, turns the radio off, and goes back to bed.

In the morning Irene feeds her family breakfast and then waits at the door until she is certain that they have left on the elevator. She turns on the radio and listens to the goings-on of her neighbours until the maid arrives. When the maid comes in, Irene quickly turns the radio off realising that her actions are ‘furtive’ (55).

On her way to a luncheon engagement, Irene boards the elevator which is full of women who live in her building. She stares at their ‘handsome and impassive faces’ (55) and wonders which ones she has listened to on the radio.

At lunch she has two Martinis and ‘she looked searchingly at her friend and wondered what her secrets were’ (55).

She changes her afternoon plans and leaves her friend to go home and back to the radio. She tells the maid that she is not to be disturbed, closes the doors to the living room and turns the radio on.

Jim arrives home from work in the evening and finds Irene ‘sad and vague’ (56). He brings her a drink before they walk through the spring evening to their dinner party. On the way they walk past a Salvation Army Band and Irene holds onto Jim so that they stop and listen to the music. She comments, ‘They’re really such nice people, aren’t they?’ (56). As she donates money to the band she has ‘a look of radiant melancholy’ that Jim has never seen before.

At the dinner party she is rude to the hostess and stares at the couple across the table from her ‘with an intensity for which she would have punished her children’ (57). On the way home from the dinner party she notices the stars in the lovely spring sky and quotes from Merchant of Venice, ‘“How far that little candle throws its beam [...] So shines a good thing

in a naughty world” ’ (57).

After they arrive home Irene waits for Jim to go to sleep and then goes to the radio and turns it on.

Irene spends the next day immersed in the transmissions of the radio. In the evening Emma, the maid, lets Jim in. Irene runs down the hall and screams at Jim to hurry five stories upstairs to intervene in a neighbour’s domestic fight. But Jim strides straight over to the radio, turns it off, and tells Irene to stop listening to the radio if it upsets her so. He demands to know why she continues to listen, and says it is ‘indecent’, ‘like looking in windows’ (57). Irene is thoroughly upset by the quarrelling she has heard all day on the radio; she feels disheartened and does not want to quarrel with Jim. Distressed, she seeks reassurances from Jim who placates her and agrees that they are not like all the others: they have never been sordid or quarrelsome. He agrees that their children are beautiful, and that as a family they have always been decent and loving to one another.

The next day the radio is properly repaired, and Irene listens to ‘serious’ music all day. When Jim arrives home that evening he is tired. He eventually starts quarrelling with, and then yelling, at Irene. He talks about his financial worries and about how he had hoped for more from their life. He points out a few of Irene’s moral failings and unethical dealings with friends and family which collapse her high opinions of herself. The story ends with an ironic twist: As Jim continues to yell, Irene stands before the radio’s ‘hideous cabinet’ hoping the radio will say something kind to her.

The first paragraph of this story puts a strong emphasis on the averageness (within their educational and income levels) of Jim and Irene. They are sufficient but lack distinction, and as such are not out of the ordinary except for their appreciation of ‘serious’ music. Their musical preferences set them apart from their friends and acquaintances. It is an activity that they keep to themselves; they have not sought out friends with which to share this interest: ‘They went to a great many concerts - although they seldom mentioned this to anyone – and they spent a great deal of time listening to music on the radio’ (49). It is apparent that they value their identity as a family within the perimeter of their social group or community; fitting into that group is important enough for them to play down an activity that they greatly enjoy but which might make them appear other than average.

In pondering the effect of uncanny characters in these short stories, and the threat they seem to pose to the home, the ugly radio in ‘The Enormous Radio’ is certainly one to

consider. Irene's personification of the radio gives the impression that the radio is alive; that through its size, unsightliness, and overwhelming volume it has somehow imposed itself into her home. It threatens Irene's aesthetic sensibilities and her sense of control and safety in her home. It shines a 'malevolent green light' and 'violent forces' (50) are trapped inside the ugly cabinet. She is confounded by its control panel and feels uneasy about having the radio in her living room. But she re-establishes her authority in her home when her children arrive from school. Irene takes them to the Park and thereby assumes her identity as caring and competent mother. Although at this point in the story the radio that Jim has purchased for her has intruded upon only one room in her home, it has already unsettled her mind. It threatens her sense of proportion and good taste. It puts her off balance by its size, ugliness, loud sound, and complicated instrument panel and becomes an object that is 'more than she could hope to master' (51).

Jim claims that he bought the radio to make Irene happy, ' "I bought this damned radio to give you some pleasure," he said. 'I paid a great deal of money for it. I thought it might make you happy. I wanted to make you happy" ' (57). He chose a large, expensive radio, an instrument that would stand out in a room and draw attention. The sound quality does not seem to have been a concern of his. This implies that Jim believes that Irene's happiness is strongly connected with the impressions they make on others. In Jim's mind, the sizes and prices of things are impressive. Jim and Irene are an educated and upwardly mobile couple, so it would be expected that making good impressions would be part of that social package. But the dark flipside of making a good impression involves covering or hiding the things that would make a bad impression. Freud's ideas of the 'homely' and 'unhomely' are easily applied to the big, ugly radio, a metaphor for the unhomely (what should stay hidden) that stands in Irene's homely (what is comfortable), tastefully decorated living room. That is does not play radio stations and 'serious' music (the homely) as it was intended to do, but instead transmits the intimate goings on of the neighbours in the building (the unhomely), creates an uneasy, uncanny feeling in the reader. It also disturbs Irene. This intruder into her home has not brought her pleasure, but has introduced an intimacy with her neighbours that she had not expected. As she listens to her neighbours, she draws away from her family.

It is after her return from the Park that Irene starts to make a shift in her perception of the radio. The radio's loudspeaker becomes 'her loudspeaker', and this is repeated twice in the same paragraph: 'the closing of the elevator doors were reproduced in *her* loudspeaker' and 'sounds had been picked up from the apartments that surrounded hers and transmitted

through *her* loudspeaker' (51, *italics mine*). Even though the radio is a 'powerful and ugly instrument' (51) that is more than she can hope to control she has started to identify with the radio to the point that she thinks of its loudspeaker as hers, perhaps even as an extension of herself. She cannot accept its ugliness – she intends to hide it behind the sofa where it can still be heard – or control or understand it, but she can possess an aspect of it. It is through this act of identification and possession that Irene begins to open the way for a threat that will shatter her comfortable and secure association with averageness; it will expose the fragility of her and Jim's peace of mind.

As she is unable to control the radio, Irene again turns it off and regains her composure by going to the nursery to see her children. Although Irene's sense of control and security is strongly linked to being with her children, she has allocated a large part of their care to the maid even though she herself does not hold a job outside of the home. Creating and maintaining a certain image of domestication satisfies Irene. The children, fed and bathed by the maid, are available to her at her convenience. Irene and Jim eat together without the children and apparently spend their evenings either with friends, or by themselves. Their lives are compartmentalized, much like the apartment building they live in. The transmissions from the neighbouring apartments threaten this compartmentalization.

Irene is suddenly alarmed when it becomes apparent that the radio is transmitting the events of others in the apartment house. She is concerned that the transmission might be going both ways, and that her neighbours might be listening in on her as well. Irene does not see the problem as a two-way problem. She does not consider this new ability to listen in on her neighbours as a threat to their privacy, or that it is an invasion into their homes. For as soon as she and Jim have ascertained that the transmission is one-way, Irene is full of enthusiasm: ' "Isn't this too divine? Try something else. See if we can get those people in 18-C" ' (54). Irene only worries that the radio's potential for infiltration and exposure might affect her own home. The ethical considerations of what she is doing by secretly listening to others do not cross her mind.

This story uses the situation of night time darkness to create a feeling of isolation in a similar way to 'The Way Out.' Harter drives home alone through his darkened and quiet neighbourhood and this evokes a feeling of isolation and vulnerability. After he enters his house, which should be secure, he has a disturbing, threatening dream. Likewise, after Irene tends to her son in the night, she looks out onto the quiet and dark street of her neighbourhood, and this simple action produces the uncanny feeling of being shut out and all

alone. Within the security of her home, she turns on the radio and listens to the despondent and distressing conversation of a couple. They are isolated in their misery in their bedroom somewhere in the multi-storeyed apartment building. In this way she has become the lone invader and her surreptitious act of listening to a distressed and despairing couple as they lie awake does not dispel her isolation but, instead, increases it and adds to her own feelings of melancholy and isolation.

In the morning Irene seems to reaffirm her apparent identity as the responsible mother, loving wife, and competent homemaker. She busies herself with the breakfast, braids her daughter's hair and waits at the door until her family has left on the elevator. It becomes increasingly evident that this aspect of Irene's identity is a public image for we learn that the maid does not arrive from her room in the basement until 10 in the morning. This brings into question the authenticity of Irene's domestic interpretation of herself. She uses her children and her domestic environment to ground herself, but had the maid arrived earlier, or had there been the space in the apartment for a live-in servant, Irene might very well have done something other than care for her family.

Her identity as the good wife and mother is a superficial one, for once her family has gone she goes straight into the living room and turns on the radio. She does not continue with the matters of her home life, but instead shifts her habits and normal preoccupations to accommodate her growing compulsion to listen in on the private home lives of others. But she has not slipped fully away from the identity that serves her in maintaining her place within her community. She realises that what she has been doing, and the resultant 'insights' she has gained, are 'furtive'. Irene's quick move to turn the radio off at the maid's arrival indicates that she knows full well that what she is doing in private would not be condoned if she were discovered.^v Irene knows that if she were in the position of being listened in on, she would be unsettled (to say the least) to discover it. This is explicitly evident when Irene abruptly commands Jim to turn the radio off until they can ascertain that the radio is not transmitting in both directions.

Irene's growing curiosity spreads from what she has heard to what she can see. As she stands in the elevator with other women from her building, she examines their faces, seeing them in ways she had not thought to see them before. Irene tries to connect what she had heard that morning when she 'invaded the privacy of several breakfast tables' (55), by way of her radio, to the women with whom she stands in such close confines. This could be interpreted as the predictable consequence of her listening; that having gathered information

one would want to connect that information to a specific person. But Irene's earlier auditory invasion of the neighbouring homes has now been expanded to include a visual invasion. In such close proximity to the women, Irene's 'staring' (55) is inappropriate and dishonest. She has moved beyond being simply curious, to attributing the 'forthright and sometimes brutal language' that had troubled and amazed her that morning (55), to specific neighbours.

Irene feels compelled to question and wonder about those around her. Unlike Harter, who is preoccupied with re-examining and reinterpreting memories, Irene wonders what disturbing secrets her friends are harbouring. Hers is a morose, prying interest in the secret lives of others without reference to her own shortcomings. Whereas Harter appears to be trying to understand motives and their consequences, Irene sees the brutality and deficiencies of others. Both Harter and Irene are distracted by inconsequential details and do not see the larger threat that they will encounter. Irene and Harter, albeit in very different ways, have invaded the homes of others thereby causing painful backlash reactions.

Irene's fascination with the private lives of her neighbours causes her to excuse herself from her afternoon plans with her friend. At this point in the story she wholeheartedly embraces her preoccupation with the secret events of her neighbours' lives. Upon arriving home she tells the maid that she is 'not to be disturbed' (55). There is no longer hesitation about the impropriety of the furtive nature of her activities, and she no longer makes the effort to appear interested in her children. In a way, she has now 'mastered' the radio and no longer seeks the reaffirmation of her identity through them. She is enthralled with the transmissions in the in-between of her life and lives of the others, which is a kind of space in which she and those she listens to do not exist. She closes herself away to be alone with those she is not actually with. She spends the rest of the afternoon with the radio, listening to acquaintances and to others she vaguely knows of, and watching clouds blow through the sky. Irene has lost herself.

In the evening, as she and Jim walk to a dinner date, Irene is impressed with how much nicer the musicians in the Salvation Army Band are than a lot of people she knows. 'They have such nice faces,' (56) she says. Irene actually does not know the musicians in the Salvation Army Band. As it is highly unlikely that members of the Salvation Army would live amongst her prosperous neighbours in their apartment building, she could not have listened in on their private lives on her radio. It is through their affiliation with a well known charitable organization, and by their musicianship, that Irene arrives at her assumed conclusions of the members. In Irene's mind these people are not 'average' like her friends and neighbours. She

links her appreciation of 'serious music' with the performers in the Salvation Army Band, and begins to identify with them. With her shifting sense of herself she adopts a new facial expression of 'radiant melancholy' and by her uncongeniality at the party she sets herself apart from her hostess and fellow guests. She begins a project to step away from the crowd she associates with even though she has not thought to examine herself or tried to understand her own motives.

With seemingly little moral character to support her endeavours, Irene attempts to reinvent her identity and that of her family's. '*So shines a good thing in a naughty world*' she says as she looks up at the mild night sky. Irene is heady from her new belief that she, like a candle or a star, is just such a good thing in her world. But as she delights in this new idea of herself, her understanding of her place in her community, her perception of the security of her marriage and her loving relationship with her children, is disintegrating.

In the end, after the radio is truly repaired, Irene's true nature is revealed, and she is indeed as average as her peers. As Jim cites examples of Irene's dishonesty, selfishness and stinginess, and yells about his dissatisfaction with his life: 'I don't like to see all my energies, all my youth, wasted on fur coats and radios and slipcovers and-' (58), Irene is again concerned about the radio transmissions of the radio:

'Please Jim,' she said. 'Please. They'll hear us.'

'*Who'll hear us?* Emma can't hear us.'

'The radio.'

She touches the radio and wishes it would say something kind to her. She reaches out, hoping for contact of some kind, but there is no one there. She is even more isolated than she was before.

'**A Country Doctor**' considers the nature of threat within the community. The concept of community can be understood as an extended form of home, with those within the community as equivalent to family members. This story also looks at the dangers of leaving the 'safety' of one's physical home and speaks of the fear, dread, and anxiety that are the result of an invasion of the home. It also engages with ideas of helplessness through aging, and the consequences for those for whom the aged feel responsible.

This story begins rapidly and is filled with anxiety as the old country doctor stands in his courtyard in a snow storm at night 'in great perplexity' (Kafka 220). He needs to 'start

on an urgent journey' (220), but his horse has died in the night from fatigue brought on by the extremely cold weather. His servant girl, Rose, returns from an unsuccessful attempt to borrow a horse in the village. In his 'confused distress' (220) the doctor kicks the door of his pigsty that has been uninhabited for a year. He discovers a man with two horses inside. Rose says, ' "You never know what you're going to find in your own house," ' (220) and she and the doctor laugh. But what the doctor has found hidden on his premises, in his 'own house' will produce threatening, even dangerous, results for Rose and the doctor.

The man crawls out of the pigsty on all fours. Two enormous horses crawl out after him and the groomsman harnesses them to the doctor's gig. As Rose attempts to help, the groomsman grabs her head and bites her on the cheek. The doctor is momentarily infuriated by the attack, but he reasons his way out of his anger, noting that the man is a stranger who has helped him when everyone else has failed him.

The doctor is delighted with the horses and, after climbing happily into the gig, he insists that the groom accompany him on the journey. But the groom refuses saying he is staying with Rose. This sends the terrified girl running into the house for safety. The groom signals the horses and the gig whirls off 'like a log in a freshet' (221). As the horses whisk him away, the doctor sees Rose running through the house searching for a place to hide: she extinguishes the lights in the rooms as she hurries through. The doctor is unable to control the horses or the violent groomsman who is smashing through the door. He is (it seems) momentarily blinded and deafened by a 'storming rush' (221) but is suddenly at his destination, where the horses come to a standstill, and so does the storm. With 'moonlight all around' (221) the family of his patient hurry out of their house into the farmyard and lift him from the carriage. The doctor cannot understand their 'confused ejaculations' (221).

The room of his patient is smoky; the air 'almost unbreathable' (221) The doctor's first impulse is to open the window, but he scans his patient instead. The boy heaves himself at the doctor and whispers, ' "Doctor, let me die." ' The family silently wait for the doctor's appraisal. While they wait he suddenly remembers Rose, and then he notices that the horses have slipped their reins. They have pushed the windows open, stuck their heads through and stand 'eyeing the patient' (222).

The doctor's examination leads him to believe that the boy is faking illness. Although he believes he should turn the boy 'out of bed with one shove,' (222) he does not. In the meantime, the horses are whinnying as if they are offering counsel to the doctor. He

remembers Rose again and still does not attempt to rescue her even though it seems as though the horses are imploring him to return with them to her. As his mind wanders, the doctor complains to himself about his situation and concludes that he has been called out needlessly and that the whole district for which he is responsible, makes his 'life a torment with [his] night bell' (223).

As he is preparing to leave, he notices the patient's sister holds 'a blood soaked towel' (223). As the horses whinny louder than before, he examines the boy again. This time he discovers an alarming, gaping wound in the boy's side, and instantly changes his mind about the boy's condition. Now the lad is 'past helping' (223). Outside the house the village school choir has formed and it sings or chants:

Strip his clothes off, then he'll heal us,
If he doesn't, kill him dead!
Only a doctor, only a doctor (224).

Family and friends of the boy have been slowly and quietly entering the house. The doctor does not resist as they strip off his clothes and lift him into bed with the patient. They lay him against the open, worm-infested sore in the boy's side. As the community closes the door to the bedroom, the doctor is in dire trouble. They leave him alone with the boy in the dark, expecting healing or sacrifice. Even the patient cannot tolerate him and wants to scratch his eyes out. In a sudden moment of clarity and decisiveness, the doctor calms the boy's fears and takes action.

He gathers his clothes and escapes through the window. As he mounts one of the horses, he anticipates a speedy journey, an equivalent to the one he had experienced when he was called out. But the horses are only loosely reined to the gig and, although they obey him, their progress is slow.

As he slowly escapes he hears the children singing the ritual healing songs, yet he is unable to hurry or direct the horses. His clothes lie tossed in the gig from his hurried escape and his fur coat drags by one sleeve in the snow. He rides naked, the slow pace of the horses causing him to comment 'Never shall I reach home at this rate' (225). But at his home the 'disgusting groom is raging' (225) and the doctor does not want to think of it anymore. He has no safe haven and no one to help him; naked, cold and alone, he feels betrayed.

This dream-like story is unlike the other examples in this criticism specifically because it uses a first person narrator. This gives the story a very immediate feel. The narrator speaks urgently and gives the impression of scattered thoughts and swiftly moving events which are intertwined with confusion and then sudden acute clarity.

In the beginning the text is constructed of short, terse sentences separated by semicolons. This gives the impression of a mind that is unable to come to a full conclusion (as evidenced by few full stops) and is racing along unable to complete a thought. The voice seems unable to take a full breath. Longer sentences are separated by commas. As the story proceeds, the semicolons are often dropped and new sentences are indicated by double spacing leading to a word with a capitalized first letter.

The doctor starts the story in a state of agitation: 'I was in great perplexity' (Kafka 220). Standing outside of his home, he is already vulnerable and exposed. He stands in his courtyard 'forlornly, with the snow gathering more and more thickly upon [him], more and more unable to move' (220); the doctor is already incapacitated before he has set off on his journey. His patient is ten miles away and a 'thick blizzard of snow' has 'filled all the wide spaces' (220) between his home and his patient's. This claustrophobic and bleak image creates a feeling of isolation, helpless frustration, and defeat, but it soon becomes apparent that the doctor's home is just steps away. Even during the night in this 'icy winter' (220) the doctor's house would be warm. We learn soon enough that the lights in the rooms of the house are lit and that the door is unlocked. It is apparent that it is the doctor's mindset that has created this breathless isolation and bafflement. His servant girl soon returns from an unsuccessful attempt to borrow a horse from neighbours. It is evident that doctor is not alone, that he has merely been awaiting her return. The threat and anxiety he felt from the extreme weather could have been alleviated had he gone into his house where the light and warmth could have comforted him and allowed him a feeling of security. Instead the doctor chose to stand outside in the cold night with only his furs to shelter him.

It is significant that the story opens with the perplexed doctor standing outside. That he has willingly left the safety and warmth of his home to wait outside is a foolish decision, but that he has decided to answer an emergency call in a blizzard, after his own horse has just died from the extreme cold, is an indication of impending disaster.

In 'A Country Doctor' Kafka uses the dark and the night time to define a sense of isolation and threat. His descriptive method is unlike the other stories in this criticism. Whereas elements of the dark and night are described in these stories - for example in 'The

Prophet's Hair' the darkness is so thick it seems to pour like smoke from a doorway (Rushdie 38) - in 'A Country Doctor,' Kafka approaches the darkness of the night from the perspective of the light. Initially it is not explicitly apparent that the story is set in the night time. It is not until the horses come to a stop in the patient's farmyard, where there is 'moonlight all around' (221), that we know for certain. Earlier in the story Rose appears at the doctor's gate waving a lantern, and although the doctor mentions that 'no one would lend a horse at this time for such a journey' (220) it is still not clear when 'this time' is. There has been so much talk of the snowstorm that it would be reasonable to assume that Rose is carrying a lantern to make her way through the heavy storm. That no one would lend a horse in the middle of a blizzard would also make sense. The time of day or night is still unclear as Rose runs through the house turning off the lights. In a dark storm, the houselights would be on during the day.

It is the cold and the fury of the storm that the doctor focuses on: it has killed his horse, immobilised him, and finally deafens and blinds him (221). As he comes to a stop in the moonlight, it is finally clear that the preceding has not only taken place in a dark storm but also in the night. The reader jumps back mentally and re-envision the first part of the story which reinforces what has just happened. This augments Rose's dire circumstances and calls into question the doctor's judgement.

Later on, several guests come into the house 'through the moonlight at the open door' (224) as a school choir forms outside the house and begins to sing. The whole community has gotten involved. This alarming image of children in the moonlight in extreme cold is soon offset by a frightening and weirder image of the old doctor, naked in bed lying against his patient's gaping wound. While the clouds begin to cover the moon, the bedroom door is shut and the doctor is alone with an aggressive, threatening patient who would like to scratch out his eyes. Without the light, the horses' heads at the windows waver 'like shadows' (224). There is no mention of the dark but there is, instead, a distinct impression of the light having been withdrawn. Whatever influence and respect the doctor may have had in his district has been withdrawn. He is now thoroughly marginalized and being made the scapegoat.

The doctor often appears lethargic and indulges in guilt which does not engender the impetus to rectify the situation. His home has been invaded, the servant girl for whom he is responsible is in grievous danger, and the family of his patient have turned to ritualism and superstition. He is officially responsible for the medical support of this community and yet he feels alienated and ineffectual. In the face of the doctor's ineffectuality the community

takes action and incorporates him into their own healing methods through a magical folk-healing ritual.

Even the horses seem to understand more, and have greater control, than the doctor. They open the windows to observe the patient and comment on the proceedings through whinnying. The doctor feels that they are encouraging him to leave the patient to rescue Rose, advice he ignores. They stay by the window even after he has been made the scapegoat in the bed with the patient. They stand by him and obey him when he takes the initiative to escape. Had he given their actions more thought (he clearly notices them and what they are doing) he would have avoided the growing threat of the family and community.

After the discovery of the groom and his horses the doctor's transportation problems are solved. The groom appears to be homeless, although he owns two beautiful and healthy horses. That he has secretly housed them and himself in an outbuilding on the doctor's property should have given the doctor and Rose pause for thought. It would have required careful timing and fastidiousness to hide such large animals in a place so near to the house. This implies that the groom knew the comings and goings of Rose and the doctor before inhabiting the pigsty. In other words, he had been watching them. His covert observations and secretive behaviour indicate that he is devious and willing to live outside of the law and the community. He is a marginalized individual in the doctor's 'district.' He is without a home and identifies with, or has more empathy with, animals than with people. He calls to the horses, ' "Hey there, Brother, hey there, Sister!" ' (220) and they respond immediately to his call by squeezing through the pigsty door. He treats them as his family and exhibits horse-like mannerisms, for example, biting Rose's face.

In his perplexed and confused state the doctor accepts the groom's offer of the use of the horses. He does not consider the ramifications of accepting a favour from this man of questionable character who has already infringed on his estate. Immediately the groom grabs hold of Rose and bites her cheek, making it very clear that he is a dangerous person and a palpable threat to her safety. As the doctor reasons his way out of his fury (much the way Harter thinks his way out of his emotions in 'The Way Out') he backs away from acting. This lack of action inadvertently signals to the groom that the doctor will not protect Rose. By not protecting Rose he leaves her vulnerable to the groom's subsequent threat of rape; the servant girl's safety and wellbeing will not be protected in the doctor's house. As she runs through the house turning off the lights to hide, the groom violently invades the home that the doctor has neglected to defend. The doctor continues on in this inertia,

missing vital details and not acting when action is required

As with 'The Prophet's Hair,' the humour perplexes the reader's perception of the action of the story and questions the intentions of the characters. This story uses humour to disrupt assumptions of expectation and reliability. On occasion it subtly alerts the reader to a presence other than that of the narrator or the audience to which he is speaking. In 'A Country Doctor' the first person narrator gives an impression of urgency, and a distinct feeling of immediacy; when unexpected slippage in point of view occurs, the effect is both comical and unsettling.

For example, as the people are performing the healing ritual the doctor says: 'My clothes were off and I looked at the people quietly, my fingers in my beard and my head cocked to one side' (224). Although this sounds as if it is from the narrator's point of view, the image he creates could not be what the narrator sees. 'I looked at the people quietly' he says. If that is so, if he were actually looking at the people, then he would have described what he saw, or perhaps relayed his thoughts as he was being looked at. But what he actually does describe is a view of himself from the people's point of view, a view that he could not have had unless he were looking in a mirror.

(224) It is a surprising and effective technique that nudges the reader's attention and adds to the comical effect. It is also uncanny; the first person narrator has been usurped by another narrator, also speaking from the first person point of view, but not in the position of the first narrator, being actually one step removed. The uncanniness makes the comical uncomfortable. The doctor may think he is 'altogether composed and equal to the situation' (224) but clearly he is not: there is someone unknown to the reader usurping the narration. The doctor is neither composed nor equal; he is fragmented.

Much of the humour could be read as absurdity or it could be taken seriously. The instability that causes the difficulty in ascertaining what might be serious and what might be comical corresponds with the doctor's oscillating opinions and responses. It brings into question his cognitive abilities thereby disturbing the reliability of the narrative. For example, when the doctor first encounters his patient, the boy throws his arms around the doctor's neck and whispers 'Doctor, let me die!' (222); this could be taken as a symptom of extreme illness, or as an indication of a melodramatic temperament. If it is interpreted as melodrama then the doctor's reaction, which is to grope around in his instruments case and, for no specific purpose, choose a pair of tweezers for contemplation, reinforces the humour of the situation. The boy's histrionic request irks the doctor and reinforces in his mind that he

has been called out unnecessarily into the stormy night. For the reader the interactions between the two characters - the boy flinging himself upon the doctor and then clutching after him from the bed; the doctor dawdling over his instruments - are comical. If, on the other hand, the boy is indeed extremely ill, then the doctor is acting negligently and unsympathetically. He is a threat and a danger to his patient, and his apathy could result in the death of the boy.

The doctor appears to have difficulty communicating with the people he wants to help. Upon his arrival at the patient's farmyard he cannot understand what the family means to say to him as they help him from his gig. Inside the house he interprets what they mean through their actions rather than what they say as they seem unwilling or unable to speak to the doctor directly. The boy speaks but never relays the symptoms of his illness to the doctor; his family members make motions, and pour rum, lean to listen for the doctor's diagnosis, set out the chair and remove the doctor's coat. As the doctor signals his decision to leave after failing to find and confirm the cause of the boy's illness, the family stands together, the father 'sniffing at the glass of rum in his hand, the mother, apparently disappointed in me - why, what do people expect? -biting her lips with tears in her eyes, the sister fluttering a blood-soaked towel' (223). The doctor does not ask for symptoms and the family seems reluctant to offer specific information. In this situation, away from his home and Rose (who appears to have been his go-between with the people in his district), communication is vitally important. His capability to accomplish his task is compromised by an inability to connect with those he needs to assist. As a result, his safety, reputation and authority are jeopardized.

Away from his own home, in the home of a family that is connected to its wider community, the doctor is an outsider (hence the expedient use of the initial metaphor of the doctor standing outside his home in the snow), and in this vulnerable position he can easily be viewed as, and used as, a scapegoat.

The country doctor with his inability to control the groom and the horses or to protect Rose, his dawdling response to the patient's illness and his vacillating diagnoses and opinions, is in a vulnerable, easily threatened position. At times he appears to be suffering from senile dementia. He believes that the community he serves is unwilling to assist or defend him. As he rides on the back of the horse in the night, he comments that none of his 'limber pack of patients lifts a finger' (225) to assist him; but one has to wonder how many of his patients would be out of their homes in the night on a country road in extreme frost and snow?

If we think of a community as a form of home, as mentioned above, it would be expected that the functions of the members of the community would alter according to the ages, professions, and inclinations of the individual members. Functional change or decline should not necessarily lead to marginalization or endangerment. As the district doctor, the doctor functions within the community, and serves his community, but does not seem to be an actual member of it.

The doctor believes that he is generous with his time and does what he can for the community he serves, but he feels unable to meet their expectations because they expect the impossible: 'That is what the people are like in my district. Always expecting the impossible from the doctor' (224). What he perceives as his own generosity they view as his obligation. Throughout the story, the doctor has shown a surprising lack of good judgement, an inability to connect or communicate effectively or sympathetically with his patient's family. He exhibits a general lack of vigour, until he decides to escape, after which his nimbleness quickly dissipates. He gets lost and succumbs to self-pity and helplessness. As his capabilities falter and his capacity dwindles, he becomes marginalized by the community and then used in a primitive attempt to gain healing.

He does not protect or heal those for whom he is responsible and, as a consequence, they are threatened with dreadful, irreparable injury and possibly death.

As noted previously, the 'home' is a concept that can be understood in many different ways that encompass home as a place of familial identity and a place of residence and beyond to cultural, class and national identity. In '**The Jewbird**' the use of home moves through shifting intersections of threat to explore these issues. It is a fable that incorporates humour, anxiety, threat and dread as it explores the challenges for immigrants as they experience dislocation and transformation of ethnic and cultural identity.

On a hot evening in August, in New York City, a scraggly black bird flops into Harry Cohen's top-floor apartment. It lands on the table where Harry, his wife Edie and their son Maurie are having their evening meal. There is an 'escaped-canary cage, its door wide open' (Malamud 322) close by, but the frazzled, bedraggled black bird lands by the food. The Cohen family is just back from their summer vacation which was cut short because Harry's mother was taken ill. Cohen is in no mood for the interruption and swears as he swats at the bird. The bird exclaims in Yiddish "'Gevalt, a pogrom!'" (323) Edie is astonished that he speaks and Maurie notes that he speaks ' "In Jewish" ' (323) but Cohen is unimpressed and

antagonistic. ‘ “Wise guy,” muttered Cohen. [...] “So if you can talk, say what’s your business. What do you want here?” ’ (323)

The bird asks for food and says that if he cannot have a lamb chop, which is what the family is eating, he might ‘ “settle for a piece of herring with a crust of bread” ’ (323). Harry Cohen asks the bird again: ‘ “What brings you to this address?” ’ (323). The bird answers that the window was open so he flew in.

The bird says he is on the run from ‘ “Anti-Semeets.” ’ and ‘ “also including eagles, vultures, and hawks. And once in a while some crows will take your eyes out” ’ (323). Cohen asks the bird’s name and he replies. ‘ “Call me Schwartz” ’ (324) [Yiddish for ‘black’]. Schwartz again asks for herring, this time mentioning the two kinds he would prefer, but settling on what Edie has in the kitchen. He then asks for rye bread. Cohen tells Edie to feed the bird on the balcony. To the bird he says: ‘ “ After that take off” ’ (324).

Schwartz tries to talk his way into staying. He says he has a long way to go but he is not specific about where he is going. He goes where there is charity. It is Maurie’s begging that finally causes Cohen to let Schwartz stay the night.

In the morning he ‘ordered the bird out’ (324) but Maurie starts to cry and Edie convinces Cohen to let the bird stay. Cohen says ‘ “I’m dead set against it. I warn you he ain’t gonna stay here long.” ’ Cohen’s attitude is clear. He does not trust the bird and he does not want it around. ‘ “One false move and he’s out on his drumsticks.” ’ (325)

He insists the bird live outside on the balcony ‘in a new wooden birdhouse Edie had bought him.’ (325) Although Schwartz says ‘thanks’ he is not happy with the situation. He would rather have ‘ “a human roof” ’ (325) over his head. He wants the smell of cooking and to read the *Jewish Morning Journal*. He wants the occasional schnapps to help his breathing. He adds, after clearly stating his dissatisfaction with the situation, ‘ “But whatever you give me, you won’t hear complaints.” ’ (325)

Cohen is not comfortable with Schwartz staying around the house, but the bird’s health starts to improve. Although he is healthier, he is still unkempt and refuses to bathe. He likes his new situation and tries to stay out of Cohen’s way. Without being asked, he helps Maurie with his homework and violin practice, and plays checkers with him.

But one night, when Cohen and Schwartz are alone, Cohen starts a quarrel. He tells the bird that he ‘ “stinks like a dead fish” ’ (326) and that, even though Schwartz sleeps in his birdhouse on the balcony, his snoring is keeping him awake at night. The bird counters that snoring is not a crime. The quarrel escalates and ends badly with Cohen on the verge of

strangling the bird. Maurie's timely arrival from the shower causes a 'pretend peace' between the two of them for the rest of the evening (327).

Schwartz is deeply upset by the quarrel. He is fearful of what might become of him and has trouble sleeping. His concentration wanes and he hops around nervously or stares into space.

Edie tries telling the bird that if he would do some of the things that Cohen asks, like bathe, that perhaps they would get along better. Schwartz makes excuses about why he will not. ' "Some people smell because of their thoughts or because who they are. My smell comes from the food I eat. What does his come from?" ' (327).

In November Schwartz starts getting uncomfortable from the cold weather but he is afraid to ask Edie if he might come in to thaw in the mornings when Cohen is at work. In the meantime, Cohen has been reading about the migration of birds and warns Schwartz that it is time for him to leave.

Cohen becomes obsessed with Schwartz. The bird is driving him 'bats by being there always, even in his dreams,' (328). Cohen begins a campaign of harassment against him, but Schwartz cannot decide what to do because he is 'afraid to leave.' Making sure to hide his activities from Maurie and Edie, Cohen mixes watery cat food in the herring slices in Schwartz's dish; he pops inflated paper bags outside the birdhouse at night when he knows the bird is sleeping. He eventually introduces a pet cat into the home. Schwartz tries to tolerate and adjust to the aggressive harassment; he is 'terror-stricken' (329) but he refuses to go.

Schwartz lives in dread. He cannot decide what to do and does not leave. Weeks go by until the day after Cohen's mother dies, and Maurie comes home from school with zero score on an arithmetic test, Cohen's tolerance evaporates. He waits until Edie takes the boy for his violin lesson and then attacks the bird with a broom. The bird flies back and forth across the balcony dodging the broom. He shelters in the birdhouse but Cohen grabs him by the legs, yanks him out, and repeatedly swings Schwartz around his head. The bird manages to grab Cohen by the nose. Cohen frantically and painfully prise him loose and swings the bird around until he is thoroughly dizzy. Cohen heaves Schwartz into the night. He also throws over the birdhouse and feeder. Such is his anger that he waits for an hour, broom in hand, for the bird to return, but the 'brokenhearted bird didn't' (329).

In the Spring, Maurie finds a dead black bird by the river, its wings broken, neck twisted, and 'both bird-eyes plucked clean out.'

“Who did it to you Mr. Schwartz?” Maurie wept.

“Anti-Semeetes,” Edie said later (330).

This story skilfully uses three preoccupations of humanity - the home, family and food - to examine, among other things, the anxiety associated with immigration, assimilation, and acceptance. What concerns this criticism is the ambiguity of the intentions of the characters that facilitates the anxiety and dread that threatens the peace of mind and, eventually, the safety of Harry Cohen and the bird; in other words: threat within the home.

This story’s treatment of food acknowledges the importance of food as more than just physical sustenance. Within the context of the home and family, food’s deeper meanings are learned. For it is within early home life that food comes to represent love, comfort, pleasure, reward and punishment, security, and contentment. It can embody ethnicity and the accompanying celebrations and rituals peculiar to cultures and religions. Schwartz uses food as a stubborn demand for integration and acceptance, although not assimilation, the result of which threatens his life.

The story starts with a bird flying in through the kitchen window (the room for food preparation), while the family eats at the table, and landing next to Harry Cohen’s plate which contains a ‘thick lamb chop’ (322). All of the action, from the start of the story until the last three brief paragraphs, takes place in the top floor apartment of the Cohen family. Cohen is a frozen food salesman and the food he sells, and the kinds of food Schwartz eats or refuses to eat, are indicative of the two characters’ attitudes and motivations; the food refers to the old ways that Schwartz clings to and the new ways to which Harry aspires. Edie ‘knows ‘where to shop’ (325) and is willing to go out of her way to keep Schwartz well fed on the traditional food he prefers. This places her as a go-between for Harry and Schwartz. She willingly prepares both traditional and contemporary foods, accommodating both her family’s and Schwartz’s culinary preferences.

‘A person without a fixed abode is viewed with suspicion in our society, labelled “vagrant,” “hobo,” “street person.” (Marcus 2).^{vi} The Jewbird is without a home. He is like a stray animal that has been living in the wild, although he has not gone feral. His domesticity seems intact regardless of his refusal to bathe. Cohen is clearly suspicious of his homelessness, and his lack of direction. Speaking of Schwartz he comments to Edie, ‘ “Poor bird my ass. He’s a foxy bastard.” ’ (Malamud 325) He complains to Schwartz, ‘All in all you are a goddamn pest and freeloader.’ (327) And again, ‘ “[...]you’re an A-number-one

troublemaker” ’ (328). He develops a great animosity towards Schwartz to the point that he starts to dream of the bird, and his incessant thinking of Schwartz bothers him no end.

Feeding a stray or wild animal encourages dependency in the animal and attracts other stray or feral animals. Cohen’s reaction to the bird’s request for food is not unreasonable. The bird arrives uninvited, looks uncared for and scruffy, and wants food. He will not say exactly where he is going even though he claims he has a long way to go, and he will not tell Cohen why he has chosen to land in that particular apartment. His answers are ambiguous and often avoid altogether supplying the information for which Cohen asks.

The bird tries to establish a position in the family. To the boy he becomes an entertaining and helpful tutor and pet. Edie wonders if he ‘might be an old Jew changed into a bird by somebody’ (324) and does her best to keep him well fed although she does not go out of her way to make him comfortable. Schwartz might have settled nicely into the family had Harry not been suspicious and entrenched in his conviction that the bird was a free-loader and shunning his migratory nature.

There are threats of various kinds and at different levels within the Cohen residence. Schwartz, as the outsider seeking respite and sustenance, is a threat to Harry Cohen who sees him as an intruder and a ‘freeloader’. For, indeed, the bird has said when asked where he was headed, that ‘ “Where there’s charity I’ll go.” ’ (324) In his position, it would be difficult for him to share in the cost of the Cohen’s generosity, but he does make a worthwhile effort with Maurie’s education and entertainment. Cohen maintains and financially supports his family as a frozen food salesman. Schwartz, on the other hand, has no means of support and is dependent on the charity of others. He is inexplicably separated from his own jewbird relatives. As an old bird, he feels vulnerable to the attacks of the outside world and tries to settle with the Cohen family. Harry makes it undeniably clear that Schwartz’s stay is temporary. He is allowed to stay because it is advantageous for Harry and Edie: the bird keeps Maurie entertained through the summer and, after school starts, helps him improve his study skills which in turn improve the boy’s school grades.

Harry is reluctant to express the depth of his animosity toward Schwartz in front of Maurie. He needs to maintain his son’s respect and feels obliged to set a good example. As a result of this, ambiguities develop regarding the authenticity of some of his responses to Schwartz. Harry brings the bird a birdfeeder filled with corn, presumably an expression of kindness, but Schwartz rejects his gift of New World food which is stereotypically viewed as crow’s food. As Schwartz’s health improves, Harry’s tone softens when he belittlingly calls

him 'crosseyes,' as though the term might be transforming into a nickname.

The levels of conflict and threat are evident immediately at the start of the story. There is an 'escaped-canary cage, its door wide open' (322), (an indication that the Cohen's are situated economically in the middle-classes) hung on the wall of the kitchen when Schwartz flops in. Given that domesticated canaries are born, bred and raised in captivity, the cage represents the society and culture in which the Cohen's are living. As the children of immigrant Jews, they are upwardly mobile, American, New York City dwellers. Their canary has escaped its cage to the outside world and has probably died from exposure to the elements, or from attack from wild creatures. Captive bred, meant to add beauty and 'class' to an environment, such a canary would have a difficult time surviving in the wild unprotected by its owners.

Although Schwartz is not a pet, or captive bred, he has some similar needs. He is an experienced traveller that has grown old and he seeks a home to shelter him from the elements. He wants a place where his needs will be met and he will be understood. It would seem more than a coincidence that he flies into the open window of the Cohen's' kitchen: 'That's how it goes. It's open, you're in. Closed, you're out, and that's your fate' (322). That Schwartz, the Jewbird seeking refuge, has flown into the home of a Jewish family which is Americanized, secularized and settled in New York city, would seem like a wonderful act of fate. But the bird's fate, to be 'in', has nothing to do with physicality, but has, instead, to do with his cultural and religious background and its subsequent perspective of belonging. Schwartz has entered a house that is not a refuge for him. Outside, homeless and in the wild, he is in danger of death and mutilation; inside, among those with whom he shares the same cultural roots, he is threatened and in real jeopardy.

The Jewbird is not the only one who is threatened in this story. Cohen's position in the family as father and husband, his authority, and his identity are threatened by Schwartz. The bird pushes against Cohen's rules, trying to overstep Cohen's boundaries. By vying for Maurie's affection and prevailing upon Edie's generosity, Schwartz insinuates himself in a family whose most aggressive and frustrated member is against him. Cohen has constructed his identity as an assimilated American, with America being his 'home' (as evidenced through his language –Americanisms). He is threatened by Schwartz's insistence on 'living simultaneously in exile and at home' (Furman, 113) 'at home' for Schwartz being the Cohen residence. Harry is threatened from within his home while Schwartz is threatened from both within and without the home.

Humour is artfully deployed throughout the story. It heightens the poignancy of the battle that occurs in the end. The Jewbird's wisecracks and gibes, combined with his accent (which is clearly defined and easily 'heard') set him a little apart from the rest of the family. The bird's accent is more pronounced, and his wit sharper, while what he says is often ambiguous. The narrator's 'accent' is similar to the rest of the characters, and generally seems to support the Jewbird's point of view. For example the narrator comments about Cohen 'What can you say to a grubber yung?' (325).^{vii} The narrator's sense of humour also plays an important part in subtly informing the story with tension and unease. In the moments without humour, the seriousness of the situation and the attitudes of the characters crystallize.

As in the other stories in this criticism, some of the action is located in the bedroom. In this case, it is Maurie's bedroom that becomes the focal point for a fair amount of the story. The bird voluntarily takes on the responsibility of Maurie's 'performance at school' (Malamud 325), and in this way is able to spend a few hours in the house in the evenings, in Maurie's room, in return for the favour. In this way he is able to avoid Cohen and still be under the 'human roof' he craves so much. In Maurie's room, Schwartz applies what he knows to Maurie's advantage and it becomes clear that Schwartz is an educated bird, and perhaps an intellectual. For entertainment he would have preferred to play chess, but he knows the limitations of his pupil and plays dominoes with the boy instead. He is an Old World bird, perhaps a refugee of Eastern Europe, as evidenced through his appreciation of the violin, chess, his intellectual pursuits and his preference for herring and schnapps (Wirth-Nesher 117). It is in Maurie's room that Schwartz feels relaxed and content as he gently directs the docile boy who accepts, without protest, the bird's academic guidance.

As Cohen's 'campaign' against the bird escalates, he introduces a full-grown cat into the home. This animal, ostensibly a gift for Maurie, is a clever and terrifying means of tormenting Schwartz. It not only poses a physical threat to the bird, but jeopardizes the relationship between the boy and the bird. For the boy, the cat is a living example of his father's care and affection. Maurie takes it into his room and sleeps with it at night, without protest from his parents, so the cat is undoubtedly a part of the family - unlike Schwartz, who must sleep outside on the balcony. Schwartz's exhaustion from Harry's paper bag explosions, the cold in his bones, the cramped quarters of the birdhouse, and ever present danger of cat attack causes him to fall asleep when he should be attending to the boy's studies. His exhaustion and anxiety imperil his opportunity to contribute to the family. A playful cat is

more appealing than a stinky, bedraggled bird. The room that had afforded comradery, security and meaningful participation in family life now becomes threatening and stressful.

The night time in this story holds particular anxieties for Schwartz. Although he is sheltered at night in the birdhouse on the balcony, Cohen's erratic night time paper bag bursting breaks the bird's sleep, and startles and alarms him. As Cohen's attempts to force the bird to leave escalate, Schwartz's anxiety increases. Cold and rheumatic from the November fog and wind, he paces in the cramped quarters of the birdhouse. Cohen's complaints about the bird's snoring cause Schwartz to worry; he begins to startle awake at the sound of his own snoring. The birdhouse in the night time is a dark, anxious, and cramped environment containing unexpected, loud, and frightening stress inducers and lacking the opportunity for sustained sleep. He is protected physically in the night by the birdhouse but is psychologically endangered.

When Cohen finally loses his control and openly attacks the bird, he throws him into a darkness that is more than just a lack of daylight. Cohen's 'campaign' has made the bird even more vulnerable than he was when he first flapped through the kitchen window on the hot summer afternoon. As in the other stories discussed in this criticism, the night time signals isolation and potential threat, but in this story the darkness becomes the location of dread and fear of an unknown, sudden attacker combined with the terrors of compressed anxiety and the anticipation of unavoidable cold and hunger. Using the idea of 'the home' as a place of belonging, combined with the comic effect of the graphically described fight between Cohen and Schwartz, this story creates a powerful ambiguity concerning the tragedy of the bird's expulsion and Cohen's mistrust and anger.

The act of swinging the bird around over the head is a reference to the ritual of Kapparot (Bowker 1997) in which a live chicken is swung over and around the head of the penitent so that it absorbs his or her sins and thus becomes a scapegoat. The bird is then slaughtered. Here, again, is a reference to food: the ritually slaughtered chicken is donated to the poor for the pre-Yom Kippur feast. As Cohen rids his home of Schwartz, who he views as a freeloader, his eviction of the bird mimics the ritual. But Schwartz fights back desperately. For the last time he evidences his belief in his entitlement to stay by clinging to Cohen's nose. Harry transfers his anger and frustration on to Schwartz and throws him into the dark, along with the birdhouse and the feeder. He clears the house of Schwartz's old world, manipulative, grandfatherly, and hungry ways, and sacrifices a part of his own cultural heritage through the process. Schwartz and Cohen both suffer as a result of American

assimilation:

With American assimilation, two versions of history collided. For Jews, *yiddishkeit* dictated that the diverse, pluralistic histories of all Jews of the Diaspora unite in a common narrative of cultural tradition prevailing over relentless persecution. [...] These diverse fragments of history were preserved within Jewish memory as essential to Jewish identity. But what happened in America? What was assimilation for any so-called “ethnic” group to this country, after all, but the effort to ignore the various pluralistic histories of the past for one culturally Anglicized narrative of the future? Assimilationists embraced the American belief that identity could be chosen and changed at will, and that achievement could mask born identities (Polster 62).

I do not agree with the argument that Edie points an accusing finger at Harry when she says that ‘Ami-Semeets’ are to blame for Schwartz’s death (Wirth-Nesher, 117). Harry Cohen and his family are in the process of creating new, Americanized identities. Edie feeds the bird and encourages him to change his habits, but she does not invite him to live in the apartment. It is Edie who buys him the birdhouse which signifies that she is not willing, at that point, to let go of the past but is also not willing to incorporate it (in the form of Schwartz) into her future. Cohen has fully embraced integration and assimilation into American culture as evidenced by his Americanisms. He has moved the family to the Lower East Side of NYC, away from the Bronx, and is socially upwardly mobile. He has hopes of getting his son into a good university, another indication of his aspirations of upward mobility. When Cohen tells Edie and Maurie that he has thrown the bird out, they do not object.

Homi K Bhabha comments, ‘There can be no demand for assimilation into culture: that we are all foreigners means that we cannot assign foreignness to other groups, and then dictate their actions or identities’ (Huddart 87). Harry needs Schwartz to maintain certain aspects of his ‘foreignness’, but so does Schwartz. Harry comments that the next thing the bird will want from the family will be to sleep in bed next to his wife Edie; Schwartz assures Harry that he will not because ‘A bird is a bird’ (Malamud 327). Schwartz does bird-like things: he pokes around in the recesses of the closet in Maurie’s room, and investigates the drawers when they are left open. He even investigates a large paper bag seeking possibilities for sheltering from the harassment and dangerous attacks of the pet cat. As Stuart Hall says, ‘identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. [...] Throughout their careers,

identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected' (1989, 225).

Cohen's desire for assimilation and his efforts to maintain what is, presumably, an identity that is not fully established and is still developing – or he would not have defended it through such covert and cruel tactics – are indicative of the pressures of immigration and new perceptions of cultural demands. Joyce Carol Oates has commented, America is

a theoretical experiment in newness; who our ancestors have been, what languages they have spoken, in what religions they believed --- these factors cannot really help to define *us*. [...] in the New World, history itself has moved with extraordinary rapidity. Each generation constitutes a beginning-again, a new discovery, sometimes of language itself (Oates 12. 1992).

But for the Cohen family, the Jewbird's uncanny arrival, just as Cohen's mother (the old generation) is dying, causes factors of ancestral identity which are integral to self identity to resurface; they cannot be ignored. Schwartz 'disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside', and it is a threatening and anxiety ridden experience.

In conclusion, these short stories demonstrate the uncanniness of invasion and threat when it encroaches on the home. They question the assumption of emotional safety within the home, for as threats arise hidden insecurities and inadequacies, past and present, come to light. Harter's inability to commit to a fuller life through long-term, worthwhile projects and relationships is exemplified through his unfortunate decision to leave his home and expose himself to an untimely death. Hashim seems compelled to destroy his household through overtly displaying his dishonesty, thievery and hypocrisy, while his daughter's childhood terrors come to life in the person of the Master Thief. Irene's superficial and judgemental values regarding her family and neighbours are turned on herself in her home thereby exposing her own inadequacies. The doctor is literally stripped naked as his faltering mental and emotional abilities disable his social standing and exile him from his home. And, the Cohen family and the Jewbird tussle over insecurities over cultural and national identity in a home environment that becomes increasingly apprehensive, aggressive and threatening.

Although generally unobtrusive, the references to the home setting in these stories nuance interpretations of character motivation: the various meanings of 'the home' are imbedded, in this case, in the location of action eliciting a fuller appreciation of the

circumstances. The invasion of the home can be understood as an invasion of the self, troubling the foundations on which the self has been built. The home is a particularly sensitive space, an enclosed and exclusive space, of which invasion prompts feelings of dread in the inhabitants. In these stories the catalyst for alarm moves ever closer to the truth of the matter by disarranging impressions of the home to draw out the unhomely.

Short stories are able to use a reader's hugely meaningful and loaded knowledge of the home to economically convey texture and depth without needing to produce extended detailed description. Appreciating the complexities of this characteristic of the short story, as it relates to the deployment of 'the home' as an influence on a story, is important to my own practice-led research which is preoccupied with writing short fictional stories which are framed within a multitude of ideas of what homes represent. The home is not just a 'fixed residence': The thing that threatens and invades the home has the power to threaten and invade identity. It can transform the self.

End Notes

i Border, limit (of a region); the line which one crosses in entering.' *OED*. Second edition, 1989; online version June 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.unicat.bangor.ac.uk/view/Entry/201234>>; accessed 22 July 2012.

ii It is interesting that in his 1906 essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' Ernst Jentsch argues, with specific reference to E. T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* (*Tales of Hoffmann*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982. pp. 85-125) that 'one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects easily is to leave the reader in uncertainty as to whether he [*sic*] has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a character.' (Sited by Royle 39) This is exactly the effect Millhauser accomplishes in the ending of 'The Way Out'. The reader 'knows' that the husband cannot be a traditional penny arcade gunslinger, but Harter's altering and rehashed observations of the husband accumulate over the course of the story, leaving the reader wondering if perhaps, within the context of the story, it might be possible that the husband is not fully human. (Just as you might get a similarly uncanny (eerie) feeling when observing an old, penny arcade, fortune teller machine and wonder if it is really is 'just' a machine.) Harter's uncanny experience is therefore augmented and transferred to the reader.

iii Bachelard observes about reading and readers who are reading about rooms that 'the reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of someplace in his own past' (14). While I would not agree that the reader completely stops reading, it is probably true that when reading of a character in a room, the reader does mentally flip through past experience to link to the room that is being read about. It is this universal familiarity with rooms that makes rooms as settings in short stories such a useful technique. It quickly establishes ambiance, tone and intention.

iv Bachelard uses this image as a way of understanding houses, with specific reference to imagining, daydreaming and memories. His image is an intuitively comfortable representation. The attic of a house is positioned as the high end of the pole while the houses become so intertwined that psychologically they can be understood as the two poles of the same house.

v Although it would have given the story a completely different emphasis, it is interesting to conjecture what would have happened had Irene disclosed the aberrations of her radio to her friends. What if she and her friends would have gathered together to eavesdrop? Would eavesdropping through the radio have become an acceptable activity? Irene and Jim seemed to have no moral qualms about listening in for an evening. It is when Irene's listening becomes a solitary and secret activity that issues of impropriety are raised.

vi The 'society' that Marcus is referring to specifically is that of the USA. This is apropos to this story which is set in New York City and was first published in 1963.

vii 'Grubber yung' is Yiddish for 'uncouth young man.' The scattering of Yiddish in this story clues the reader to the implied audience which would be Jews and those familiar with American Jewish culture. But many of the concerns of the story are also those of immigrants in America, generally.

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