

**THIS HOUSE HAS ITS POLITICS**

**By Mark Sampson**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree of

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of  
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree  
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MASTER OF ARTS**

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## GET YOUR AFFAIRS IN ORDER

You shared something with me last night. We were lying head to foot on the couch, watching television together, when a man appeared on the screen. I said without thinking (perhaps taking this New You for granted): "Hey, that guy with the red hair, he looks a little like your father." And immediately caught myself.

"My father?" You glanced over, and I knew you could see the momentary blast of panic in my eyes, a reflex I've developed after all these years. But you just smiled that warm gray smile of yours and said: "Yeah, I suppose he looks a bit like Dad." Then you squeezed my big toe, popped off the TV, and began talking. You said things like: "I used to be afraid of turning into him, but not anymore ... I'm my own person now, my own person ... And you know Care, it feels pretty good ..." I tested the waters again, half kidding when I said: "Gee, Michael, you've never talked about these things before ... your dad, he was always off limits." And indeed he was; one mention of him to the Old You made you insufferable, splintering the house with arguments for days afterwards. But you just squeezed my foot again and said: "I've let all that go, Carolyn. I don't need it anymore." And I thought: I like this man you've become.

Warm, pleasant thoughts in a cold, sterile place. Carolyn sat in the chilly doctor's office staring at the blood pressure gauge on the wall, and the big open box of tongue depressors that always reminded her of the Popsicle sticks of her youth. She squirmed on the long sheet of white paper covering the doctor's bench, making it crinkle beneath her as she tried to get comfortable, and wondered what was taking the specialist so long. Bloody doctors did this on purpose, she thought, making you sit in the little room

all by yourself waiting for your tests to come back, all the while forcing onto you these long, lingering bouts of self-examination. Maybe *they* should sit with a bare bum on crinkled paper for an hour and see how they liked it. She could hear nurses' voices on the other side of the door and was tempted to call to them. What *is* taking so long?

I do not have cancer, she thought. My body wouldn't do that to me. I know, I know—too many cigarettes that I smoked at the dining room table after all those vicious fights with the Old Michael, hundreds of cigarettes for hundreds of vicious fights—but my body wouldn't do that to me. Dr. Kimbo will come in and say words like bronchial inflammation, or pneumonia, or even emphysema—words I can live with. I cannot live with the C word. My courage ends there.

She thought of the vicious fights with Michael. She hadn't had one since he returned from his sabbatical three years ago. Three months in Afghanistan. His goal, he said, was to tour its cities' dusty and rubble-plagued streets, seeing first-hand religion and war coming together. A lifelong goal realized. The last big argument had been about whether it was too dangerous for him to go. She didn't want him to leave. Pleaded with him not to. But he did anyway, making it painfully clear that he was going no matter what she thought. She would not stand in his way, he said, and in the end she didn't. Yet, when he came home, she barely recognized the man he'd become. It was like the hot suns he had walked under had cooled him, mellowed his disposition in some profound way. Many mornings now, she woke to find him bringing her a cup of tea in bed, setting it on the nightstand before kissing her on the mouth and giving her a hug. They weren't his typical hugs, anymore; they were hugs that held on to her for dear life, as if he couldn't let go for fear of losing her to some great funnel cloud descending out of the sky. At first,

and for a long time it seemed, she didn't trust those hugs. They made her skin crawl with suspicion. But eventually, she began to expect them. Even rely on them. There were other changes, too. This New Michael often insisted they spend their Sundays walking through Point Pleasant or hoofing it up to the top of Citadel Hill. He'd also gone to extra trouble on the last few Mother's Days, and birthdays, and anniversaries. He even called the children on his own now, without her impetus, dialing their home numbers after taking the time to commit them to memory. This brought her a joy she could hardly explain. And then something like last night, that spontaneous eruption of disclosure, discussing his father with the kind of candor she had believed for years he was incapable of possessing. And she thought: I'm not sure I want to trust this, but I do. I have to, because you've changed. What on earth did you see over there, three years ago, that made you grow into the man I always thought you could be? And better yet, why do I still fear the other shoe will drop, that you will revert back to your old ways, that cold and stubborn regime?

*Well that's the question right there, isn't it? Perhaps that's why you haven't told him about any of this. Three years and he has been everything you've always wanted, yet it's an overdue paradise you still fear being evicted from. It may not matter. Dr. Kimbo may come through that door and tell you it's all over, that you have cancer and are going to die. How unfair that you lived with the Old Michael for 25 years and this New Michael for barely three, and now a cancer specialist in a white lab coat may come in and tell you it's all over.*

As if to reinforce this, another of her low sticky spasms clattered up from deep inside her lungs. Her diaphragm stiffened and she coughed a cough that shouldn't have

been able to come from a woman her size. In an instant, her mouth was full of something warm and thick and smelly. She thought for a moment of swallowing it back down, but couldn't bring herself to do it. Grimacing, she looked around the room for a tissue or garbage can she could spit into, but there was nothing. What kind of doctor's office doesn't even have a tissue I can honk into, she thought. The taste and texture of that gelatin slug made her stomach revolt. Bending over and placing her head between her knees, Carolyn let it fly onto the tiled floor. It landed with the sound of a marble bouncing just once.

She had expected another gob of greenish phlegm, like the other greenish gobs that she had coughed up over the last few weeks. But this mess was novel. A thick, black curdle like melted tar clung to the floor, surrounded in a repugnant halo of red. Her eyes focused on that hue. She recognized it. Her mind trickled like a river, back through years, nearly fifteen of them, to thoughts she hadn't dared to think for fear of turning into a pillar of salt. She recognized that fusion of black and blood as a reminder of something. Of what? Perhaps her cowardice. But also of something far worse. A long, thin line streaked a few inches away from that bulbous black mess, forming an exclamation mark, and the message it emphasized was loud and clear. I'm going to die, thought Carolyn, a startling thought that echoed over a decade and a half that felt lost to her now. Oh my God, I'm going to die.

*Oh my God, I'm going to die.* The words seemed so out of character, even for Barbie, that Carolyn had been tempted to make some joke about it and hang up the phone. Sure Barbie, you're going to die. You call me every seven months with *something*

shocking to say. But there was a different tone in her friend's voice this time that went beyond her usual melodrama. This wasn't *My period is a day and a half late, oh my God I'm pregnant, or I'm giving up the junk for good this time, Care, I swear dagawd.* This was different. This was about death. "Oh my God, I'm going to die," was what she said. "Carolyn I'm really sick this time can you come please can you come oh my God I'm going to die ..."

Okay. So she needed a plan. Thankfully, her elderly neighbour, Mrs. MacInnis, was working in her flowerbed next door, easily accessible for asking favours. Mrs. MacInnis often took care of little Ray and Lynn on short notice, and this was no exception. She seemed to know instinctively what it was like being married to a man like Michael. So Carolyn thought: Okay, okay, he teaches a class from one until 2:30, then has office hours until four. He'll probably join a couple other profs for beers afterwards, and won't be home until five or 5:30. That's just enough time for me to help Barbie through whatever crisis she's having and make it home in time to have his supper waiting for him when he gets home. He won't even have to know that Mrs. MacInnis was over here to be with Lynn, and with Ray when he gets off the bus after school. Peace would prevail. Another war skillfully avoided.

Just as Carolyn threw on a coat and fetched her keys off the wall, Lynn met her at the front door, looked up with her round face, and asked: Where you going, Mommy? Carolyn lifted the little girl up and smiled at her, crossing her eyes. Mommy has a friend who's sick, sweetheart, and I'm going to see if I can't make her feel better. But I won't be long, and Mrs. MacInnis will take good care of you. The little girl nodded, as if understanding how important it was to look after friends when they were sick.

The North End was not a place Carolyn knew well or was comfortable with. She found a parking space a few blocks down Agricola and had to walk the rest of the way to Barbie's apartment complex on North Street. Though it was early afternoon, Carolyn felt uneasy strolling past the slummy tenant buildings where she imagined stoned, tired eyes were watching her from rusted iron railings, compelling her to hold her purse tight against her bony hip. Barbie's building was a square box four stories tall along North Street on the way down to the bridge crossing the harbour. The windows along the front had blankets or Canadian flags tied up to act as curtains. Carolyn caught her own reflection in the building's front door as she yanked it open: *Scrawny Suburban Housewife Invades Dreaded North End Yet Again, Earns Medal For Continued Bravery And Friendship*. God, I hope Barb appreciates what I'm doing, she thought. She stepped into the stinking, flyer-strewn lobby and buzzed Barbie's room. There was a long pause before her voice crackled through the little beige speaker.

"Still convinced you're going to die?" Carolyn asked her.

"Bout time you got here," Barbie replied. The scream of the security door filled the lobby as she let her friend in.

Barbie's apartment was as it usually was. Just a single main room with a bathroom just off the kitchenette. There was a mattress resting on the floor in the corner with a single stained bed sheet covering it. She had one couch—a soiled futon she had found on the curbside, which also acted as a bureau for her clothes—and one easy chair, which had no legs. Against the wall was a small black and white TV, the tips of its

antennae covered in tinfoil, resting on a milk crate. Another, larger crate acted as a makeshift coffee table, but Barbie used it mostly for holding her drug paraphernalia. The kitchenette contained a single plastic tub for a sink, a bar fridge to store food in, and a hotplate. Above the sink was the apartment's only adornment, a wooden clock in the shape of Prince Edward Island that Carolyn had given Barbie when they moved to Nova Scotia together as young women a dozen years ago, in the early 1970s.

"Barb, honey, I really doubt you're dying," Carolyn said as she took a seat on the lip of the futon, away from the bundles of dirty clothes that took up most of the space. She didn't want to get too close to them. In fact, if she could have levitated in the air and not touched any part of this apartment, she would have. It seemed to be swimming with timeless filth.

"But I am," Barbie replied, swaggering away from the kitchenette before falling into the legless easy chair, spreading apart her miniskirt with her open legs as she settled. "Look at me, Care. I'm really messed up this time. Be serious."

"I see that you're high," she said. "But then again, what else is new?" But there *was* something new. Barbie was even thinner than usual. Her skin was the colour of untreated wool. Her red hair fell down from its part in straight, lifeless streaks, making her look much older than her 32 years.

"I am going to die today," she shrugged, matter-of-factly. "I just wanted you to be here with me when I did."

"You're not going to die, Barbie."

"I've been sick for weeks now, Care. Doing some pretty gross things to the toilet in that bathroom. I'm done for this time. Too many drugs, too many cigarettes.

Sweardagawd, I'm convinced I got that there new AIDS disease. I'm convinced I got Parkinson's. I wake up in the middle of the night with the spins—you know, the spins—where you're just lying in bed all still while the room feels like it's going around in these long, loopy circles. Or the shakes. The shakes are even worse. They came on all at once today ... Today's the day, I'm really goin' today, sweardagawd ...” She looked over at Carolyn, bleary-eyed. “Say, how're your kids?”

“They're fine,” Carolyn answered, wondering if Barbie would even remember this conversation five minutes from now. “We're trying to get Ray into the gifted program. Lynn starts school next year. They're both doing great.”

“And Michael?”

“He's the same. Better now that he's on a tenure track. I don't have to work anymore. I just stay home and look after the kids.”

Barbie squinted at Carolyn, then slumped forward. “Fucking coward ...”

“Barb ...” *Don't you call me that ...don't ever call me that ...*

“Fucking coward ... still won't stand up to him, will ya. Is this what you do now? Wear high heels and pearls while you vacuum his floor? Can't believe you're still running scared of him, after all these years. Nice way to live ...”

*I'm not a coward! And I don't wear high heels and pearls. I don't! But I do vacuum his floors, yes, and look after his kids and cook his meals. It's what I do, and I can't bloody well change now. It was easy for you, Barbie. Every man you ever met wanted to hand you the stars and the moon, but not me. I'd be alone if it wasn't for Michael. And yes, I may not be allowed to work and I may have to live under his thumb, but it's better than being alone. I don't think that makes me a coward.*

“Barbie, hon, I don’t want to get into a whole thing with you-”

“Hey, don’t tell me, I’ll fuckin’ tell you. All those years us growing up on the Island, the sleepovers in the loft of your dad’s barn and the car trips to Cavendish Beach, you telling me about your Big Dreams, making me listen to how you were going to make something of yourself, using those big brains of yours. And for what? To lose yourself to a man who ain’t worth the toilet he shits in. Well, right! Is this how you pictured your life working out?”

“Is this how you pictured *your* life working out?”

But Barbie sat up, unfazed by the question. “Why’s it so hot in here? Swardagawd, I’m burning up. Feel’s like the whole apartment’s on fire. I wish I could get those damned windows open.” A shiny film of sweat materialized on her forehead, turning the thin red bangs over her eyes black. She smacked her lips and looked around.

“Barbie, are you hungry? I have my car. We could go to Point Pleasant and get some ice cream and fresh air.”

“I don’t want to die in Point Fucking Pleasant.”

“Barbie, you’re not going to ... Barb, look at me ... hello, over here ... You’re not going to die.”

But Barbie wasn’t listening to her. She had her head leaned back against the easy chair and stared in a milky oblivion up at her cracked and chipped ceiling. Her wicker-thin legs were bent at scarecrow angles on their way to the stained carpet floor, and her knotty fingers drummed distantly on the armrest. Her stomach began rumbling underneath her pastel blue tank top. The rumbling was assertive, alive, with a mind of its own.

“Barbie ...”

“Ah Care, I’m sorry ... God I wish I could go back in time ... I’d treat ya better, Carolyn, sweardagawd I would ... you were always so good, always so good looking after other people ... I should of looked after you, maybe things woulda worked out differently ... for us both ...” Her stomach began making even louder sounds, revolting sounds, a high-pitched squealing and low, sonorous grinding. She sat up and clutched herself as if her innards were threatening to leap out of her body.

“Barbie, hon, are you okay? Do you think you’re going to be sick?”

“Ah fuck, gotta go to the bathroom ... the bathroom yet again... Give me a minute, would you.” She staggered to her feet, sweat pouring off her face.

“Well here, let me help you.”

Carolyn led her to the bathroom door, guided her over to the toilet and stayed with her while she hiked up her pink miniskirt, dropped her underwear, and lowered her narrow buttocks onto the toilet seat. Then Carolyn went out and shut the door. But the space between her and Barbie wasn’t enough to muffle the horrible sounds that came abruptly from inside the bathroom. The sound of her friend’s desperate grunting. The echoing *pow* of her bowels letting go, like someone hitting a snare drum over and over and over again. Then another weeping, mournful groan, a groan that pleaded for mercy, before a loud crash, a toppling over onto the floor.

“Barbie?” Carolyn threw open the door to find her friend crumpled on her shoulder beside the toilet. The smell was like nothing Carolyn could have ever imagined. She wrapped one arm around Barbie’s torso to help her up, then hurried with the other to flush the mess down the toilet. No sooner had the water snarled into the bottom of the

basin then Barbie threw herself head first into the bowl and vomited, every muscle in her body clenching up as she did. Finally, she raised herself from the bowl and rested her forehead on the toilet seat.

As Carolyn flushed again, she couldn't help but look inside, and that's when she saw it. The red and the black. An unspeakable horror holding fast to the enamel. Worse than pus green, worse than jaundiced yellow, worse than brackish brown. It was the colour of death, the red and the black. It was blood, and something far worse.

"Barbie, I'm going to take you to the hospit-"

"Oh gawwwd ..." she screamed, and scrambled to get onto the toilet seat again, reaching it just in time before her bowels let go in another noisy, fetid burst. When she finished, she leaned back against the toilet tank and wept.

"Barbie, will you let me take you to the hospital?"

Her friend nodded slowly through her tears, through the sweat and desperation that smeared her face.

The convulsions had already begun by the time they reached the Victoria. Nurses rushed to get Barbie onto a gurney and down the hall, telling Carolyn it would be best if she waited in the lounge until the doctor got a chance to see her. Finding a seat, Carolyn dared to look at her watch for the first time since the whole ordeal began. She felt like crying when she saw that it was already after four o'clock. Oh my god, she thought, what if Michael *didn't* go for a drink after his office hours? He could be home by now. Oh God, he could be home right now.

She stared distantly at the payphones on the wall. Call him. Tell him where you are and exactly what's happening. But she couldn't. If he knew that she was with Barbie, of all people, he'd be merciless. It wouldn't matter that she was sick; the only thing he'd see was a table with no dinner on it, a stove with no tea steeping, the children in the care of a neighbour, and their mother out with a drug addict.

God, what on bloody earth am I going to do? she thought, rubbing her temples. Maybe I could call and tell him some lie? Anything to fend off his assault, at least until I get home? Her mind tried conjuring up some story to tell him, but thought of nothing. It couldn't shake the image of that horrible mess that Barbie had made in the toilet. The black and the red. A futile exorcism of a lifetime's sins. She looked up towards the nurses' desk. Why haven't they told me anything yet? How long are they going to keep me waiting here? Each time she glanced down at her watch, it seemed her eyes were playing tricks on her. It was 4:30, then it was ten to five; moments later it seemed to be nearly six. Doctors and nurses moved like icebergs through the halls and along the desks. Each time it seemed as if one of them were about to approach Carolyn with news, they would veer off into a room or alcove to administer the information on their clipboards to someone other than her.

Call Michael, Carolyn thought. Call him. Explain that your best friend from childhood is very sick and you're staying with her. Please, please make him understand what she means to you. For just once, stand up to him. Don't be ... don't be a ...

Finally, one of the iceberg doctors floated into the waiting lounge and approached Carolyn. She looked up into his flat, vacant face, and knew. "Are you the one who brought Barbie Taylor in this afternoon?" he asked.

Carolyn nodded.

“I’m sorry, but there was nothing we could do for her. She was badly dehydrated from the drugs and diarrhea, and we’re fairly certain she hadn’t eaten anything in several days. She went into cardiac arrest about 20 minutes ago and died. I’m so sorry.”

Carolyn brought her hands up to her face. The black and the red, she thought. The black and the red got her, just like Barbie knew it would.

*I suppose I did have big plans. Big enough to get us off the Island, anyway. I had outgrown my father’s farm, a city girl at heart born on 30 acres of green grass, red soil. (Even Dad accepted my wanderlust in that severe, taciturn way of his, the solid sneer of a farmer who had no use for the big city). And you, Barbie, my inseparable friend, just needed some adventure. So we left. And how huge Halifax seemed to us then, with its big shiny buildings and stout universities, its shopping malls, and a whole waterfront of taverns at our disposal. Your favourite was the Seaside, of course. A place where visiting sailors gathered for drinks, song, women. We’d sit scrunched together on the crowded benches with our cool glasses of pale ale, trying to look like sophisticates and make friends in the smoky din. You were better at it than I was. You had red hair and a loose tongue and an uncanny ability to hold your liquor. Sometimes you’d have two guys going at once, on either side of you, playing them off each other for your affection. Neither would have much use for me, sitting upright with my dark hair tucked behind my ears. And you amazed us all when you scaled the tables and danced, shaking your full hips (you were heavier then) for the pleasures of the crowd. Sometimes, I’d even let you drag me up to join you (despite my certainty that everyone would stare at my flat chest*

*and skinny legs), because I wanted to be like you, be lavished with that kind of attention. The sailors would all hoot and holler and bang their glasses on the tables. They were idiots, most of them—vapid and uninteresting. Yet I couldn't bring myself to question your judgement when you'd leave the bar with one of them (or sometimes even, with two of them) and disappear into the night.*

*And then one evening, through the haze of all that cigarette smoke and music, I met the strangest young man of them all. Barely old enough to be allowed in, yet dressed in a caramel-coloured tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. Not a sailor, but a student at one of the universities. A boy who took his studies very seriously. Dragged out that night by gregarious friends, no doubt desperate to get him away from the books for a while. He talked to me—me, Barbie—over everyone else, and had little use for you and your shenanigans. He asked me out all proper. Took me to museums (he knew so much) and tested my knowledge of constellations and geography and world religions. Pulled at my mind like it was soft taffy. And so when we'd meet you at the Seaside for drinks, I didn't get up to dance with you anymore, because I knew he didn't approve. Eventually, we stopped going there altogether ...*

There were tears in her eyes when she cracked open the front door to find Michael sitting at the table in their sunken dining room with his arms folded across his chest. He stared up at her as she came through the door. For a moment his façade wavered, perhaps seeing the wetness seeping out of her face and the heavy red sacks under her eyes. But it was only for a moment, and then his glare returned.

“Seven o'clock,” he said with slow, measured precision.

“Michael ...”

“Seven o’clock. I’ve been home for nearly three hours, Carolyn. And for three hours, I’ve had to stare at a table with no food on it, a tea pot with no tea in it, and children who don’t know where their mother went.”

“Michael ...”

A slow-seeping rage dripped from his words. “Don’t speak. It’s bad enough I had to come home to find Mrs. MacInnis in my house looking after your children, but then to have to sit here for *three hours* ...”

“Michael-”

“Don’t—*speak*. There is nothing you can say, right now, to justify not being here during the supper hour. Not a thing, Carolyn. You only have *one job*, and that is to look after this house and the people who live in it. That’s all you have to do, all day long. Nothing else takes priority; certainly not whatever *the hell* you were doing all afternoon.”

“I was with Barbie, and-”

“Oh! Well that’s just the icing on the fucking cake, isn’t it!” he said, standing. “So the reason you weren’t home with your children is because you were gallivanting all over the North End with a drug addict and whore. Perfect! I told you the next time I caught you with her, there would be consequences. But did you listen? No. You just went ahead and did what you *fucking well wanted* without thinking of anyone else ...”

“Michael, please, she-”

“... Just like her, you know. Are you listening to me? You would’ve ended up just like her if it wasn’t for me. You were on that exact same path until I rescued you. And

this is how you repay me. By going against my word and spending a whole afternoon with a *fucking drug addict whore piece of North End garbage like that! You fucking-*”

“Michael, Barbie died this afternoon!”

Finally, he stopped speaking. His whole head had turned burgundy, a fat bearded sausage atop his shoulders. His eyes quivered. Then he raised a finger, slowly, and jabbed it in her direction. “You *should* have been here,” he said. Then he moved past her, towards the front door. Threw it open and slammed it behind him. A moment later, his car’s tires were squealing on the driveway.

In a moment, Carolyn would collapse into her typical crying place, her chair at the dining room table, with her cigarettes. But she turned then to see a little face staring at her from between the banister supports on the stairs. Lynn. She looked like she had just witnessed a person being set on fire. When Carolyn opened her mouth to speak, the little girl scurried up the stairs, rushing to her bedroom and closing the door behind her.

For a long time after, Carolyn sat at the table with her tears and her cigarettes. After each angry drag, she would tap her smoke into the lopsided ashtray that Ray had made for her in his shop class. The tears poured over the swollen sacks under her eyes and down to the tip of her nose, hanging precariously there, threatening to jump, before she wiped them away. Another drag and another tap, while belated thoughts swept through her mind. *Should have stood up to him ...he can't keep doing this to me ... Barbie, she tried to warn me ... she knew what he does to me ... knew how sick my life is ... just as sick as hers ...as hers was ...* Another drag. Another tap. The ashtray teemed with crushed cigarette butts and gray ash, like thousands of little diseases waiting to catch up to her.

There was a careful click of a bedroom door above her, and a moment later the shuffling of little feet coming down the stairs. Lynn had surfaced from the safe boundaries of her bedroom with its colourful army of stuffed animals and happy posters on the wall. In her hand she clutched a Cabbage Patch Doll for security, her confidante on the way to assess the battlefield.

Carolyn mashed out her cigarette and swept the tears out of her eyes before reaching to scoop up the little girl. Lynn climbed into her lap, squirmed to get comfortable, then turned a solemn face up to her mother. Carolyn tried to smile at her, crossing her eyes as she did, but Lynn's expression wanted nothing of it.

"You saw Daddy and me fighting, didn't you?" Carolyn said.

"You're always fighting."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. Your Daddy does love me, but he just ..."

Carolyn tried, but couldn't find a way to finish that sentence.

The face in front of her wasn't buying it anyway. It was as if little Lynn had aged a bit somehow. Became capable of understanding the fires that burned in her house in ways she wasn't capable before. "Your friend didn't get better, did she?"

"No. She's been called up to live where the angels are. She's with God now."

More tears, and no strength to wipe them away.

"You were just trying to help her," Lynn said, and began crying too. "You didn't do anything wrong. He shouldn't be so mean to you, Mommy. You, you were just trying to *help* somebody."

\*

*What is taking him so long?* she thought. *Maybe he's forgotten about me. Please, please hurry Dr. Kimbo.* She climbed down off the bench for a moment to wipe away the black, bloodied mess with her foot. She couldn't stare at it anymore.

Carolyn tried imagine what she would say to Michael if her tests turned out positive. If she told him, would a flash of the Old Michael resurface and yell at her for keeping secrets from him? Or would the New Michael simply put his arms around her and do what she had never seen him do before, weep? She didn't want to find out. She thought about the talk on the couch the night before (your father, Michael ...you talked about your father ... I could hardly believe it) and the walks through Point Pleasant and the cups of tea brought to her in bed. His desperation to love her, as if he knew that their time together was growing short. As if he knew that there were many things to be made up for, many things that could no longer go unsaid, or unfinished. And yet she still kept secrets from him. Still feared the battles he was capable of, even in her weakest hour.

The door opened and Dr. Kimbo came in. He had a clipboard in his hand with X-rays of her lungs clipped to it. The darkness of his skin and hair contrasted with his white lab coat. His face was cleanly shaven, his eyes mild and sad, his chin dimpled. She imagined him going home that night to a loving wife who would live happily with him for many years to come. Perhaps he knew this, or something like this, and thus respected the moment he now found himself in, one resting on the cusp of eternity for someone else.

“Carolyn, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, but I wanted to be absolutely sure of my diagnosis before I came in.”

“That bad, huh?” she asked, and tried to smile. He would not return it. His Adam’s apple jumped in his throat as he swallowed.

“There is no easy way to say this, Carolyn, but your tests have come back with some pretty serious problems. You have nodules growing on both lungs, a considerable number of them, and the test show that there is malignancy. There are 27 nodules in all and, yes, there may be a risk of them spreading to other parts of your body. Now there are some available treatments to slow down the course of the disease, and I’d like you to talk with Miss Lowell at the front desk to schedule a time for us to discuss your options. Most patients are overwhelmed by this news, and we’re going to do all that we can here to provide treatment for the pain you’ll be going through and give you as much comfort as we can. But I’m afraid ...” He paused, then took a slow breath. “I’m afraid there’s little we can do. I’m so sorry, Carolyn, but it’s my recommendation that ... that you get your affairs in order.”

Then he clipped the X-rays to the vast light board on the wall and turned it on. Her insides were suddenly illuminated in front of her—snowy white ribs surrounded by greenish-blue flesh. In the centre were the broad oval holes of her lungs, with giant pools of black swimming inside their green hue. They looked like bullet holes. Or large cigarette burns on a couch. They were everywhere, infesting her body, claiming ownership over it. It was as if her lungs were a house on fire, consumed by black unforgiving flames.

*We talked, you and I. Last night on the couch. You shared things with me you’ve never shared before. In the morning you brought me tea. Perhaps tomorrow, you’ll take me for a drive along the South Shore. The next day we’ll do something else together,*

*maybe a trip to the Island. I can show you the barn loft where I shared all my dreams with the closest of my friends. And you will understand. Everything. And you'll stay with me, here with me forever ...*

I'm going to die, Carolyn thought. She touched her mouth with her hand and began conjuring up ways in which she could possibly share this with Michael.

## GIANTS WILL RISE WITH THE MOON

It was the sound that stirred him. Not the wind rattling the panes above his head with the wet promise of winter. Not the sea crashing with mythical rote against the craggy rocks at the beach down the road. Not even close. The sound that woke Michael on this Saturday morning was coming from the grate beneath his bed leading down to the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. It wasn't a voice calling up to get him out of bed; it wasn't even the ruder sound of a broomstick handle tapping on the ceiling below his floorboards. No, when James Macpherson grew impatient for his son to return to the wakeful world, the old guy started in with the rattling. Michael could hear the cast-iron poker jabbing away at the burning logs inside the stove, and when it jangled against the iron hole in the top, the message was cunning and unmistakable. Michael groaned, tossed off the blankets and sat upright, touching the cold wooden floor with his bare feet.

Downstairs, his parents were in the tiny kitchen as usual—his mother at the sink peeling potatoes while his father topped off the stove before lowering his bulk into his chair at the table. “Top of the morning!” James Macpherson exclaimed when he saw his son appear through the arch, wiping sleep out of his eyes. Was it even morning? Michael could see the moon shimmering in the cobalt sky through the dew-dripped window above the sink.

“Top of the morning,” he muttered before seating himself.

“Fiona, tea for the boy,” James said.

Michael's mother (already dressed, already with her hair done ... he wondered if she ever really slept) went to the stove, lifted the copper tea pot up, poured some for Michael and brought it over. Kissed him once on the cheek and gave him a listless

“Morning dear” before returning to the sink and her potatoes. Michael tasted the tea while his father read the morning paper. Michael wasn’t sure if he liked tea yet, but James had pushed him to start drinking it, now that he was a teenager. It was better to have some early in the morning while it was fresh, instead of later that night when his father drank it after it had spent the entire day steeping on the stove. Michael poured some milk in. If he got the amount just right, it wasn’t so bad. He took another sip and tried hard not to grimace.

Soon his father’s performance began, what Michael referred to as his humming and bluffing. It started with a mere click in the throat, as if he had swallowed a hair, followed by a pronounced rustling of the paper. Then came a low hum exhaled through his nose, like he had something unpleasant to ask. Then a half smile, turning up the corners of his mouth. *I’m not going to say a word this time*, Michael thought. *YOU were the one rattling the poker in the stove loud enough to wake me. YOU were the one who got me out of bed. If you’ve have something to ask, then ask.* But James Macpherson just turned the pages of the paper with that smirk on his face. Michael reached over to the remains of the *Cape Breton Post* piled in the centre of the table and teased out the sports section. Two could play at this cold war.

It was then, almost in an instant, that a story in the sports section grabbed Michael’s attention, stealing it away from his father’s theatrics. His mind bloomed as his eyes gobbled up the lines of that particular article: “Newly crowned world heavyweight champion Cassius Clay, of Louisville Kentucky, confirmed Friday rumours that he has joined the Nation of Islam, a rogue religious sect based in the southern U.S. ... the group, while claiming to be a legitimate branch of the Muslim faith, is better known for inciting anti-white sentiment among the Negro American population ...” The words floated like satellites around Michael’s

world, feeling far away from this kitchen's narrow table and rheumy wallpaper. Nation of Islam ... Muslim faith ... So Clay *is* a Muslim after all, Michael thought. I just *knew* it.

"So, seeing how you're already up and about," James Macpherson began, "I want you to come with me this morning to New Waterford. I got a job to do but I sure could use an extra set of hands."

Michael looked up from the paper. No kidding! he thought. But why didn't you just knock on my door this morning and ask, or better yet give me some notice before I went to bed last night, instead of dickering with that poker in the stove? How come you can't ever be direct with me? Why can't you just order me around instead of pretending I have some choice in the matter? "How long will it take?" he asked.

"Oh you know, two, three hours. Why? You got some place to be?"

"Well I do have homework ... I was hoping to hitchhike to the library."

James Macpherson smiled an unbelieving smile. "You and the books! Fine. I'll tell you what: you do a good job helping me this morning and I'll even drop you off at the library myself."

Michael nodded, but didn't believe him. Whatever "work" his father had found would not take two or three hours, nor would he drop Michael off at the library. Between this moment and the time he sat down with his evening tea, his promise would fall apart in a magical yet completely organic way. That's how it went with James Macpherson, master fabricator.

While they both returned to the paper, Fiona brought over their breakfast of eggs and fried potato, setting it down in silence in front of them. Then she went back to the sink, wiped her hands with a tea towel, and waited for them to finish.

~

*He sat outside at the café, on the patio overlooking Spring Garden Road. One table over, an incessant cel phone chirped like a sparrow. The summer sun felt nice on Michael's bare forearms as he drank his tea. The street was packed with people moving between shops and restaurants and bars. White shorts and summer skirts, shoulders bare and red, cheap iced moccachinos clutched in well-manicured hands. He had come to the café early, perhaps too early, and now grew bored watching the throngs moving happily up and down the street as he waited. Impatience began burning behind his eyes, began clutching at his shoulders.*

*But then, as if to make him feel guilty for his budding agitation, Michael saw his son coming. Right on time as usual, and he felt foolish for questioning Ray's punctuality. Rising from his seat, Michael extended a hand across the patio rail, and the kid (looking well fed and sharply dressed for a 20-year-old) jogged up and shook it before coming around to join him at the table.*

*"Ray, pal, thanks for meeting me here," Michael began. "I realize you're busy."*

*"Well, you know, it sounded important, Dad," Ray replied before turning to get the waiter's attention.*

*"So have you got your courses all picked out for the fall?"*

*"Yep. Got word just this week, in fact, I'll be graduating a year early after all."*

*"Ray, that's fantastic. And you're okay for money?"*

*"Dad. Of course."*

*"And how's Jasmine?"*

*"Ahhh, she's great, Dad. I am so ready to marry this girl. You wouldn't believe."*

*Michael neither smiled nor frowned at this prospect, but merely twitching with unease from his son's open display of affection. He cleared his throat and sipped his tea.*

*"So what's on your mind, Pop?" Ray asked.*

*Michael locked eyes with his son and thought: You're not going to argue with me about this. You will not question what I have to tell you. You will only accept it. That's all I'm allowing you to do. It's been hard enough coming to this decision, and I don't need you judging me, so don't even try. But I invited you here, Ray, because I need you on my side. I want to be honest and straight forward with you.*

*"You remember what we talked about before?" he began.*

*"About you leaving for part of your sabbatical?"*

*"That's right. Do you remember where I said I'd be going?"*

*Ray's faced turned humourless, almost angry. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."*

*"Well, I got word that I can go. And I'm going."*

*"Have you told Mom yet?"*

*Oh how very automatic, Michael thought. Not: When are you leaving? Nor: When are you coming back? Not even: Are you sure this is what you really want? But only: Have you told Mom yet?*

*"No, I haven't," he said. "Not yet ..."*

~

It was as Michael knew it would be. The job did not take two or three hours. The work that James Macpherson had lined up involved replacing an axle and conveyor belt at a bottling plant in New Waterford, one of his freelancing gigs as a machinist while "between jobs." (Driving down the wet, shiny highway through the blustering wind on

the way to New Waterford, James had inundated his son with the myriad benefits of being a machinist—safer than coal mining, more reliable than fishing, and a machinist would never be out of work. Michael nodded quietly, wondering why, then, his father went for long stretches of weeks or even months without a paycheque.) When they arrived at the bottling plant, James marched in and began assessing and gesticulating and ordering people around. Well, not quite “ordering”, Michael thought. More like “suggesting”. His vague requests seemed to confuse the foreman and his cohorts, causing momentary bouts of chaos as they tried to figure out what he was asking of them. This only intensified James’s theatrics. But finally it became clear to the workers: The machine would need to be unplugged (James was deathly afraid of electrocution—this after an incident at home replacing a light fixture, a story he had gone to great pains exaggerating in the intervening years); he also wanted the area around the conveyer cleared and swept clean; finally, the workers would absolutely need to stay at a distance while the professionals did their job; James did not want them looking over his shoulder.

Michael remained by his father’s side while he worked, passing him ratchets and helping to unscrew bolts, loosen ball bearings and washers. Soon his hands were black with grease, his mind numb with repetition. But after they finished, James ordered the conveyor belt plugged in and sure enough, the huge machine rumbled back to life. Michael turned his eyes up to the big white clock overlooking the plant floor and saw that, somehow, five hours had slipped past them.

With a fresh ten dollars in his pocket, James Macpherson suggested a brief celebratory stop. He knew every tavern from L’Ardoise to North Sydney, and, he claimed, every tavern knew him. Michael wanted to argue (the afternoon begun, library

hours fading fast) but the prospect of seeing the inside of a tavern held too much allure. He said nothing, but nodded with tacit, reluctant agreement.

The Red Robin Pub sat at the top of the high street, with the Atlantic Ocean somewhere to its left. The two of them stepped through the doors out of the gales of wind and into the smoke-laden air. At a table by the front window, a half dozen heads turned up from tall pints of bitter to greet James Macpherson with “hey, how are ya!” and “how’s it goan on!” Coal miners off from their morning shift. The bartender was a lanky, balding fellow in a green smock. He crossed hairy forearms at his chest and glowered as Michael’s father approached the bar.

“Macpherson, you know better than to bring your under-aged brat in here. You trying to get me shut down?”

“Go whan with ya,” James replied. “Your 10-year-old daughter’s the one serving up the fish and chips in the back. Don’t talk to me about minors in your bar.”

“Plenty a miners over here!” someone roared from the table by the front window. James took out of one the crisp bills he had earned that morning. “So a shot of whiskey for me, a taste of some stout for my scrawny little friend here, and not another word of protest. The boy could stand to put on a few pounds.”

James and Michael took their drinks and joined the miners at their table. While Michael took a tentative sip of his stout (named, he assumed, for the type of stomach one needed to drink it) his father made some introductions. The men had names like Taft and Raleigh and Smithwick. James asked them what they were all doing here so early on a Saturday afternoon.

“We’re waiting for Duncan Burns,” replied the one called Taft. He wore a pork pie hat that reminded Michael of a fez, and had the most bulbous nose he had ever seen; it hung off the miner’s face like a rotten onion. “He’s going to tell us whether we need to form a search party. Apparently, the bird lady’s gone missing.”

“The who?” James asked.

“Well, I guess the proper word is a ... a whatchamacallit ...”

“*Ornithologist*,” said the one called Smithwick, proudly.

“Right, an ornithologist. But we just call her the bird lady. She was doing some work up around Fogart Cove last night and never checked in. Duncan—he made constable, did you hear?—was gonna wait ‘til noon to see if she’d turn up before getting us to organize a search. He seems to think she got swept off the cliffs by the high winds they were having out there last night.” Taft went on to explain that the young woman was a visiting scientist, from Toronto of all places. She had come to track the nesting and migratory practices of the few piping plovers that inhabited the ashy gray sands off Fogart Cove. She was staying up in North Sydney, keeping mostly to herself and not fraternizing with the locals, on account of being coloured and all, (that was the word he used, Michael would remember for years after ... *coloured*).

“And she wears this here *thing* on her head,” Taft said, sipping his stout.

Michael’s attention piqued as the miner took off his hat, grabbed a grubby cloth napkin off the table and folded it onto his own cranium to demonstrate, pulling it tight over his big red ears. “You know what I mean? And she talks with this real funny accent, all clippy and weird.”

“Can hardly make her out a’tall,” agreed the one called Raleigh. “The wife ran into her in Amis’s feed store last week, and couldn’t make a damn lick a sense a what she was saying.”

“Yeah yeah,” said Taft, “but she also pronounces each word carefully, in this kind of snooty attitude. Well, snooty for a coloured, anyways.” The other miners nodded, as if this had been the focus of many a conversation around the pubs and in the shafts.

*You may not know what she is, but I think I do*, Michael wanted to say. He thought of the slim row of books he had found in the library, the books he had pulled down and read and hoarded after hearing the rumours about Cassius Clay. He remembered the way his mind widened, blossomed like a rose, as his eyes traced along descriptions of rituals and histories and practices. And yes, attires.

He might have spoken up then, shared his knowledge, except that James had already begun a story of when he had gone to Toronto once as a young man, meeting and sharing drinks with a coloured woman in a cocktail lounge. “I could never hook up with her, you know, in the Biblical sense; but *man* that little scooch sure could talk the dirty talk. She sat in my lap all night with her drink, grinding to that there jazz music.” Michael found this story curious, since he remembered his father telling another drinking buddy once that he had never, *ever* set foot in Toronto and never would, so help him God.

The men ordered another round while they waited for Duncan. Soon, the miner named Smithwick grabbed Michael under his slender arm to ask: “So what do you say for yourself, sunny-boy? You be going underground with us someday soon?” The man’s wide palm, rendered black from a lifetime in the pits, felt like it had been wrapped in canvas.

“Not on your life,” James answered before his son could speak. “This one’s not for coal mining. He’s going to be a machinist, like his old man.” James Macpherson looked around the table, appraising his audience. “Yep, the kid can fix anything, let me tell ya. Anything all at. Why, just this morning he helped me with the conveyor belt at the bottling plant, and damn near repaired the thing on his own. And he’s always been like that, guys, from the time he was in diapers.” Michael wasn’t sure whether his father had lifted this fable from his own childhood, or whether he was confusing Michael with one of his other sons, or whether he was just making it up on the spot. But the coal miners seemed ready to roll their eyes at him.

“Yeah, yeah, Macpherson,” Taft said. “All your boys are machinists. All your boys are working in auto plants in Ontario, too.”

“Or maybe, you know,” Michael ventured, taking another careful nip at his stout, “I’ll go to college. I haven’t decided yet.”

“College!” the miners bellowed in unison, and sent their glasses crashing down onto the table. Then out came stories as quick as knives about college: about how someone’s cousin once went to college and came back to New Waterford a queer; about how someone else’s daughter went to school on the mainland and came back so snobby she wouldn’t even speak to her own blessed father when she saw him on the street. College indeed. James Macpherson just smirked and shrugged at his son, as if to say: This is what you get for bringing up such talk here.

Stories about the pitfalls of college brought about other stories. The mention of one person ignited a tangent about another, a relative or lover. Tales of car crashes along the Cabot Trail, of fisherman pining on the North Atlantic only to be lost in its

unforgiving embrace. Husbands coming home to find wives in bed with neighbours, shotgun blasts splitting the calm rural air. The afternoon dragged on, the peat fire burning bright in the cozy tavern and the windows rattling from the frigid gusts roaring up the high street. Michael listened enraptured as the men shared their stories. Yet, whenever his father spoke, the illusion broke down. His tales, as far as Michael knew, were all lies. Or, if not lies, at least gross embellishments. James Macpherson had never sparred 15 rounds with Sailor Sam in a gym in St. Peter's, had never saved the lives of a young couple from the hungry jaws of a bear while camping in the Highlands. He had never shot a deer, was never in a bar fight. If these stories were lies, then what about the coal miners' stories? Were they just as good at fabrication as James was? It bothered Michael that he didn't know what to believe, that nothing here was real, substantiated, true. He wanted to be in the library (books were bound things—printed and under his control) or better yet, home with the paper reading more about Cassius Clay and the Nation of Islam. That was his mythology. Not these legends of giants rising out of the mountains, bluffing and bellowing into the wet winter air, hearkening their voices back to the Isles of the Blessed. He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with the spells these men cast.

It was then that they saw Duncan through the window, hurrying up the high street towards the tavern. The man with the shiny new constable's hat (pinned under his hand so the wind wouldn't tear it off his head) skipped over wide puddles of water that covered the cobbled street before diving through the doors and into the smoky warm glow of the Red Robin.

“What's the word?” Taft asked, motioning to Duncan with his hand.

“Get yourselves together, boys,” the constable replied, wiping sleet off his arms.  
“The search is on. We’ve got one missing bird lady on our hands.”

The legs of their stools squealed on the wooden floor as the miners stood up, and Michael was not surprised to see his father stand with them. James Macpherson looked down at his son as if expecting some kind of protest, as if expecting him to kick up a fuss about the stupid library and his stupid homework. But Michael just swallowed the last gulp of his stout, wiped his lips and stood up. *You weren't going to keep your promise to me anyway, he thought. Might as well make the best of this. Besides, I wouldn't mind meeting this bird lady myself.* And so together the half-drunk men piled out of the Red Robin and were on their way to meet another potential story in the making.

~

*“You realize she doesn't want to you go,” Ray said.*

*“I know that, pal,” Michael replied, his words laced with a hint of indignation.*

*“But this is important to me. Your mother will understand.”*

*“Why exactly is it important to you?”*

*“What do you mean?” Michael asked, flummoxed, his impatience with his son returning, in a different form.*

*“I mean explain why it's important to you, Dad. Make me understand.”*

*And there it was, a request to articulate the interior voice that nagged Michael so ceaselessly. It was hard to communicate, hard to mix together his mind and his emotions in that way. It was like mixing acids and bases, the results an overflowing soup of inarticulation. The words that would not come sounded something like: I have to go because I've taught and explained and written about these things without ever seeing*

*them first hand. I know this religion, Ray, this part of the world like my own heart and yet I've never walked in its shadow, never touched it and seen what these things are capable of. Afghanistan is the perfect place to witness the consequence of ideas. I'm going there to see those consequences in the face of another human or in the rubble of a burned-out street.*

*"It's important to me, Ray. It just is." That was the best he could do, and maybe ten years ago, or even five, it would have been enough. But Ray was an adult now, sentient in a way that children are not. He wouldn't be placated by such a pat answer.*

*"It's awfully dangerous in that part of the world right now, Dad."*

*"Don't you think I know that?" Michael's temper was up now, despite his best efforts to keep it down. "But this is what's best for me right now, best for my career. And what's best for my career has always been what's best for your mother. And for you and your sister, for that matter. It's not my fault the three of you are too ... stupid to make that connection." He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth.*

*Ray didn't argue. He couldn't. When the waiter came with his latte and set it down by his elbow, the kid just sipped the drink and looked at his father. Partly stung, partly pitying, and partly daring the old guy to say something else hurtful.*

~

They found the bird lady. That is, Michael found the bird lady.

Dressed in windbreakers, the people in the search party combed the beach at the cliffs of Fogart Cove, carrying with them searchlights, walking sticks, and flares. Large, jagged rocks piled up and over and alongside each other choked the beach, forming

ragged pictograms along the surf. The cliffs rose high into the air like ruffled curtains, home to dozens of caves gaping at the ocean for miles in either direction.

Michael had tried to stay close to his father, but James told his son to spread out, to walk until he found a part of the beach that no one else was covering. Michael had a flashlight and some flares with him as he hopped over the wet, shiny outcrops. He moved further and further away from the crowds of people, for hours it seemed, until they were virtually out of sight. And yet, even out here on the furthest reaches of everything he knew, he still felt at the mercy of his father's caprice. *Come help me with my work ... come drink with me in a tavern ... come join a search party ...* This was a life lived out of control.

And so he was alone when the voice rose out of the caves to his left. It was a soft, accented tongue, trying to yell over the bluster of the tide. A voice not used to hollering. Michael hurried up the rocks, holding on precariously to his footing. He followed the voice to a hole falling down at an angle along the slope of the cliff.

"Is someone there?" the voice called from deep inside the cavern. "Please, if someone is there, can you help me. Please!"

"Don't worry," Michael called down into the darkness. "There's someone here. Just hold on a minute." He scaled back down the cliff until he found a piece of beach with some sand showing. He lit one of his flares, its bright red glow bursting to life, and stabbed it into the ground. Then he hurried back up to the mouth of the cave.

"You can't climb up, can you?" Michael asked.

"No, I cannot. I have dislocated my shoulder, I think."

"Well watch out, I'm coming down."

Michael leaped through the hole, fell straight with his feet together until his Keds landed with a splash into the shallow cold water of the cave. He turned on his flashlight, illuminating the harsh rocks surrounding them. Instantly, he could see a dark, pretty face with stolid eyes staring at him, head wrapped in its unmistakable headdress. His own eyes lit up with recognition.

“Holy crap, you *are* wearing a hijab,” he said. “You’re Muslim.”

The face jarred with surprise, then suddenly smiled. “I am, yes. How does a boy like you know of the hijab?”

Michael blushed.

The first thing he did was try to get her out of the cave. The rocks leading up to the hole provided few places for gripping. With her arm limp and useless by her side, and Michael’s general lack of upper body strength, they simply couldn’t get to the top together. The bird lady told him it would be fine if he left to fetch the search party and brought them back, but he said no. He’d let the flare he set outside do that work for him. He’d rather stay and keep her company. They could just see the dusk through the top of the hole as it turned the sun to the colour of whiskey behind a film of cloud. He would not leave her alone in the dark.

Her name was Rhona. She was not originally from Toronto, but had immigrated there five years ago to begin graduate work. She was from Pakistan. She had come to Canada for its good schools and clean air. And its abundance of birds. Cape Breton, she had learned, was a particular hotbed for the species she had only read about in the textbooks of her homeland. This trip was two years in the making. Yet, here she was,

stranded in a cave with a hurt shoulder after getting plucked off the cliff by an unusually strong gust of North Atlantic wind.

“You try to prepare for every eventuality, of course,” she clipped succinctly, “but I had no way to expect this. The irony is I was standing on the cliff thinking about the wind and how it made those beautiful whiteheads in the water, when I took my tumble. I hope my disappearance has not caused too much trouble.”

Michael made himself comfortable on a rock and listened to her. He wanted to hear about everything—her work, her life in Pakistan, her faith. Questions flowed out of him like water. Rhona had been to many, many places. She told him about the Middle East and central Asia and Africa. She talked about the wild markets of Calcutta and the burgeoning tourism of Kabul. She talked about the vile conflict brewing between her country and India. They also talked about Cassius Clay, and that made Michael gleeful and animated. (“Mark my words,” Rhona said, “you’ll be calling him by a different name by this time next year.”) And she talked about her hijab, the material it was made from and when she had first started wearing it. She talked about her father back in Pakistan and her fiancé in Toronto. And about the sacred rites of being a Muslim daughter, wife, mother.

“Perhaps you are too young to understand these things, yes?” she said. “What are you, thirteen, fourteen? Words like ‘tribalism-versus-humanism’ do not mean a lot to you right now, probably.”

“Hey, I’m still listening,” he said, sensing his temper behind his eyes (he hated to feel stupid, above all else) before pushing it back down again.

“Well, I am sure you will learn these things in time. The struggle of the world is like a fire, Michael, and what feeds it is chaos, disorder, unbridled greed. But tradition, community, leadership—these are what Allah says hold the world together.” She laughed lightly. “Perhaps that is why I have so much respect for your Canadian goose. Now there is a bird with a sense of tradition. And though individuals, they always fly as one, with someone leading the pack, of course.”

Every now and then, she would stop and try to get Michael to reciprocate, to talk about this place and the things *he* knew. But what could he tell her about? Machinists and coal miners? Fishermen, taverns, winters that stretched on for months? His world was not this one. His world was books, newspapers, libraries: portals into her world, into things she had seen and lived through first hand. She smiled at him then. Told him that someday he would go to places he only dreamed of, places that offered more options to him than just libraries or taverns. He nodded. Believing with quiet desperation every word she said.

Eventually, voices light and distant trickled down into the cave. Someone had found his flare. Rhona began calling for help. Michael climbed out of the cavern on his own to get the rescuers’ attention as they searched the crags. He found two men looking together. He told them about Rhona in the cave with the dislocated shoulder, and the two of them went down after her. As Michael breathed in the salty air, he felt a sense of relief wash over him. The sky had cleared, the wind had died down, and the moon was just beginning to rise. After a few moments, the men emerged from the cave with Rhona sitting on their shoulders between them. They rested her on the rocks before one of them

unclipped a walkie talkie from his belt and radioed in. Duncan's voice on the other end suggested they stay put until help arrived.

While they waited, the two men took out a flask of whiskey, gulped down a few mouthfuls each, and then offered some to Rhona. They said it would help settle her nerves and lessen the pain in her arm. She politely declined, saying it was nice of them to extend some to her, but Allah forbid it. The two men looked at each other, smirked and shrugged their shoulders. Then they passed the flask towards Michael, but he too declined.

"Go way with ya," said one of them. "You're James Macpherson's boy. I know you'll have some."

But Michael just looked at Rhona sitting quietly on the rocks, hijab flapping in the dying wind, and turned back to the men to shake his head once more. They could keep their whiskey to themselves.

The rest of the search party arrived, a doctor among them, to help Rhona get off the beach and back into North Sydney. The doctor wrapped her in a blanket and examined her shoulder, declaring that it wasn't broken. Before leaving, she turned to Michael and thanked him for helping her. He shook her hand, awkward as the men around them gawked suspiciously. He thanked her too, confident that she understood for what. All the while, James Macpherson strutted around the group of rescuers, thumping his chest and repeating that it was his boy who had found the woman. *Yes indeed ... that's my boy ... he's the hero of the day ... found the woman on his own, he did ... yes indeed.* Another legend to be shared over pints of bitter at the Red Robin.

And even on the drive home, with the evening coming alive in a fit of stars and moonlight, Michael could already see his father altering and embellishing the afternoon's tale of rescue. Michael had gone from merely staying with the "missing coloured" to actually rescuing her from the cave. And not a moment too soon, since the evening tide had started rushing in and she surely would've drowned if not for the boy's swift and decisive action. Perhaps, as the months and even years passed, James Macpherson would add other elements to the story, better elements (rain and lightning, an angry bear hunting for fish nearby, high waves that nearly sent the boy and the desperate woman cascading into the sea) until fact and fiction could not be separated. Michael sat in the car next to his father and mulled over such foolishness. He was no hero, but he would have to live up to whatever yarns his father spun. He would have no control over that burden, at least for now.

*Bide your time*, said a voice in his head that sounded remarkably like Rhona's. *You will have control, some day. You will make your own myths, dominate your own destiny. You will not have to pander to his insipid amusement forever. You will have control. You will have things a certain way. Your reality will exist separately from his.* Michael shuddered with the anticipation. It would, of course, bring unspeakable wars with his father over the next few years. Stories were a matter of control in their household, and it was a control James Macpherson would not give up without a fight. But it was a fight Michael would win. He was sure of it.

In the meantime, their Chevy pulled up the gravel drive to their little house on the hill to find Fiona coming out onto the porch to greet them. She quietly beckoned them into her kitchen, full of the smell of cooking fish. She took their coats and hung them by

the stove, then asked them to wash up for dinner. She served their meals in silence, listening to James unfold the afternoon's story for her, then stood near the sink cleaning and puttering about while they ate. When they finished, the two retired to their chairs in the living room (James with his tea, as thick and strong as blood, and Michael with none) while Fiona cleared their plates, washed them in the sink, put them away, and swept the floor. When she finished, she took her knitting needles and some yarn and joined James and Michael in the living room, beginning her evening's work until it was time to help them get ready for bed.

~

*He watched Ray polish off the last of his latte. Neither had spoken in several minutes. They eyed each other once, then once more. Daring the other with blunt silence.*

*"So you'll go?" Ray said finally.*

*"I'll go."*

*"No matter what she wants."*

*"No matter what she wants."*

*His son looked beaten. Incapable of interfering anymore. "Okay, but promise me you'll let her know. Now. Don't put it off. Give her lots of time to get used to the idea. It's the least you can do."*

*Michael sighed. "Fine. But I won't tolerate a big war over this, Ray. I expect complete support from all of you on this. Do I make myself clear? This is for the best. You'll have to trust my word on that."*

*But Ray said nothing.*

~

It was a long time to bide, those 30 years. Michael stood over the bed in his bedroom, a suitcase open and half packed in front of him. His temper was up, burning in his eyes and on the tip of his tongue. He was late. He hated being late. Perhaps this was part of Carolyn's ongoing ploy to keep him from going, as if making him miss his flight would solve anything. He ruffled the neatly folded clothes she had put in his suitcase, angrily searching.

"Carolyn," he barked into the hall, "you haven't packed that canteen I bought. Where is it?"

She rushed up the stairs, opened a hall closet, removed the canteen from its plastic Canadian Tire bag, and brought it to him. He snagged it out of her hand before tossing it onto the now disheveled clothes in the suitcase. She stood there, waiting for acknowledgement.

"Can I talk to you?" she asked, finally. "I don't want you leaving with us like this. Please, can we talk?"

He conceded. "Speak," he said.

"You don't think I understand why you're going, but I do," she began hastily, as if she had been rehearsing this in her head. "I know Afghanistan is like this ... this *thing* for you. It goes beyond your research and everything else, and I understand that. I've supported you through every stage of your academic career. But Michael, please, it is too dangerous—"

"You *don't* understand," he said. "If the reports are true, and they probably are, the Taliban are about to take Herat, and they could take Kabul as early as next year. If they do ... would you *listen* to me? ... if they do, there's a chance that no Westerners—"

not academics, not journalists, not relief workers, nobody—will be able to get into the country. If I don't go now, I may never get to go.”

Carolyn understood this. But during her husband's three months in Afghanistan, she would not be able to escape the litany of stories that would fill the international pages of the paper—stories that were as real and as jagged as a set of teeth biting into her:

*September 6, 1995, the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul burns to the ground ... November 30, 1995, rocket attacks kill 17 people, and injure 26 others ... December 14, 1995, rockets strike again, this time in residential Kabul ...*

“Listen to me,” Michael said. “You are my wife, and you will support me in this. Do you understand? I'm going—no matter what you think, what you feel, what you are afraid of, or how this affects our marriage. You're not going to dictate terms to me, or defy me, or use the kids or yourself as leverage against me. You will support me, you will kiss me goodbye at the airport and welcome me home at Christmas. Do you understand?”

Michael threw the rest of his clothes and gear into the suitcase and zipped it shut. Carolyn went downstairs and smoked three cigarettes at the dining room table, trying to get control of herself, while Michael carried his bags out to the car. He said his good-byes to his daughter, Lynn (upstairs, in her bedroom, the moody, brooding teenager who wanted no part of this fight), then the two of them left for the Halifax airport. Ray was there to meet them, and helped his father carry his bags to the check-in. When the time came, he shook Michael's hand and wished him a good flight to Pakistan and a safe passage through its porous border into Afghanistan. Michael kissed Carolyn goodbye, a perfunctory peck on the mouth, then turned to the ramp leading to his plane. He didn't look back at his wife and son, at the hug they shared, the unspoken allegiance between

them. And as the plane lifted off into the night, with the moon beaming through his port window, Michael thought only of himself—*this is it, it's really happening, I'm really on my way*—the big man with the big, uncompromised plans, on his way to a world he had never seen, but always, always wanted to.

## THERE IS NO MERCY ON THE STREETS OF THIS CITY

To begin, a dream.

Now Ray Macpherson would be the first to admit that his dreams were not typical. In fact, he seemed incapable of having one of those clichéd Hollywood nightmares, the whole nine yards of bursting awake in a darkened room with a sweaty back and wide eyes, with his wife stirring awake to calmly mutter: “Hon, what is it?” He never had those kinds of dreams. His night visions were rarely remembered at night. They were like echoes, little residues, voices hiding inside the fog of his memory. And in the moments when it seemed the least likely, those voices would rise out of that fog and speak to him. Paint little, horrific pictures with their perfect little words.

Such was the case with this dream. Ray didn’t even remember it until much later that day, while sitting at his desk in the newsroom of the *Halifax Tribune*. All around him was the continuous chatter of multiple interviews, of computer keys clicking, of unanswered phones screaming into the stale newsroom air. Ray himself had a phone stuck to his face and a coffee mug full of that sludgy break-room coffee making repeated trips to his mouth. He was listening to a city alderman dither over details of some budgetary acrobatics. Was it even worth sending a reporter to city hall this close to deadline, Ray wondered, just to placate this verbose politician who kept saying to him “You sound awfully young, son”?

“Listen kid, you’ll want this in tomorrow’s paper, I assure you,” the alderman insisted. “Trust me, I’ll be more ... *specific* when your man gets here. Are you even listening to me? Who’s your supervisor? How old are you anyway? You sound awfully young, son.”

“Never mind how old I am,” Ray said. “Why don’t you give *me* a few details, before I send someone all the way down there.” He hunched over his notepad, sipped his horrid coffee.

“Fine. But I’m telling you here and now, this part’s off the record. I don’t want to be *burned* by this in tomorrow’s headlines.”

And that did it. Burned. Burning. Set On Fire. The dream flooded back into Ray’s mind in the way his dreams usually did, feeling like a bout of *déjà vu*, as if someone wedged recollection between his eyes like a stick. Ray managed to jot down what the alderman told him, managed to find a free reporter to send, but couldn’t shake the voice that now made itself comfortable inside his head.

\*

*A house is burning, Ray, and you are burning inside it. See yourself engulfed in flames in a house about to collapse. The fire is everywhere. It eats off your hair and nose and genitals, scorches your skin to the colour of eggplant. You stumble around, seemingly blind, until you catch sight of a shattered window and totter over to it. You see the drop from that window is more than three storeys. It is enough to kill you. Then, in that strange dream logic that will only make sense until the instant you wake up, you understand that with one blink of your eyes the flames will disappear. How weird and unsettling, this decision that faces you as you hover over the window: the choice between a quick death, or a life lived with no genitals and skin the colour of eggplant ...*

\*

Where to take you from here? Perhaps you’re wondering about the alderman’s question. Ray gets “How old are you anyway?” a lot in his job. His co-workers can

snigger, but it makes sense. Always a gifted child, he finished his journalism degree from United Anglican College a whole year early. (They even gave him a Governor General's Medal for having the highest marks.) He found his first job at the *Tribune* while still a naïve and fearless frosh, so it's no surprise that now, at barely 24, he is the junior editor of its city pages. This, despite the occasional youthful impetuosity that coats his language, making aldermen and police captains and coroners a tad leery.

Ray wouldn't want to talk about this. He'd rather share with you the other aspects of his accelerated existence: his little toddler Cynthia, and his wife Jasmine. He still marvels at the sound of those words: His wife Jasmine. His wife. His *wife*. He is somebody's husband. When that stylish fox with the long black hair meets friends for drinks and says, "Oh, I can only stay for a bit; my husband's picking me up," he's the guy she's talking about. This joy affects him differently, cuts deeper than the lusty pleasures they shared while still journalism students together at UAC—pleasures he now thinks of as goofy, adolescent. The oft-brutal flirtations across the cafeteria table; the raunchy games of Strip Scrabble played in the candlelit dimness of her residence room; the mock arguments about which was better: print or broadcast journalism. ("Of course you'll do TV, baby; this town could use another talking airhead with a pretty face." "Hey, I'm surprised you're so interested in print, buddy-boy, considering you've got the perfect face for radio.") The joy now is older, more adult. Comprised of a small townhouse with a mortgage, a car they share, and a noisy scampering bundle of energy with pudgy fingers and a penchant for interrupting everyone with her need-to-know-*right-now* questions.

Cynthia. Rays sees in her Jasmine's smoky gray eyes. Jasmine sees in her Ray's dark eyebrows. And his unquestionable kindness. One day, Cynthia found a buzzing,

bouncing horsefly trapped between the two panels of their patio door, and spent 20 minutes trying to rescue it. After accidentally squishing the creature to death, she cried all afternoon. "She's just like you, Ray," Jasmine said after calming her down. "Hates to see anything suffer." He tried to argue he wasn't that soft, that he had a rep to maintain as the Big Bad Journalist. But she was right about him, as usual. He hated to see anything suffer.

\*

*There will be pity, sympathy, and even understanding. But there will be no mercy or respite from the shame of being burned alive. Listen to the other voices coming from the dream, Ray. You don't really recognize them. Yet you can tell that they pity you on the outside, and mock you on it the inside. Listen to them: "That poor boy. Burned up really bad, he was. Such a shame. He can't love his wife in, oh you know, that physical way anymore ... and his little girl, well she can't even stand to look at him. A real shame. Maybe he should just, well, go away. Go away and let them both move on." That's the answer the window offers you, Ray. The drop will kill you. Death, you imagine, would be preferable to a life with no mercy. Death offers a kind of certainty. Yet there, in the dream, you want to choose life over death. You want to choose emptiness over certainty.*

\*

Five days after his dream, Ray lost his mother to cancer. Carolyn Macpherson had been a pretty woman, and looked prettier still inside her casket. Her favourite dress, a little turquoise number, clung to her thin body while her rings rested eternally on her folded narrow fingers. There was calm relief, as well as tasteful makeup, painted onto her

face. Both managed to hide the leathery, mummified look that a lifetime of cigarette smoking had given her.

The centre of attention at the wake was Ray's father Michael, the newly minted widower. He stood among flowers to shake the hands of everyone who passed the casket—colleagues from the university where he taught, old family friends, and his few relatives able to make the trip. He absorbed their condolences with well-measured nods of his head while his two children stood by him, seemingly following suit by matching his quiet resolve.

“You have my deepest sympathies, Dr. Macpherson ...”

“She was a kindly woman, your wife was ...”

“They broke the mold when they made her, Michael ... if you need to talk, you know where to reach me ...”

Yet, if you look at this scene *presently*, you can see something strange—something just off. Watch Ray's younger sister, Lynn. She's standing there in a black frock about two sizes too large, deliberately chosen to hide the chubbiness she's convinced she's developed around her kidneys. She had the frock altered earlier in the week to remove the frills that had spilled out from the back; she would not bury her mother while wearing frills. Her brown hair is pinned up tight in a bun, pulled taut at her temples. Now look closely. All day long, Lynn hasn't spoken to, touched, or even looked at her father. And notice the spite that makes her red eyes angular and cold. It's not really directed at Michael, but rather at the people who have come to share his grief. That spite asks them: *Do you even know why you're here? Are you aware of why she smoked all those cigarettes? Look around you. Are you curious why she has no friends of her own*

*here, no distant family? Everyone is HIS colleague, or THEIR friend, or HIS relative.*

*None of you had a relationship with her independent of him.*

Ray is not so cynical. He still sympathizes with his father, even though he would agree with everything Lynn thinks. He wants to touch the man, put an arm around him and share this gravity together. But he's having trouble doing it. He can't seem to let go of Jasmine's hand as she stands next to him. His grip on her is tight but not hurtful. It's a grip that pleads: *Do not move do not move do not move do not move*. She understands this and thinks it's normal for a young man about to bury his mother. Yet, later that night, while he made fitful love to Jasmine in the humid darkness of their bedroom, Ray would explain that it was something more. Not just grief for his mother, but also a fear of his father's grief. He is genuinely afraid that his dad, at age 49, has no idea how to mourn.

Finally, the old guy breaks away for a few minutes to find an empty corner of the funeral parlour. A brief recess from the long line of well-wishers. Look closely. He stands there with his disheveled jacket hanging off his shoulders and his black tie dangling over the round crest of his middle-aged belly. Ray watches him. Wonders what thoughts stew behind his merciless green eyes. And then that little pot belly begins to bounce up and down, quickly, like a rabbit's nose. For one shameful second, Ray thinks his father is giggling for some reason. And then realizes he is not. He lets go of Jasmine's hand and crosses the parlour floor to be with his dad, to put an arm around the man's shoulders. Look very closely. Michael doesn't move. Doesn't say a word. Doesn't acknowledge Ray's presence in any way. He just stands there stiff as a diving board, exuding a profound awkwardness. Eventually, Ray's arm slips off and he wanders back over to his wife, leaving Michael to his own private mysteries.

\*

*The dream keeps speaking to you, Ray, and you're wondering what it all means, this choosing emptiness over certainty. What is so empty about the living world? Do you not have a wife who adores you, a daughter who will come to worship you? Do you not have a dream job and a nice home? In effect, an Envidable Life? And what's so certain about death anyway? Who is to say that, right now, your mother (or anyone for that matter) is not being faced with challenges and self-doubt in the afterlife?*

*These are tough questions to answer, Ray. But for now, understand that the house in your dream is the house you grew up in. You stand in the attic while it all burns around you, and you're burning with it. You can change that, though; one quick nod of your head and the flames will go out. But the damage remains (the ruined genitals ... the eggplant face ...), so pick your choice and stand by your decision. What are you waiting for? Either live with the damage, or jump out the bloody window.*

\*

There is a beach just south of Halifax that Ray and Jasmine would enjoy together whenever they could get away from the ceaseless parade of interviews and write-ups and editorial meetings that choked their respective careers. They'd come here to sit out on the big broken rocks stacked slapdash along the pewter gray sand to feel the surf rush in. There was a certain way that Jasmine would touch him while they were sitting out on those rocks that Ray really liked. They'd be half facing the sea, half facing each other, and she would set a hand on his leg. It wasn't really a sexual touch, but more like calmness. That's how Ray liked to think of it: A calm hand on his leg. It would simply

rest there, cupping his thigh, and drain all the anxieties from his body. It was a touch that said: *Out here, with me, you have nothing to worry about.*

A few weeks after Ray's mother died, the two of them sat out on the rocks while Cynthia played nearby in the sand with a plastic bucket and shovel, scooping up sticks and shells and rocks and anything else that piqued her curiosity. Ray was quiet, thoughtful.

"We don't have to stay, you know," Jasmine said. "The two of us could find work anywhere. We can leave if you really want to." This was a continuation of the talk they had the night before, when Ray felt overwhelmed with a need to leave the place he grew up. *Montreal ... New York ... Vancouver ...* These were the cities they had discussed, even though Jasmine really didn't want to go. Her large family and all of her friends were here, and besides, she loved Halifax (these gray rocks, that blue ocean, those two bridges reaching across the harbour) with all of her heart. But Ray was feeling lost after his mother's funeral, and believed in those short moments that escape from his father's city was the only answer.

"No, I want to stay," he said. "I don't want to run from this. It feels like such a cliché, you know, like some stupid Hollywood cliché, where you have to run from your roots to find yourself, and I won't do it, Jazz. I love it here, you love it here, and this is definitely the place to raise Cynthia. I just wish ... my father ... my *dad* ..."

The unspeakable things that came from grief. Michael had scarcely spoken to Ray since the funeral. It felt like such a regression, since the old guy had mellowed so much in recent years (really, Ray thought, from the moment he returned from his last sabbatical, where he had done time travelling throughout war-torn areas of central Asia).

He had become more understanding and less stubborn. Ray hadn't questioned this but merely revelled in Michael's newfound accessibility. Their talks about life and goals and morals no longer degenerated into senseless debates. Their talks had become light and casual. And Ray realized something about his father he hadn't before: the stuffy professor with the gray beard and unruly temper had a gentle side. But now, with his wife gone, it was like the old guy had taken a backwards step. When Ray tried to get Michael to talk, he just got defensive and mildly insulting without really realizing it, taking pot shots at Ray's choice of career or his techniques of parenting. All of this left him wondering: *Are you even aware of your defeat? Can you not see that you are beaten, not by your weaknesses, but by your need for strength? Let it go, Dad ... Dad, please, just let it go ... and ... just ... cry ...like you did at the wake ...*

Jasmine touched him. A calm hand on his leg. It brought Ray back down to earth and made him realize he had started to cry himself. He wiped tears off his face just as Cynthia came bounding up the rocks with her pail swinging back and forth.

"Mommy, mommy, look at all the shells I found!"

"Show me what you got!" Jasmine replied, matching her daughter's enthusiasm.

As Cynthia held out the bucket for her mom's inspection, she spotted the redness in Ray's face. "Hey, why's Daddy crying?"

"He's not crying, hon. I had to throw sand in his eyes cuz he was getting fresh with me."

Ray's tears turned to snorts as he laughed and shook his head.

"What means fresh?" the little girl asked.

"Never you mind. I'll tell you when you're older."

Ray looked at mother and daughter squatting next to each other on the wind-swept rocks, examining the contents of the pail. When Jasmine looked back up at him, Ray tried to meet her eyes with all seriousness, and said: "I am so in love with you." But she'd have nothing of it, and playfully shoved his shoulder with her fist. "Goof," she smiled.

\*

Lynn started coming to visit a lot more after the funeral. Perhaps her tiny apartment could no longer contain the tightly coiled bundles of her grief. For the first time in her life, she actually needed to be around other people. It was one of those rare evenings when Ray and Jasmine were home at the same time, and Lynn was over for coffee. They sat in the living room, Jasmine on the couch, Lynn in the recliner, Ray and Cynthia playing together on the carpeted floor. Ray had a feeling Lynn liked everything about his little house, enjoyed its warmth and coziness. She sat there with her coffee held carefully in her lap, admiring what surrounded her: The slanted roof, the affordable and inoffensive art on the walls; his collection of middle-of-the-road '70s rock CDs, Springsteen and B.T.O. and the rest, interspersed with Jasmine's more refined tastes in classical and the blues, piled along one wall. He was sure this place felt more mature to Lynn than the single-roomed bachelor suite she lived in for no other reason, Ray thought, than out of pure and belligerent pride.

What Lynn really seemed to be enjoying on this night was watching Ray in the role of father. She took a distinct interest in her brother's exchanges with Cynthia, frantic for an unspoken confirmation.

"A doo-doo-doo," Ray said.

“A dah-dah-dah,” answered Cynthia.

Then together: “That’s all ah want to say to yooo ...” The little girl giggled as her daddy tickled her. Lynn absorbed it all, like a sponge.

Eventually, Cynthia got tired and crabby with playing on the floor, so Jasmine scooped her up, blew kisses onto her stomach, and carried her off to bed. *I love her perfect timing*, Ray thought. *She knows I need to talk to Lynn alone.*

When he heard Jasmine close the bedroom door, Ray climbed up onto the couch, sipped his coffee, and looked at his little sister. Her hair was shiny and tied up in a pony tail. A large rope of beads, her favourite necklace, dangled down the front of her blouse. She was three years younger than Ray, but looked older, wearier. Like someone who desperately sought attention but hated being touched.

“So,” he said.

“So,” she answered.

“So, have you called Dad recently?”

Her face went slack, rebellious. She hid her mouth in the coffee mug for a second before saying: “Nope. We really don’t have anything to discuss, now do we?”

“Lynn, I’m worried about him. He’s not talking as much now. I’m trying to get him to open up again, but he won’t. He just gets mad.”

“Surprise surprise.” She leaned back, her wide shoulders spreading out across the recliner. She looked around the room, nonchalant, as if she’d rather discuss something else.

“Lynn ...”

“Let me ask you a question,” she said, turning her eyes to meet his. “This occurred to me at Mom’s funeral, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. Can you recall, Ray, your very first memory? I mean, if you stretch your mind back as far as it will go, what’s the first thing you ever remember remembering?”

“Oh God, I don’t know.” He thought about it for a minute. “I suppose it would be watching TV and seeing Ronald Reagan get shot. I remember I was sitting in that old breakfast nook we used to have, eating Cheerios and watching the old portable TV we used to keep in the kitchen. It must have been during a newscast or something. I don’t know how old I would’ve been, but I was old enough to know who Ronald Reagan was and what it meant to be shot.” He could imagine sharing this revelation with the grizzled old journalists he worked with and the guffaws it would bring about his age.

“Do you want to know what my first memory is?” she said. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. It happened one day when I was maybe four or five. Mom had to leave the house for a while to stay with this friend of hers. She was like a childhood chum or something, and she was really, really sick. You were in school by then, but I wasn’t, so Mom had to get that little old lady from next door—Mrs. MacInnis, you remember her?—to come over and stay with me. Anyway, something happened and Mom couldn’t make it back before Dad got home in the evening. When he came in and didn’t see any dinner on the table and you and I with the neighbour, he became so irate. He interrogated Mrs. MacInnis, just flipped out on her, asking all kinds of questions about where Mom was, how long she had been gone and when she was getting back. When he couldn’t get anything out of her, he threw her out of the house. Then he yelled at you and me about where the hell Mom could’ve been. I remember being so scared that

I just hid in my room while he paced around downstairs and banged cupboards and waited at the table for her to show up. When she finally did, he just lit into her, I mean absolutely lit into her about not being there to look after us and have dinner on the table. I remember coming out of my room and watching it from the stairs.”

“There were a lot of fights like that,” Ray sighed. “It seemed so foolish, like a stupid cliché ...” *But he was getting better, Lynn. Easing up. Mom told me so, before she died.*

“But Ray, that’s not even the worst part. She told me later that her friend had *died* that afternoon. I mean, Mom had just watched her best friend die, and then came home to *that*. It took me years to even fathom how deeply that must have hurt her. I can still hardly imagine ... imagine what he put her through ... ” She began to weep, just slightly, but then wiped the tears angrily away from her red face.

“Lynn, I know this harder on you, because you’re not as close to Dad as I am. But don’t you think Mom would want you to make some kind of peace with him? He’s all alone in that big house now. He’s got no one to talk to, no one to share his feeling with. I’m sure he’s paying a price for all those wars he started when we were growing up, but-”

“He deserves whatever price he pays and more,” she said angrily. “Sometimes, growing up, I *would* see him as the moral centre of that household, Ray. When he was hard on you, or me, or especially Mom, I’d think that it was because he had some divine insight into the greater good. That his morality was more complicated than any of us could understand, and he could see around corners we couldn’t. But then I’d remember that day and know it wasn’t true. The arguments that raged in that house, Ray, were

always a result of his ... *regime*, his insecurities, and nothing brings that home for me more than that day. And to think, it's the very first thing I can ever remember ..."

Ray swallowed, and tried not to think about his dream.

Later, Jasmine came back out to the living room and noticed the heavy silence between them. She sat down next to Ray and touched his leg. He squeezed her hand, but wasn't really thinking of his wife just then. He was still stuck on Lynn's words. Their tone and precision. He was also thinking about Cynthia, slowly falling to sleep in her little bedroom. And wondered if his daughter had had *her* first memory yet.

\*

*So please tell us, Ray, that you recognize where all of this is going. Do you know why you are being faced with the choice of living or dying? Don't worry. It's not about your literal death (or your literal life), but more of a metaphor: The emptiness of life or the certainty that comes with death. Look closely at these things, Ray. See what the dream means, and what lies ahead for you.*

*Your father chose certainty. He had to have, after all, everything in that house A Certain Way. Dinner on the table at 5:30 and all that. Well, he got his certainty, but look at the price he pays now. You think he lives with emptiness? He should be so lucky. He lives with the ghost of his wife and the ghosts of the bonds he could have had with his children. He even lives with the ghost of his own father, and his father, and his father before that. Mindsets and morality that are passed down, clandestinely, through the generations. He wishes he was alone.*

*You will have some serious decisions to make, Ray, when it's your turn to go through what he's going through. Your independence from him is on the line. But before*

*this residue from the dream leaves you completely, quiet your mind and think on this:  
There is nothing wrong with emptiness if it means letting go and coming to terms with the  
uncertainty of living. It's a noble thing. Just don't expect mercy from the pain in the  
meantime. Are you ready for it? Because here it comes ...*

\*

Ten months after Carolyn's funeral, Jasmine died in a car accident. It was definitely a clichéd Hollywood crash. Several flips over and a huge, huge ball of fire. She was burned beyond recognition. They had eventually needed dental records to confirm her identity. In the meantime, the policeman who arrived at Ray's front door during the supper hour, hat in hand, had all the dignity and reluctance of a unsolicited salesman as he delivered the news. Ray's shock was exquisite, the numbness sublime. It felt as if his whole world had caved in on itself, like a wet flower.

At the funeral, Ray's grief seemed to pour out of every hole of his body. He wouldn't mask it, nor put on airs of strength or stability for anyone. He wept until he found weeping a bore. He envisioned every possible aspect of Jasmine from every conceivable angle, and they all came at random and with no taboo: her face with a TV mike in front of it; the gruffness of her voice first thing in the morning; her most favourite sexual positions (hips straddling him, black hair flailing unabashedly in the dimness of their bedroom) and her smile when they finished; her calm hand on his leg, and the way she talked to Cynthia.

Oh, and he thought of Cynthia, too. His daughter would tell him, years later, that she didn't really remember her mother—just a spectre of her face, a flicker of personality. This seemed consistent with the little girl who coloured in her colouring book on the

floor of the funeral parlour, fairly oblivious to and incapable of understanding the events around her.

Through all of this, Michael couldn't touch Ray, nor offer any words to comfort him. The best the old guy could do was stay out of the way and not look too put off by the sight of his son's total disintegration. In his own mind, that was the right thing to do. Michael was better at keeping others at bay, allowing his son's anguish a wide berth. But for Ray, it was different. Of all the silent pleas that screamed through his mind, the loudest was directed at his father: *Help me ... you've been through this ... help me ... please, dad, help me ...* Unspoken words that Michael could not or would not pluck from the air.

It was Lynn who crossed the parlour floor. It was Lynn who put her arms around her brother and wept with him. It was Lynn who heard all the things he couldn't say. Three words in particular rested on his teeth as she held him, but Ray didn't waste the strength to give them voice. *Make it stop*, he wanted to say. *Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop, make it stop ...*

## ADVOCATE IN ABSENTIA

**The Tourist**

“Thank you for calling Nova Scotia Tourism Information, this is Lynn.”

She waited, impatient, through the dull hiss in her headset. Lynn never understood that slight pause that some people took before speaking to a 1-800 operator. In the background she could hear a child wailing, a parakeet crying out inside the echoey dome of its cage.

“Yeah, hello, is someone there?” A man’s voice, gruff and distorted by static.

“Yes sir, go ahead.”

“Yeah, I’m callin from Mississippi. Can ya hear me up there?”

“Yes, sir. How can I help you today?” More commotion in the background, voices tripping over each other and the bark of a dog. A house full of fret and chaos.

“Yeah, look, the wife and I are planning a trip up to Nova Scotia in July”—the man pronounced it a sweaty, southern *Joo-lie*—“and we were just wondering: Should we have a bunch of reservations already made before we show up? Or can we just find places to stay as we go?” Then, making no attempt to cover the phone, yelled: “Would you just sit and relax, woman! I’m asking her. I’m *asking* her.”

The *wife*, Lynn thought. He actually referred to the woman as the *wife*. Mentioned with the same possessive lethargy as one might mention an outboard motor or new RV. She felt a pang of pity for the woman as Lynn envisioned this man and his entire existence. The meals he ate, his leisure activities, the way he voted every four years.

“Accommodations in Nova Scotia tend to be scarce come July,” she answered. “I recommend you and the *wife* book a few places in advance. Do you have a copy of our travel guide? I can help you pick out some hotels if you like.”

“Just hang on a sec.” Then, not covering the phone again: “Marlene, Mar-*lene*, go see if you can’t find that guide book they sent us.” When he came back on the line, he quieted his words as if ashamed of them. “Look, I hate to ask this, but you folks up there in Nova Scotia, y’all got runnin water in your tawlets, right? I mean, I ain’t gonna have to bring up one of those portable tawlets with me, am I?”

Before Lynn could even fathom a response, the man did cover the phone and say something, then something louder and more aggressive to the wife. The static clattered and the phone rattled before he came back on again. “Look, she’s all in a tizzy here. I’ll have to call you back.” Then an abrupt click and he was gone.

And just like that, her sympathies for the man’s wife dissipated as fast as they had come. Lynn returned to her comfort zone, this drab gray cubicle she lived in for 10 hours a day, with its computer and binders and the provincial map pinned to the wall in front of her. Her drab cubicle looked like every other drab cubicle that filled the drab expansive floor of the drab call centre, with its wide tinted windows and brown carpet reeking of cleaning products and spilled coffee. The stale air around Lynn was choked with the bustle of ringing phones, of churning faxes, of co-workers gossiping between calls about who among them was sleeping with whom. For Lynn, this world was safer, more tenable than the one she had just visited on the other end of the phone—the wife in her tizzy and the husband with his bawling commands. In this cubicle, no one would dare call her the

wife, or anything else. She was just Lynn—a disembodied voice speaking to the continent.

She heard Paul come crashing into the cubicle next to hers, several minutes late for his shift. Management had moved him down to this corner three weeks ago, after he had caused a ruckus at the other end with the new girls who had started at the beginning of May. The cubicles on either side of Lynn had been empty all winter, and she had been thankful for their silence. Now, Paul appeared hell-bent on disrupting her quiet little world.

“You should have come the Palace last night, Lynn,” he said, popping up like a gopher over the cubicle wall, his Acadian accent sloshing his words around like melting ice. “The DJ was so *on*. And let me tell you this—there was romance the air. Even you could’ve gotten It last night.” The Palace was the sleaziest dance club in the city, often referred to as a Meat Market, immortalized in a Barenaked Ladies song. The willowy females who frequented the club were roughly Lynn’s age—20 years old—but that’s where the comparisons ended.

“What, exactly, could I have gotten?” she asked him.

“You know. *It*. Oh, don’t look so mortified.”

Paul was always talking about It. Gettin’ it. Givin’ it. Doin’ it. He was 24 years old, with crisp blue eyes, hair spiked with gel, and a slight curve to his nose, like a girl’s. He usually came to work wearing silk shirts and cargo pants, his own unique take on Business Casual. It was the well-glossed look of someone who didn’t believe he’d have to work there very long. But both he and Lynn started at the call centre two years ago,

had been in the same orientation group. She remembered him as a chatty guy, talking once about his great ambition, although she couldn't remember what his great ambition was.

"Paul, for the last time, I'm *never* coming to the Palace with you. You know it just isn't my scene." Perhaps she would have gone on to say that if he asked her to someplace else, someplace decent, someplace *respectable*, then she might possibly ... But then a tone sounded in her headset, followed by the hiss of dead air. "Thank you for calling Nova Scotia Tourism Information, this is Lynn," she chimed, turning back to her desk.

After finishing her call, Lynn wheeled around the corner to find Paul meticulously laying out his papers in front of him, then adjusting and readjusting the position of the pens on his desk. He spotted her staring at his intricate arrangements. "Organization is next to Godliness," he said.

"Really? Where does sitting there without your phone turned on rank?"

"Say, I really like your necklace," he said, unfazed. "Where'd you get that?"

"This?" She fingered the rope of beads that dangled around her neck. Paul had developed this trend since landing here three weeks ago—making brusque comments on some part of her dress, or demeanour, or habits. "A friend of mine gave it to me," she answered, "as a reward for getting off meat and becoming a vegetarian."

"Really? You're a veg-e-tar-ian? Are you *serious*?"

"Hey, what's wrong with becoming vegetarian?"

"Oh nothing. I guess. But why did you do it? Was it animal rights, or a health thing?"

“Well, I ... the thing is, when I started, I ... well ...” His question was a bit infuriating. Why *had* she given up meat? It happened more than three years ago now, when her friend Rebecca had converted her, and Lynn tried to remember under what grounds. They had discussed chickens in high-density pens, cows grazing in fields that had once been rain forests, but they had also talked about cholesterol and cancer-causing oxidants.

“I guess a little of both,” she said. “I don’t know. It’s been a while since I thought about exactly why.”

“You’re an odd duck, Lynn,” he said. “You’d think you’d remember something like that. I mean, it must’ve been a struggle to give up meat, if your friend had to reward you with such a nice necklace.”

He was right. It *had* been a struggle. She remembered that much. *Okay, fine, Paul, she thought, you’ve proven there are no flies on you. Stop looking so smug and adorable.* Another tone sounded in her headset and she wheeled back over to her desk. “Thank you for calling Nova Scotia Tourism Information, this is Lynn.” When she finished, she found Paul standing up from his desk and peeling off his headset before moving towards the aisle leading to the door.

“I’m skipping down to the cafeteria. Can I fetch you anything?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“You sure ‘bout that? Can’t bring you back a tofu burger or a handful of trail mix?” He beamed at her. Waited for a response.

She glared back. “You’re not funny.”

“Yes I am,” he answered. When she didn’t remove her scowl, he said: “Oh relax, Lynn. We’re always remembered for what makes us conspicuous.” Then he smiled at her, mostly with his crisp blue eyes, and disappeared down the aisle.

### **The Specialist**

Lynn lived with her cat Miles in a cramped bachelor suite in the basement of a building in the west end of the city. It was an unassuming box she had moved into after dropping out of her first year of university, despite the pleas of her mother and scoldings of her father. Lynn’s apartment was the antithesis of everything her folks believed about good accommodation. It lacked differentiating walls or spaces to distinguish bedroom from living room, kitchen or dining area. It had an ancient gray radiator under the window that clanked like armour unless she kept the heat on. It didn’t have a proper kitchen (“A hotplate and bar fridge is not a proper kitchen,” her mother often said as she implored Lynn to move back home. “Trust me, Sweetie, I’ve seen places like this before.”), and the stand-up shower in the bathroom was prone to uncontrolled fits of mold and sludge. But it was pride that Lynn kept living there, and she clung with obdurate determination to its advantages. The rent was startlingly cheap. The apartment was small and therefore easy to keep clean. There had been a strange stack of two-by-sixes in the corner when she moved in, which she had since fashioned into a crude bookshelf to hold the few texts she had accumulated during her only year of university. The apartment was just a short drive in her weathered Honda to the call centre. She found her neighbours here quiet and anonymous—happy little ponies locked away in their own corrals. And

Miles clearly loved the place, spending his days stretched out on the sill of the window that overlooked the alley.

So she came home that night to her little cell, fuming about tofu burgers and trail mix, wondering why such things made her conspicuous to someone like Paul, pondering the things that made *him* conspicuous and what was it about his crisp blue eyes that she couldn't get out of her head. She came in the door, threw her keys on the counter, and scooped up Miles before he could get out. "Howya doin', boy?" she crooned, stroking him. She went over to her machine to find a message waiting for her. She thought perhaps Paul had dug her number out of the personnel database and called to apologize for being such an insufferable prick, or at least to flirt a little more. But it wasn't him. It was her mother.

Talk about the things that made a person conspicuous. Carolyn Macpherson may have been a petite person, but the sound of her husky, phlegm-glazed voice inside the machine belied her lack of size. "Hi Lynn, it's just, em, Mom calling. I was hoping we could chat. I scheduled an appointment with that ..." A pause as she wheezed into her fist, away from the phone. "Excuse me, dear. An appointment with that specialist I mentioned. Anyway, give me a call. I'd like to talk."

Lynn dialed the house. Her father shouldn't have been home to answer—he was teaching an evening graduate seminar this semester, a professor at the same university she had dropped out of—but if he did answer, she was going to hang up. Lynn was not in the mood to sit through one of Michael's blunt, tactless lectures about her life's failings. It seemed to be the only conversation he was capable of having with her. *Jesus, Lynn, how long do you plan to work in that hell hole? ... Do you really want to live in a dumpy*

*bachelor pad for the rest of your life? ... Lynn, most 20-year-olds are in university, okay. Most are smart enough to realize they've got their whole lives to work full time ... I don't understand you ... you get free tuition because I teach there, can't you even finish a bloody three-year diploma? ... Christ, Lynn, you're throwing your whole life away ...*

"Hello."

"Hi, Mom."

"Oh hi, Sweetie. Thanks for calling me back so soon."

"No problem. So what's the story with this specialist? When do you go see him?"

Lynn sat down on her futon and let Miles climb into her lap as her mother began to talk.

"The appointment is three weeks from this Thursday. I've been to the family doctor, but I didn't like what he told me, so I went and got a second opinion. Anyway, both recommended I see somebody with particular expertise." Those were the words Carolyn used: *particular expertise*. She began describing symptoms and problems she was having when Lynn cut her off.

"Wait a minute, what kind of specialist is this exactly, Mom?"

Carolyn said nothing at first.

"Mom?"

"He's a cancer specialist, Lynny." Then, as if to reel back in the heavy line she had cast: "But I don't want you to worry, Sweetie ... it's just a precautionary exam."

*Cancer*, Lynn thought, feeling her stomach sink into the futon. She rolled that word around in her mind, measuring its syllables, gauging its cadence. *I can't believe the*

*doctors are throwing that word around. Why are you so calm about this, Mom? How can you think that this wouldn't worry me?*

"Have you told Dad yet?"

A heavy sigh. "No, I haven't. Not yet. I ... I figure there's no need to concern him just yet. If something comes from these tests, then I'll tell him. But ..."

"And yet you've told me."

"Yes, but ... see the thing is I—"

"You're afraid to tell him, aren't you?"

"Lynn, please, Sweetie, this is hard enough as it is, please don't start in on me."

"You're afraid he'll think you've been keeping secrets from him. You're afraid he'll explode on you over this."

"No. No, that's not true. You don't understand. He's not like that anymore. He's gotten better, Lynn. He and I have been getting along so well. You wouldn't believe the changes in him. If you'd just move home, you'd see for yourself."

"Then why haven't you told him?"

"Well I just, you know ..."

Lynn waited, but her mother had no answer for this. *For Christsake, grow a backbone, woman. It's like Paul said: We're remembered for what makes us conspicuous; so what do you think you'll be remembered for? Other than a life lived on eggshells as you pussyfoot around his temper? And if you think he's changed, that's your business. But I damn well know what makes him conspicuous, and don't ask me to see him any other way. I refuse to, alright? I absolutely fucking-well refuse to.*

Lynn sat there, marinating in these thoughts as her mother continued talking. When she tried to wrap up on a positive note, Lynn could only end with a curt good-bye. Yet, after her mother was gone, she took Miles and climbed up onto her bed, and began to shake. "My God, Miles, my mom might have cancer," she said to him. "My mom ... my mom ...my poor mommy ..."

The next day at work, Lynn sat silent in her cubicle, taking only the occasional caller. Eventually, Paul wheeled around her wall to check in on her.

"You're a bit conspicuous by your silence today, Lynn."

"Must've eaten some bad tofu last night," she snapped without turning around.

Paul laughed uneasily. When she still didn't look at him, he said: "Okay, I'm sorry I poked fun at your beliefs yesterday. I was only fucking around."

"Apology accepted. Now go away."

"No, I mean it. I want to make it up to you. I know this great Pakistani restaurant up on Quinpool. Definitely your kind of scene. They have a whole separate menu for vegetarians, in fact. Let me take you there, Saturday night, as my way of saying I'm sorry. And we don't even have to do It afterwards."

"No."

"Fine. We can do It afterwards if you really want."

"Go away, Paul." She reached over and flicked on her phone. An instant later, the tone of an incoming call went off in her headset. "Thank you calling Nova Scotia Tourism Information, this is Lynn," she sang by rote. The caller kept her busy for a good twenty minutes. But after finishing, Lynn saw that Paul had gone on a cafeteria run and

brought her back something, setting it on the corner of her desk without her noticing. A spinach samosa. Her favourite.

### The Diner

A filmmaker. That had been his dirty little ambition, she suddenly remembered. He wanted to be a filmmaker. This was what he had shared with the group during call-centre boot camp.

She lay in bed staring at her stucco ceiling, pleading for sleep, stroking Miles as he lay curled up on the pillow next to her. Lynn was trying to fight off the sensation she felt inside—it was like a shoreline crumbling into the sea from years of erosion. There were noisy, unfocused thoughts fighting for places to sit inside her brain. *Stand up to him, you spineless dolt ...leave her alone, Dad, just leave her the hell alone ... I'm not going back to school, I'm not! ... Nova Scotia Tourism Information, this is Lynn ... Nova Scotia, ye sea-bound coast ... 7,400 kilometres of shoreline and still not enough water to put out the fires that burned in my parents' house ...yes, yes, we have running water in our townlets ...* And the heaviest, most unwieldy of these thoughts: *My mother, my mom, could be dying ...*

And yet. A filmmaker. This is what she thought about the most. Paul's presence touched her between the eyes, and somewhere else as well. She lay there, trying very hard not to think about him. It was so stupid, a callous trap she wasn't going to fall into. Getting advances from a guy at the same time she was having a personal crisis. It was what Lynn's brother, Ray, might call a tired cliché. Ray was three years older than Lynn, had graduated from university at the top of his class two years ago, and was now married with a child. He lived in a small but impressive townhouse in a good neighbourhood, and

worked at the city paper as a journalist, fighting constant wars with tired clichés. Ray would enjoy picking apart this story: Lynn, secure in her ruts and routines, now faced an unspeakable fear, only to be rescued by a knight in the next cubicle. Awful, horrible stuff. And Lynn was determined not to get roped into such a hackneyed plot.

And yet, a filmmaker. She wondered about the status of that ambition, two years on. Had Paul abandoned it for the safety and regular work of the call centre? Or was he still scheming, still planning to make that one big dream come true? She climbed out of bed. Picked up the phone, hesitated, then dialed Paul's home number, which she had the foresight to swipe out of the personnel database after he had given her the samosa.

"Uhh ... *bonjour*?" he crooned, half asleep.

"Do you still want to be a filmmaker?" she asked.

"Who is this?"

"It's Lynn. Do you still want to be a filmmaker?"

He wasn't the least bit off guard by this question. "Absolutely. In fact, I've applied to a very prestigious film school in Montreal. I'm supposed to find out any week now whether I've been accepted for the fall."

"So you don't want to work in the call centre forever?"

"God no. Who the hell does? Lynn, why are you asking me this?"

"Is your offer to take me to dinner still?"

"Yes."

She smiled in spite of herself. "Alright. You're getting a chance with me, Paul. Blow it and you won't get a second." She hung up and crawled back into bed. Scooped Miles up her in arms.

They sat in a booth near the kitchen, the fragrance of curry and garlic a thick presence in the air. A globular red lamp, ensconced with yellow tassels, dangled from a cord over their table. The restaurant was a split level with walls covered in large intricate rugs that looked both ancient and *nouveau*. The floor beneath them was blood red, to match the lamps.

“Are you ready to order?” asked the middle-aged Pakistani waitress.

Lynn gave the menu a final inspection. “Yes, I’ll have the eggplant baingan-bharta.”

“Excellent choice. And for you, young man?”

“I guess I’ll have the karhah gosht.”

“The *karhai* gosht,” she and Lynn corrected him in unison. “Would you like it with chicken or mutton?”

Paul looked at Lynn, his thin, soft mouth arching into a smile. When she foisted no opinion one way or the other, he said to the waitress: “Better give me the mutton.” She nodded and took their menus, leaving them alone in the candlelight.

Lynn watched him as he sipped his wine. He was wearing a white silk shirt with black tie. His hair was spiky but not grotesquely so. He appeared to be checking out her dress—a denim frock she had thrown on at the last minute. She wondered if he liked it, before chastising herself for wondering if he liked it. He also seemed to be admiring her necklace again. “So you seem to know your way around Pakistani food pretty well,” he said.

“A little,” she replied, sipping her own wine. “My father spent some time in that part of the world about three years ago. He teaches comparative religion at the university and was on sabbatical over there. When he came home, he made the family go out to all these restaurants around town—Pakistani, East Indian, Afghan. I don’t think he expected me to like it as much as I did.”

“Ah, I see. You and he don’t usually see eye to eye?”

“Well, let’s just say we don’t have much in common. He ...” She wanted to push forward, tell Paul about Michael the academic and Michael the disciplinarian. Michael who had such fixed notions about the way lives were meant to unfold. Michael who kept his wife on a short leash. And to share with Paul her inner rage. “He’s just ... just a very stubborn man,” she said instead.

“Ah, so that’s where you get it from.”

His eyes were on her, his insufferably beautiful eyes, waiting for her cutting retort in the candlelight. But she said nothing. She would not be goaded.

When their meals came, they ate in silence for a while. Lynn carved up the large pieces of peeled eggplant and hoisted them into her mouth, rolled them around on her tongue, tasting their rich flavour. She watched as Paul took cautious, skeptical bites of his own meal before deciding that he liked it, then wolfing the drizzled chunks of mutton.

“Here, try some of this,” she said, and pointed a forkful of eggplant at his mouth. He took a taste, chewed slowly. “Interesting flavour. What is that I’m tasting?”

“Probably the coriander and cumin.”

“Coriander and what?”

“Cumin.”

"*Cumin*," he said. He appeared to enjoy the sound of the word more than its taste.

"Mmm, cumin ... Tell me, do you like cumin, Lynn?"

*Don't laugh don't laugh it'll only encourage him ...* "Settle down, cowboy," she said. "Why don't you tell me more about becoming a filmmaker? What's this school in Montreal supposed to be like?"

"Ah, let me tell you, Lynn, it's supposed to be great," he replied, growing animated. "Very light on theory, very heavy on practical. I plan to go there with my camcorder and spend two years straight just making shorts and documentaries. It's going to be *tres* sweet."

"What sort of films do you want to make?"

And so he talked about the large stack of scripts he kept in a trunk under his bed, about the hours and hours he spent writing and rewriting and honing his ideas. He talked about his plans for docu-dramas and mocu-dramas and little clay-mation vignettes. And then there was the topic for his ultimate film, his magnum opus.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Golf," he said.

"Golf?"

"Yes, golf," he replied. "Have you ever golfed? It's a sublime experience. *Le Quebecois* have some glorious courses. I want to make a different kind of film, like an anthology. It's going to be this mixed bag of things: fictional stories, true stories, interviews, confessionals, everything. And it's all going to be about golf."

"Golf," she said. "I never pictured you as a big golfer."

They ordered another bottle of wine. With tongue sufficiently loosened, Paul leaned in towards Lynn and said: "I have to ask you this question, cuz if I don't ask I'll feel like a putz, especially now that I've told you all about ..." and he hiccuped from the wine, "about all my films. What do *you* want to do, you know, with your life? I'm assuming you don't wanna work in the stupid call centre forever."

She gulped her own wine, felt its warmth spread through her cheeks. "I like working in the call centre. It's easy, nobody hassles me, there's always plenty of hours, especially in the summer, and it pays me enough to live on my own."

"But c'mon, Lynn, what are you passionate about? What keeps you awake at night? I spend most of my time fantasizing about taking the world by storm with my golf movie. What do you fantasize about?"

"Never, ever marrying a man like my father. *That*, Paul, is about it."

"Huh. I wonder how that makes your mom feel?"

"My mom? Well, she ..." *She could be dying with cancer*, she wanted to tell him. *She could be really sick and dying and I need to talk about it, Paul. I'm really afraid ...* He waited for her to go on. Lynn gulped her wine again. "My mom is living with the choices she's made. And so am I. I just ... I just want to be happy ... but I don't want to ... you know ... *rely* on anyone else for that happiness, like she does with Dad. I want to go it on my own ... my own ..." The wine felt thick in her blood. "I don't know what I'm saying," she said. "Let's just... just eat our meals..."

"Okay," he replied, and took another bite of his mutton. He nodded at her plate.

"How's it cumin?"

"You're not funny."

“Yes I am.”

She polished off her wine and poured herself another glass. *Okay Paul*, she thought, *I guess I have to start admitting you are.*

They stood in the lobby of her building. She had her key halfway into the security door, her body turned at an angle to face him. “Thank you for the meal,” she slurred. “I hope you don’t think me *too* vegetarian.”

“I hope you don’t think me too much of a meat eater.” He grinned.

She grinned back. “Hey, you can eat whatever you want. I don’t mind...”

“You don’t?” And suddenly stepped towards her, pressing his body into hers. His movement was so sudden that she had to gasp. “The mutton wasn’t bad,” he said, leaning in. Bright blues watching her mouth. “But I suspect some things taste better than others.” His accent turned each word into a soft, gentle clip.

When her mouth fell open to speak, perhaps to dissuade him from this, perhaps to encourage him, he leaned in and kissed her. His mouth, strong yet soft, gripped hers and parted her lips. She kissed him back, tasting coriander between them. She threw the door open and pulled him inside. They stumbled down the hall to her apartment, came crashing in and turned on the lights long enough to lock Miles in the bathroom. Then onto her bed, rolling, fumbling. She did not stop him when he slid the frock gingerly off her. His mouth moved down her body while his crisp blue eyes held her gaze.

“Lynn ...” he whispered. “Let me ... will you let me ... do it ...”

She turned her eyes up to the stucco ceiling. “Eat,” she said. “Just eat ... nothing else for now ... okay?”

“Eat?” he asked, moving lower.

“Eat,” she answered.

And so he did.

### The dervish

She began to realize his life was made up of compiled stories, layered one on top of the other. Lynn recognized the disparate nature of the facts and reminisces he shared with her. He appeared to have lived several lives and no life at all. The stints at university. The trips to Europe. The nights he and the boys he lived with—other spiky-haired lads in cargo pants and shiny shirts—closed out the city’s bars and dance clubs. But there was also his loneliness. This is what she thought: Paul is a profoundly lonesome guy, and *that* story doesn’t seem to fit in with the others. His early-morning hours hunched over a laptop, pounding out teleplay after teleplay for movies he may or may not make. Scripts he wouldn’t let her read. The late nights filming with deliberate anonymity the sights and smells of the downtown as drunken bar-goers staggered through streets searching for romance and cheap pizza. The long hours when he was blocked and couldn’t think of a single idea, followed by frantic phone calls to friends for constant reassurance.

In the two weeks following their date, Lynn heard these stories from him around her cubicle wall, and it made her wonder if all lives were not formed this way, through a compilation of conflicting narratives. The two of them went out again, and then again, but always with a group from the call centre and never alone. Lynn hated socializing with her co-workers, but was afraid of what would happen if she had Paul to herself. Not so much them doing it (in his bolder moments, he was able to exact that subtle sexual

pressure on her that seemed hot-wired into the male brain), since she felt that doing It with Paul was an inevitability. But she was afraid that if he got her alone, he would come after *her* compiled stories. The messy, garbled tales and anxieties that made little or no sense to her, let alone anyone else. So she would concoct large, elaborate excuses why she couldn't spend an evening on his couch with a rented movie, or go for a stroll through Point Pleasant.

This was what she couldn't share with him:

*My father, Michael, ran our household with an iron fist. There's no better way to put it. We were not to deviate from his ideas of right and wrong. Children were to be seen and not heard, raised to work hard and have ambitions, and go to university, find a spouse, buy a house. My brother Ray got that right, but I didn't. And mother only existed to serve Dad's needs and the needs of the house, and if anything went wrong, if anything slipped off the rails even just a little bit, the onus fell completely on her. He was unrelenting when he felt she was acting in anyone's interest other than his. They would fight, and she would always lose. And do you know what she'd do afterwards? Why, she would sit at the table in our sunken dining room, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Eyes red and leaking, lips quivering after each sorrowful puff. No sooner would she crush out one cigarette than she would light up another, until her ashtray, that old lopsided one Ray had made for her in shop class, began overflowing with ash. And sometimes, when I was little, I'd walk up to her when she was crying, and she'd take me onto her narrow lap. "Why does he do it, Lynny?" she would ask. "Tell me why he does it." And because I was little, I shouldn't have known why ... even though ... even though I was pretty sure that I did ...*

She sat on her bed, stroking Miles, with the phone pinned between her ear and shoulder after dialing the house. When he answered, she didn't bother hanging up.

"Hi, is Mom there?"

"Lynn? Hi. No, she's not. I'm not sure where she went."

This caught her a little off guard. It was unusual for him not to know exactly where Carolyn was at all times. *He's changed, Lynny ... if you'd only move home, you'd see for yourself ...*

"I just wanted to wish her luck with her doctor's appointment tomorrow. And to remind her to call me and let me know how it went."

"Oh, I'm sure she will. Say, how are things with you, anyway? It feels like forever since we've talked."

"Things are fine, Dad. Anyway, I have to run. Tell Mom-"

"Lynn?"

"Yes?" *Here it comes, his long harangue about the dead-end existence of call centre employment, the black hole I've been sucked into.*

"She didn't say anything to you about her appointment, did she? She's been coughing like crazy the last little while, and I get the feeling she's worried. But she hasn't said boo about it. Did she talk you at all?"

*He has changed, Lynn. You should see him now. Really, ever since he got back from central Asia, he's a different man. I think being over there made him appreciate us a lot more. You should talk to him. He wants to be something more to you than what he is; he just doesn't know how to go about it. And you should be something more to him, too. You should at least try to be SOMETHING for somebody else ...*

“Not a word, Dad. Now I really have to go. I’ll talk to you later.” She hung up before he could say anything else, and pressed her hands into her face.

The phone rang. She was still shaking when she finally decided to answer.

“Hello.”

“*Bonjour, mon petite poulet.*”

She sighed, thought about crying her guts out to Paul then, just letting all her little narratives come pouring out of her, but decided to laugh instead. “Hello there.”

“Listen, I thought I’d pass along a little 4-1-1 to your fine self. Me and the boys are throwing a house party here Friday night. It’s going to be a hell of a bash.”

“That so?”

“Now I realize hanging out *avec* people you don’t know isn’t really your scene. But I thought you’d like to come anyway.”

“Thanks, Paul. I’d love to.”

“Really? You mean it? Sure you won’t be busy throwing a birthday party for your cat or something?”

“Oh shut up,” she laughed. “You’re not funny.”

“Yes I am.”

A calm sigh. “Yes you are.”

\*

Lynn stood in front of the mirror, staring at the clothes she had picked out as they hugged her body: A pair of cut-off jeans (May had turned into June, the weather finally warm enough for shorts) and a grotesquely skimpy halter top she found hiding at the bottom of her bureau. Her body wasn’t really fat, just kind of soft, doughy, without

angles. She wished she could see it as Paul might. One second, she imagined his blue eyes taking a delicious walk all over her, his thin lips curling into a smile of approval. The next second she saw him gulping with revulsion at her pale skin and chubby rolls, and making some crack at her in French. *You realize*, she thought, *that dressing for the specific approval of one person is fraught with trouble*. She took a hard, honest look at herself in the mirror. The halter top wasn't that flattering at all. Revealing, but not flattering. It wasn't designed for a body with these proportions. And in one crystalline moment, she accepted that the top made her look like twenty pounds of meat stuffed into a five-pound bag. So she changed into a light skirt and sleeveless blouse.

She made it to Paul's place fashionably early, toting a bottle of wine. He and five other guys lived in a three-storey house near the university. It was like most of the other houses that surrounded the campus—old and run down, with drooping porches and chipped paint. Yet possessing a kind of Bohemian charm popular among students and young professionals looking for low rent. She arrived to find the porch door open to a hallway that led into the living room. The *thump-thump-thump* of dance music reverberated off the plaster walls, competing with the sounds of conversation and glasses clinking with liquor. Though it was early, Lynn saw that the living room and hall were packed with people. They looked like they had been there all day, drinking and talking and whooping it up. She squeezed past them as she came in, nodding to the odd person she thought she recognized.

“Have you seen Paul?” she asked someone at random.

“Nope, sorry. But I just got here myself. He should be around somewhere.”

She passed through the living room towards the kitchen, nodding to strangers. She brushed up against a thin girl with cornstalk hair and a Mike's Hard Lemonade in her hand.

"Hi, have you seen Paul?"

"Who's Paul? Sorry, I don't know anyone here either."

The kitchen had a warped white floor, several cupboards with missing doors, and a pine table covered in a spread of snacks. Lynn removed her wine from its brown paper bag and looked around for an opener and a glass.

"Are you looking for Paul?" asked a guy coming into the kitchen just then, clutching a two-four of Keith's in his hand. He set it down with a rattle and extended his hand to Lynn. "I'm Josh, one of his roommates."

"Hi, Josh. Yeah, have you seen him?"

"You know, it's the strangest thing. He came home about an hour ago, saw that there was mail for him on the counter, took it up to his room, and nobody has seen him since. He gets like this sometimes, you know—a real party-pooper."

"Where's his room?"

"Upstairs. Second door on the left."

She grabbed her wine and an opener.

When she found where he was, she knocked lightly on the door before slipping in. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the bed, with an open manila envelope between his legs. Paul's room had a dusty hardwood floor and white walls. A large Nova Scotia flag was pinned up over his desk. His golf bag leaned against one corner. In an

open closet she could see stacks upon stacks of VHS tapes lined up in a small library. His camcorder rested on a tripod, overlooking the room like a guardian.

“I didn’t get in,” he said, fiddling with the envelope between his legs. “They ... they turned down my application.”

She went over, sat down next to him, uncorked the wine bottle, and handed it over. He took a swig, then passed it back. She swallowed a mouthful, tasting his saliva on the rim and not minding in the least. He began talking, words tripping over themselves as they came out. First, full of spite and rage and dismissal: *Stupid film school wouldn't know talent if it bit them on the arse ... who the fuck needs them anyway? ...* Followed by wallowing self pity: *I'm so stupid, Lynn, a stupid bloody hack who can't make a film that anyone wants to watch, and I'll have to work in that stupid call centre for the rest of my stupid life.* He wept. He bellowed. He pleaded. He demanded she get rid of the wine before he got too drunk, then grabbed it from her and chugged more of it down. All the while, she played with the spiky hair on top of his head, rubbed his shoulders and kissed his neck. Listened to every word he said and reassured him with things he wanted to hear. And when he rested his head on her chest, she reached down and patted his knee. When he nuzzled against her, she moved her hand up to his thigh. And when his tongue, stiff and nimble and clever, slipped between the flaps of her blouse and over the edge of her bra to the soft flesh beneath, she moved her hand up to the front of his pants and began working on the zipper.

The walls muffled the thumping music downstairs, the voices beyond them distant and unimportant. His bed was small but clean. She clutched at him, wanting to feel his gravity press her into the mattress as deep as she would go. She hastily unbuttoned his

shirt, pulled it apart to expose his thin, hard chest. Tasted his nipple, his mouth, his hair. Her own flesh a mottle of pink and white, the wine burning in her blood as her bra and skirt found the floor. As she arched her back up and his mouth widened over her, she became a willful prisoner to her own body. The feel of spreading membranes, the clear unmistakable claw of arousal gripping her between the legs, the breath she couldn't catch in her lungs. She pulled Paul down and brought him to her with her hand.

"Lynn," he whispered. "Lynn, just, take it slow for a sec ... just for a sec..."

"Why's that, cowboy?" she purred.

He pushed his forehead into hers. "It's actually ... actually my first time ... first time, you know, doing it."

She smiled up at him. Kissed his mouth. "Of course it is," she said, before steering him into her.

And she found herself jubilant, almost airy, when she stumbled home to her apartment the next morning. There was the whorish ache of a wine hangover throbbing in her temples, and a rickety stiffness in her back from sharing Paul's cramped bed. Yet she felt like she could do anything, walk on water or jump over the moon. She came in the door, set her keys carefully on the counter, and scooped up Miles for a big hug. "Mommy got laid last night, baby!" She went over and threw open her window, not caring about the smells emanating from the alley, and let the Saturday morning sunshine flood in.

She was thinking about him and everything he had been. So playful and mild and funny and deliberate and skilled and awkward and beautiful and ugly. He was both the

best and worst lover she ever had. And in the end, he simply lay there, staring at her, happy and full of himself, yet introspective. Looking ... well ... saved.

There was a message on her machine. Lynn pressed the button, and her mother's frantic voice filled the apartment. "Lynn, it's Mom. I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you Thursday after my appointment, but ... your father and I, we ... we don't know how to tell you this ..." And she began weeping. "Oh Lynny, call the house as soon as you can ... I'm really, really sick, Lynny ... I'm really really sick ..."

Lynn snatched the phone out of its cradle, pressed it to her heart, squeezed her eyes shut. How could she have possibly forgotten about her mother's appointment? She grew fearful and angry. Fearful of facing the unimaginable possibility of a world without her mother; angry that it was those cigarettes, those hundreds of cigarettes smoked in weepy defiance after all those fights with her father, that had done this to her. And Lynn decided that if he answered, she was just going to scream at him: *YOU did this ... you DID this ...you did THIS to her...*

As she dialed the numbers and waited for someone to answer, all of her thoughts gave in to that rage, all of her little stories turned impermeable, and she knew that she would never, ever, sleep with Paul again.

## COSMOGONY

*Half a world away from you, my love ...*

Michael remembered thinking these words while stopping to rest on a dusty hot Afghanistan road to lift his canteen to his lips. Women young and old with their hijabs pulled tightly over their faces passed him on their way to market. The fluttering robes, the dark olive faces, the slouching march of diffidence. A stark contrast to the image of his wife, who at that moment would have been asleep in the cool confines of their Canadian bedroom. Michael sat on a stone bench in Kabul under a painfully blue sky to sip his water and watch the Muslim world. He took out a notepad, tried to write something, a poignant insight, a specific detail—anything that would further his research. But he couldn't. Though he was only going to be there for three months, he knew he'd barely survive it. He felt homesickness crawl through his insides like moisture creeping into an attic. And imagined just then the gaping space between he and his Carolyn, and thought: *Half a world away from you, my love.*

The three-month sabbatical in Afghanistan taught Dr. Michael Macpherson about longing. He came home to his old life in Halifax, his position at the university, his house, his cars. He also came home to discover something new about his wife. She had a presence that made him long for her presence. In the days and weeks after his return, he found himself missing her, even when she was in the next room folding tea towels. Mornings he surprised her by making his own tea and then bringing her the first cup in bed. Late at night, sprawled head to foot on the couch watching Letterman, he amused

her by playing with her toes, watched her smile with quirky curiosity as she asked: What are you *doing* down there?

That was then. This is now. Carolyn is no longer half a world away. No 28-hour flight can deliver him to her. As emphatically as his mind can state it, Michael knows the truth: she is dead.

He never realized there was such an art to cooking a meal. He had watched Carolyn do this for years and never understood the beauty of it, the timing. Standing at the place in the kitchen where his wife often stood, Michael stirred a wide pan of bubbling tomato sauce, sprinkled in some oregano, wondered if his concoction needed another pinch of salt. The Parmesan cheese he had ground by hand sat in a pile at the ready, and he would sprinkle some in at just the right time for it to melt but not too much. He placed the lid over the sauce and looked at his watch. *Don't put on the pasta just yet*, he told himself. *You have to fight the temptation to rush. The road to perfection (and this meal must be perfect) is paved with good timing.*

Going to the open cupboard, he lifted four plates off the stack and carried them down into the sunken dining room. He placed one at each of the four ends of the glass and iron table before deciding on the best place to put Cynthia. The inside chair seemed about right. He picked up the booster seat he had brought down from the attic (so old, so full of soggy memories) and placed it on the chair. Excellent. She would love sitting eye level with the grown-ups.

A ding at the oven, finally pre-heated enough to put the garlic bread on. Michael hurried back into the kitchen, popped open the freezer, and took out the long tube of

wrapped tinfoil. Yanking open the oven door, he placed the bread on the top rack, adjusted it length wise, then back to the way it was, moved it to what he thought was closer to the centre of the oven, then moved it back. Satisfied, he closed the door and set the timer for 20 minutes. *Now you can put on the pasta*, he instructed himself, and brought down a pot from one of the shelves.

*Okay, okay, am I forgetting anything?* he thought when he took a moment to breathe. *Not many chances to do this, so I have to do it right.* He ran a quick checklist in his head: Ray, his son, liked Alexander Keith's beer, so Michael had some cooling in the bottom of the fridge. Little Cynthia would be excitable at first, but like any four-year-old's her attention span would wane, so Michael had a box of old faded toys (also from the attic) waiting for her in the living room. As for Lynn, his daughter, he had no clue how to make this special for her. She was a vegetarian—one of the few things he knew about her for sure—so he loaded the tomato sauce with big Portobello mushrooms instead of meat. She may not notice, or say anything if she did, but Michael didn't know what more he could do to please her.

The crunch of tires on his driveway came suddenly through the open window, and Michael went over and pulled back the curtain to see Ray's Lumina rumbling in. Taking a deep breath, he moved towards the front entry to be there when his son and granddaughter came through the door. *Okay, it's show time*, he thought.

Ray put his car into park, turned off the engine, and looked at his daughter strapped into the passenger seat across from him. She had a Sailor Moon colouring book in her lap and was diligently giving her heroine green hair. "Cynthia, honey," he said, and

she looked up at him with her mother's smoky grey eyes. "Remember what we talked about before. You have to be on your best behaviour at Granddad's, 'kay? You give him a great big hug when we go in there."

"I will," she replied. "Can I take my book in with me?"

"Of course."

Ray was relieved to see that little sister's car wasn't in the driveway yet. Lynn had called him at the office two days earlier, insisting that he and Cynthia arrive before she did. *Please don't be late*, she had begged. *I don't want to be sitting in there for 20 minutes trying to make conversation with him. Please, Ray, make sure you get there first.* She'd been so frantic, so relentless, and he didn't bother trying to assuage her fears. He had given up trying to change how she saw their father.

He and Cynthia walked hand and hand, father and daughter, up the walkway to the door. "Anybody home?" he called out as he popped it open. His father was in the front entry, grey beard trimmed neatly around his jaw line, a Polo dress shirt hugging the protuberant paunch of his stomach.

"Granddad!" Cynthia exclaimed, and ran into Michael's open arms. Ray watched his father scoop her up and plant a precision kiss on her pink cheek. "How's my girl?" he asked, smiling an emperor's smile, and she nodded vigorously, her non-verbal way of saying: I'm doing fine, thanks. He set her down before extending a hand to his son. Ray took it, and the two men shared what could only be described as a Moment Of Knowing. The lock of eyes, the sense that they had finally, after 25 years, found a common ground. They were comrades in grief.

“God it’s good to see you, pal,” his father said, reverting to Ray’s childhood nickname as he pumped his arm up and down.

“Boy, something smells good in here,” Ray replied. “I hope you didn’t go to too much trouble for us, Dad.”

This is what Ray and Michael have in common: They have both lost wives. If you could measure male grief, if you could send secret probes into the hearts of men (real men, who hid, denied, lied about, glossed over, or sucked up every emotion that crossed the stratosphere of their beings) then perhaps you’d discover that Ray has suffered more than his father. He has, after all, lost both his mother and his wife within a year of each other. What’s more, he’s left with a little girl who will never know her mommy (*she was an absolute jewel, sweetheart ...*), who must be reminded that Mommy is living with the angels, that she is Gone and she’s Never Coming Back.

At his mother’s wake, Ray attempted to hug his father for the first time in years. Michael was standing in one corner of the funeral parlour, alone for a rare, prized moment, chewing his lips in a failed effort not to cry. Ray came up beside him and wrapped a cautious arm around his shoulders, but his father froze, stiff as a post. Eventually, Ray let his arm drop, felt more awkward than he ever had in his life, and retreated back to the other side of the parlour to his wife Jasmine’s awaiting hand.

At Jasmine’s funeral, Ray felt like something was pulling him apart from the inside out, that his body was being quartered by unseen horses. His father wouldn’t touch him, couldn’t find any words to comfort him, even though he’d been through the exact same thing a year earlier. Later, Ray would silently seethe over this. He wasn’t about to

be ashamed of his grief, ashamed of the shock that consumed him (he still remembers the cop on his front step, saying with early evening dignity: son, there's been an accident ...). He hated that his father made him feel self-conscious for not hiding his anguish. *Why are you like this?* he wanted to scream at him. *Do you really think this makes you a bigger man? Don't you realize that this cold, inflexible mindset is why you have no relationship with your daughter, why your wife died without hearing all the hundreds of kind, loving things you should've told her? So don't think for a second that because I'm 25 and you're 50 that you're twice the man I am. At least I knew who my wife was ...*

All water under the bridge. Or perhaps, all pasta in the boiling pot, softening up and becoming bendable. Michael hung up their coats and then let Cynthia lead him over to the couch in the living room to show him her colouring book. Ray watched his father take perfunctory interest in Cynthia's private universe before he looked up and said: "Oh Ray, there's beer in the fridge. Go fetch yourself one." Ray went into the kitchen to find his father's masterpiece, the culinary culmination of everything he'd learned since his wife died, residing on the burners of the stove.

"Dad, looks like your pasta is about to boil over," he called out.

"Just turn down the burner and give it a stir, would you," Michael replied, the sudden expert.

Lynn was on the cusp of an anxiety attack. Pulling up behind Ray's Lumina in her father's driveway, she strangled the wheel of her battered Honda as if barrelling down some highway, uncontrollably, at 200 miles an hour. *Deep breaths*, she thought as she turned off the engine. *Deep breaths. You can do this. You can make it. You're just here*

*for a meal and some cursory conversation (nice weather, how's the job, seeing anyone?) and at the earliest point when it's polite to leave, you will. Then you won't have to deal with him again for another six or nine or 18 months.*

So this was Lynn stepping out of her car: swaddled in a denim dress that goes from shoulder to ankle, mahogany hair as shiny as a new pipe, a rope of beads hanging loosely around her neck. To most of her family she was the anomaly: an unflinching feminist, a lover and defender of mothers, daughters, wives, sisters. An advocate in absentia. But recently, she has started to become more like her mother (whom she still has trouble accepting is gone) than she'll ever admit to. Lynn's carefully crafted stratagem, her military maneuvering to avoid at all costs the life her mother was saddled with, has hit an unexpected snag: Ray.

She felt this great, tectonic shift come over her, the first time she saw her brother the widower, her brother the single dad. Who knew a man could be a little girl's entire world? He was not only Cynthia's provider and disciplinarian, but now (with Jasmine gone) also playmate, teammate, best friend. One day, over wine, Lynn found herself telling him: "You know, Ray, if I do marry, not that I'm saying I ever will, but I want it to be to a guy like you. I want to have my own Daddy's Little Girl."

Going up the walkway, Lynn realized not for the first time that her father's house was no longer her house, no longer a home to her at all. Forcing herself up to the door, she decided to ring the bell, wishing quietly that her mother could answer instead, with her black hair tucked behind her ears, wiping her hands on her apron before reaching for a hug. Instead, the door swung open with a loud crack and there he was, grinning his big

fake stupid grin she had seen too many times before and spreading his arms in a lame attempt at affection.

“Well hello my dear,” he said. Lynn had mastered the art of hugging her father while at the same time pushing him away. “Hi Pop,” she replied. “Good to see you.”

This is what Lynn knows and despises about her father: He always demanded things A Certain Way, and married his wife because she understood this. Even when he was completing his PhD and Carolyn had to work 60-hour weeks packing groceries at the Sobeys to support them, Mother still made sure everything was A Certain Way. Their clothes, family vacations, behaviour while visiting relatives, but also: ambitions, morals, social standing, and the right amount of milk in Michael’s tea. Everything had to be A Certain Way, and nothing was exempt, nothing was autonomous from his perceptions of right and wrong. Small gaffes were never small gaffes; they were indicative of something larger that would inevitably rip the family apart if left unchecked by the swift and severe hand of fatherly justice. And it was severe. Lynn had never heard her father speak a single sentence that was both kind and sincere; she could not recall four consecutive days of peace in that house the entire time she was growing up. She had watched with pitying detachment as her mother clawed her way through three decades under this regime; and now, at 22, Lynn realized: That Life Must Never Become My Life.

This is what Lynn does not know about her father: After spending three months on a sabbatical in Afghanistan in 1995, seeing the most intricate horrors—stories and lives and burned-out tanks and women crushed under men, things he would never be able to articulate to anyone, certainly not to the likes of his children—he came back so

homesick for his wife that he would have her Any Way. And realized that the carefully constructed façade he had gone to such efforts to built meant nothing, absolutely nothing. What did matter was her laugh, the way she would giggle at something ridiculous she heard on the television; or the look of her tanned, shapely arms reaching out of the shower for a towel; or the playful way she crossed her eyes whenever she smiled at children. He had become a sponge for all things Carolyn, finally seeing her in ways he would never be able to un-see again. Michael enjoyed four years of this before the cancer came to pick his wife apart piece by piece. And then she was gone.

“Ray, pal, another beer?”

“Nah Dad, I’m fine really. I’ll just have some of this water.”

“How about you, Lynn? Another glass of wine?”

“Oh no thanks, Dad. I am driving later.”

“Cynthia, sweetheart, you want some more spaghetti I can tell. Here, let me take your plate-”

“Dad, please, she’s fine. Just sit and relax. We’re all happy. Take a load off.”

But Michael was already moving with Cynthia’s plate back up to the kitchen, where he grabbed the silver tongs and began dumping more of the stringy white pasta onto her plate. He scooped some of the rich red sauce on top before calling out:

“Sure I can’t get you guys something while I’m up?”

“We’re fine, Dad,” Lynn pressed. “Just come sit before your dinner gets cold.”

Michael carried Cynthia’s plate down and put it in front of her before resuming his place at the head of the table. He remembered his wife like this all the time, always up

and down from the dinner table, fetching people this, refilling that, stopping just long enough to take squirrel bites at her own small portion of food. He wondered if she too had lived with this anxiety to please and make sure everyone had what he or she needed. No, that wasn't quite true. He didn't wonder if she had lived with this; he *knew* that she had. But he did wonder about her motivations. Did she have the same slow-creeping fear that if things weren't done just right it would reflect badly on her? Did she make herself sick trying to ignite every banal little moment into a flaming memory they would cherish forever? Did she do this and that and the other thing out of fear of being alone? He didn't think so. What *had* driven his wife to please, to nurture, to anchor the people she cared about? How had she done this, lived like this, for so long?

"So there's something I'd like to talk to you both about," Michael began, and saw his children's eyes turn up at him with mild suspicion. "Now don't go thinking I invited you here with some ulterior motive. Just relax. I had an idea about something, is all."

Ray looked genuinely curious. Lynn looked like she was ready to crawl under the table and hide. "What is it?" Ray asked.

"Granddad," Cynthia interrupted meekly, tugging at the sleeve of Michael's shirt. "Did I, um, show you the thing I drew in my Sailor Moon book?"

"Cynthia, sweetie, Granddad's talking," Michael replied, patting her arm away before returning his attention to Ray and Lynn. "I wanted to let you know that I bought a beach house up on the Eastern shore. It's a really nice spot, overlooking the ocean. It's got three bedrooms, a wonderful deck, lots of lawn space. I was thinking we could start a new tradition."

“What kind of tradition?” Lynn asked. Cynthia hopped down from the booster seat and went into the living room to fetch her colouring book off the couch.

“Since I’m going to be spending most of my summers there,” Michael continued, “I thought maybe on the weekends you two could join me. Ray, there’s plenty of neighbourhood kids for Cynthia to play with. Lynn, you’re welcome to bring along a friend or your cat or whatever.”

With Sailor Moon book in hand, Cynthia climbed up into Michael’s lap and began flipping through the colourful pages until she reached the back cover. “See what I drew before supper, Granddad.”

Lynn and Ray glanced at each other, shifted awkwardly in their chairs. Then Lynn said: “The call centre only gives me one weekend off a month, Dad. And usually that one’s pretty busy. I don’t think I could make it very often.”

“Granddad, look at what I *drew* ...”

“Well you could come whenever you have the time,” Michael replied. “I was only thinking that we could use a new tradition in this family. With your mother gone, I think it’s important the three of us spend more time together.”

“Granddad, *look*.”

“I agree, Dad,” Ray said. “But it’s just a logistical thing. I’m working a lot more now and I was hoping to put Cynthia in kid’s camp this year. I’m sure we could make it up once or twice over the summer, but every weekend-”

“Look now, I never said every weekend,” Michael retorted. “Honestly, I just want you two to put a little effort into us being together.”

“Granddad, *look!*”

“Cynthia, I am talking, *please*.”

Silence. Glossy eyes. A four-year-old face trying so hard to be brave, trying so hard not to cry in front of the grown-ups. In her lap, on the white back cover of her colouring book, were six stick figures drawn in crayon, labelled: Mommy, Daddy, Linnn, Granddaddy, Grammie-grams, Me. Below their stick figure legs, spirals of white clouds. Above their stick figure heads, stars and angels. Six people, together in a universe created by a four year old, up in the place where the Mommies are, up with the angels.

“Why don’t you come show *me* what you drew,” Lynn said, patting her knee. The little girl marched solemnly, shamefully around the table and climbed into her aunt’s lap.

“Anyway, why don’t the two of you think it over,” Michael finished, and helped himself to another slice of garlic bread.

They left, and Michael never got a straight answer. He stood in the door and waved as they pulled down the drive towards the highway that would return them to their own lives. Later, he took the untouched toys and the booster seat back up to the attic. As he stood in the dim light of the room among his boxed-up memories, Michael realized something he couldn’t quite articulate. But if he could, it might have gone something like this: Grief is the origin of all love. At the beginning of the universe (or, at least, the beginning of all human relations) grief came before love. In the beginning, we never loved what we assumed would always be there; it wasn’t until we faced the bloody, gaping hole of something lost that we realized the emotions we should’ve felt to begin with. Traditions provide us with illusions of permanence, but in the end we learn that nothing is permanent. And so we love. And the greatest lie of all is that we grieve

because we love, when really we love because of our knowledge of grief, and inevitable journey towards it.

That night, Michael slept alone in a bed he used to share with his wife, in a house he used to share with his children. And dreamed of the wide, savage lands of Afghanistan.

## AFTERWORD

It's curious, this obsession I've recently developed with the concept of sound. As a writer, I find I cannot rely as much on that standard and limiting concept of the all-seeing *eye* in narrative, the flickering cinematic feast that strikes a reader at the visual level. Don't get me wrong: I love reading (and writing) good, solid cinematic prose. It pleases me when someone says "God, I could just *see* that scene when I was reading it", and I get downright giddy if they're talking about a piece of mine. Yet the predominant sense that the stories in this collection utilize is sound, not sight. The eye is there, but it plays a supporting role to the ear. Throughout the writing process, it has felt like the kernel and execution of my best ideas came as a result of my *hearing* something. This thesis has pushed me beyond the role of ocular observer to that of an acute listener. I think in terms of sound now. Social psychology (i.e. the various ways that thoughts, feelings and behaviours are influenced by the real, imagined or implied influence of other people), which these stories inevitably deal with, is all about what one hears, what people tell you about themselves.

Sound is all over these stories. It is sound that punctuates the severity of Carolyn's illness as she coughs up a wad of phlegm in the doctor's office ("[she] let it fly onto the tiled floor. It landed with the sound of a marble bouncing just once"). It is the sound of a poker jabbing into the wood-burning stove that stirs the teenaged Michael from sleep when his father wants him up. Ray's unconventional dream manifests itself in sound—it is a voice describing the visuals in his head, and not the visuals themselves. Lynn spends 10 hours a day working in a dull, cramped call centre, her only contact with the outside world coming to her via the sounds that crackle through her headset. And the

conflict that rages in the Macpherson household, the war that sets it on fire, comes in the form of arguments, harsh words spoken, competing voices struggling to be heard.

My reliance on the ear is due to the stories' interconnection. Throughout my studies in literature and writing during the last two years (and in particular, in a graduate seminar I took called "The Eye and the Ear"), it has come to my attention that an all-seeing *eye* in narrative is tantamount to an all-seeing *I*. Once again, this is not a reality that particularly distresses me. Composition is and has always been for me a strictly individualistic, solipsistic, solitary activity where I'm in charge. I wouldn't do it if it were any other way. I love bossing characters around. When writing in the third person, I do editorialize and pass judgment on my characters. When I'm writing in the first person, my narrator does become the sole vessel by which the reader comes in contact with my fictional world. Short stories don't necessarily need an all-seeing "eye/I" to be autonomous, but they definitely need a strong and well-developed identity, based mostly on authorial egoism. And these stories strive for that kind of autonomous nature. I want each piece to be a whole thing, capable of standing on its own, and I think it's naïve to deny the role that an individualistic eye/I plays in that.

Yet, these stories are trying to be something more than just whole articles. Taken together, they form an interconnected collection of narratives. Something is meant to be gained by reading them together while respecting their unity as individuals. This can include: a nuance of character (in "Cosmogony", we're free to assume that Lynn and Michael have nothing in common, though it becomes apparent in "Advocate in Absentia" that they are actually quite similar); certain thematic imagery (we don't really have to question Carolyn's description of her cancerous lungs as a house on fire—it's as

plausible as anything, I suppose—but it ties in nicely with Ray’s bizarre dream two stories over); or even an extrapolation of nonessential plot points (as a singular piece, “Get Your Affairs In Order” might leave us curious as to how young Lynn will grow to cope with the cruelty she witnesses, and the rest of the collection shows us). The overriding element that transcends this individual unity without compromising it is what the ear captures. Sound, at least in my context of composing these stories, is a communal experience. It is shared in a way that sight cannot be. That’s not to say that specific “sounds” are shared between all the characters all the time; nor does it mean that none of the characters “see” the exact same thing. It just means that sight as a concept is internalized and personalized, whereas sound is outward and public, resonating across the expanse of all five stories.

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The conventions of the interconnected short story collection have played a huge role in my execution of this technique. I have read dozens of short story collections in preparation for this essay, many of which were labeled as interconnected. The vast majority of the stories in these collections were previously published in journals or magazines, and I suppose that’s a testament to their ability to stand on their own. And like the components of my thesis, these stories use a particular element to create a sense of interconnection when brought together in an anthology.

Sometimes, that element is concrete. The stories in Rohinton Mistry’s *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, for example, are set in the same apartment building in India. Characters from one piece make cameo appearances in another, and often their tales overlap. In *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Alice Munro puts her protagonist, Rose, through a strictly

chronological narrative over the course of 10 short stories. The trick here is that each piece maintains its independence despite its chronological relationship with the other stories; in that way, the work remains within the realm of an anthology, as opposed to a more traditional novel. Conversely, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, set during the Vietnam war, is deliberately masking what it wants to be. Some reviewers refer to it as a novel; others refer to it as a short story collection. Parts of it are pure fiction, while others read like memoir writing (the protagonist in several pieces is the author himself, Tim O'Brien—a soldier in Vietnam in 1968). I was impressed with how this work avoided telling its stories in chronological order, and was also impressed with its “meta-narrative” techniques; O'Brien interjects in places, swearing to the authenticity of certain events, then undermines that authenticity in other places, all in the name of blurring the lines between fiction and memoir. Yet, though some of the stories were previously published in magazines, there are several pieces (or chapters, or vignettes, or whatever they are) that don't stand up on their own as autonomous articles. These were usually short pieces, a few pages each, that acted as bridges between larger, more autonomous narratives.

I wanted to do something different. Like many writers, I tend to write stories that I would want to read myself but can't find written with the characters, themes, style, structure or technique that appeal to me. I didn't want *This House Has Its Politics* to be a collection of (relatively) unrelated short stories, like, say, Alistair MacLeod's *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. I didn't want it to be a collection of “loosely” related stories, like Nancy Lee's *Dead Girls*. I didn't want it to be a novella, told with linear but co-dependent chapters; nor did I want it made up of independent stories told in chronological

order, like in *Who Do You Think You Are?*. And I didn't want to have some of the stories related and others not, like in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Man Descending*. What I did want was a collection that was a "family" of short stories, related to each other in the truest sense. I wanted these pieces to be strong, autonomous stories capable of standing on their own, yet related to the other stories in the collection, and dependent on them to bring out their depths and richer meanings. I wanted each story to run a double life: an independent one, disengaged from its role in a larger chronology or thematic space in relation to the other stories, and a co-dependent life, actually aware of its effects on the other stories, and their effects on it.

Of course, I'm deliberately intending this form to match the content of the narratives themselves. Each protagonist lives a double existence: one of independence (or longing for independence), and another based on an inescapable relationship with the other family members. The dynamic of the Macpherson household is set up very much like a political spectrum (hence my title), with each character claiming a particular stance along its plane. But just like our traditional notions of the political spectrum, the Macpherson spectrum is circular, with the two extremes (represented by Michael and Lynn) actually coming together and being very similar to one another. It is from such a thematic spectrum that these stories achieve their true "interconnection," and this is what I believe separates my thesis from other works in the same genre: because the spectrum is circular, the characters are able move or shift positions, thus growing closer or further apart from one another. After returning from his sabbatical in Afghanistan, Michael grows closer to Carolyn (but not necessarily to the children) than he was when he left; Carolyn can rail against her husband's cruelty in one story, then stand up for him in

another. Ray, a political centralist if there ever was one, is caught in the crossfire of tension between Lynn and Michael, getting pulled in one direction and then another; and Lynn goes through several “political” shifts over the course of the collection, in particular during her relationship with Paul. If the characters were to remain stationary in their positions and beliefs, then these stories would merely be *incidentally* interconnected—an interconnection based on similar characters, locales and events. I didn’t want that. I didn’t want characters simply making cameo appearances in other characters’ stories and dropping sly “inside” comments about events that occur in those other stories. Each character’s position is something he or she “sees” as a result of his or her own independent eye/I narrative; what shifts those positions is something they “hear” echoing across the boundaries of the other narratives in the collection.

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I think it’s important to discuss, in this way, what elements make stories interconnected and what ones don’t. Obviously, the same characters appearing in different pieces, similar events taking place, and so forth, play a huge role. But I believe there is a difference between an “interconnected” relationship and an “intertextual” relationship between narratives, and this was a line I had to be very careful not to cross during the writing process. I don’t believe, for example, that stories with similar themes necessarily qualify as interconnected; they may share an intertextual bond by tackling similar issues or ideas, but that doesn’t make them interconnected in the sense I’m dealing with. I don’t believe that a novel is merely a collection of interconnected short stories (some of which stand on their own and some don’t); I think a novel tackles something fundamentally different than what short stories, even a series of them, tackle.

And I don't believe that location is enough to "interconnect" short stories, either. If Alistair MacLeod writes an anthology of stories set on Cape Breton Island, does that feature alone make them interconnected? As I learned in David Arnason's "Winnipeg In Literature" graduate seminar, a distinct place can lend stories a certain intertextuality that goes beyond a shared history; but I'd be hesitant to lump my thesis in with collections that claim to be "interconnected by place" alone.

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Place plays a huge role in what I'm doing with this collection. Being a Maritimer writing stories set in the Maritimes, I'm faced with the reality of my work being labelled as "regional". This is an extremely problematic term for me, not only because its stigma limits the scope of any piece of writing, but also because I find it tiresome and redundant. All literature worth its salt is set in a distinct region, so no work is more "regional" than another. Yet, I am playing around with several conventions regarding Maritime and even Canadian literature. For example, almost all "regional writing" seems to require at least one sullen, emotionally distant, one-dimensional father figure, typically an alcoholic, and almost always from a blue collar background. Novelist Rob Payne, writing in the January 26, 2002 *Globe and Mail*, describes the tradition succinctly: "The Dysfunctional Family Novel (usually set in Cape Breton or Newfoundland and inevitably featuring an alcoholic father figure and a woman who—at the height of oxymoron—is presented as an 'empowered victim.')." I couldn't work with this convention. Michael, while taciturn and cruel, is an academic—well read and knowledgeable, and (at least I hope to think) multi-dimensional. I will admit that part of the reason why he is a scholar is because I couldn't imagine a circumstance that would result in his "great conversion" had he been a

fisherman or coal miner; yet, based on his cold, reserved character, I felt it would be too easy, too much like cheating, to make him just another surly blue collar slob. That ground has been well broken before.

I'm also playing with the traditional notions of urban versus suburban space. In seems that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in a place like Nova Scotia, "suburban" has become wholly separated from its "urban" dependence. Places that could be hundreds of kilometres from an urban area still manage to signify a "suburban" existence. The thesis presents suburban living as a state of mind and not a physical proximity to an urban space. The one story that is wholly rural is "Giants Will Rise With The Moon," and I realize that it embraces many of the conventions I claim to be writing against. Yet, I've deliberately woven into the story other intertextual relationships that have nothing to do with that convention. For example, the piece borrows its title and several key images from the lyrics of Canadian folk singer Stan Rogers; it also owes a huge debt to American writer T. Coraghessan Boyle's fabulous short story "Swept Away", as well as the original Scottish myths concerning the Legend Of Fingal and Ossian.

The last thing I'll say about location is how this thesis details the urban space of Halifax. In the Maritime literature that I've read, Halifax is always presented as a vague, amorphous place—somewhere to run to or escape from—and usually referenced by its name alone. In other words, a place without proportions. By keeping my stories grounded in the city and making references to many of its landmarks (Citadel Hill, Point Pleasant, the waterfront, even its sleaziest dance club, The Palace) I've attempted to give the space dimension. Nova Scotian writers like Thomas Raddall, or even Lynn Coady, while brilliant for various reasons, have not written about a Halifax that I recognize; and I plan

to make it part of my mission, should my career as a fiction writer progress, to mythologize the place as I interpret it.

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I would be remiss in this essay if I didn't discuss the role Afghanistan and its plight plays in my thesis. In many ways, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent war on terrorism have been the worst thing to happen to this work. Most of the ideas that formed these stories came long before Afghanistan made its dubious return to the daily news. The thoughts and ideas I had for these characters were gestating but unformed until the fall of 2000, when I heard about the struggles of Afghan women under the Taliban. Suddenly, the right key fit into the right lock as Michael's "conversion" became apparent (occurring in the fall of 1995, when the Taliban were waging war with its predecessor, the *mujahideen* government, for control of Kabul), and eventually "Cosmogony" was born. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, I've cringed every time I've written the word "Afghanistan" in these stories, and I wouldn't blame readers for cringing along with me when reading them. Yet, while researching the recent history of that country, I came to realize that it truly is like a household in turmoil, torn between its dependence on contradictory and often violent interpretations of Islam and its need to grow and progress into a healthy society again. For no other reason than that, I felt Afghanistan was a nice little metaphor to parallel the Macpherson household, and I didn't feel comfortable changing it after recent events. But just as Halifax is a real place with real dimension in these stories, Afghanistan had to remain very distant, a place of fantasy, not quite real. I've never been to that country ( although I hope to visit it someday), so the scholars, historians and journalists who have can provide you with better details about it than I can. And I'll leave

them to do it.

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Just as the form of this thesis mirrors its content, the structure of the individual stories also parallels my thoughts on how social psychology works. While taking the “Prairie Archives” graduate seminar this past year, I had the privilege of researching the works and compositional theories of Nova Scotian author Ray Smith. In his books *Lord Nelson Tavern* and *Cape Breton is the Thought Control Centre of Canada*, Smith explores a notion he calls “compiled fiction”—an idea that acts as a kind of bridge between the interconnected and intertextual relationships that stories can have. Compiled fiction is a kind of layering of seemingly unrelated or downright contradictory narratives in order to tell larger stories. My pieces here are layered in a similar fashion; each contains at least two narratives that tell different stories, present same characters in different lights, or “unwittingly” provide insight into unrelated stories. “Get Your Affairs In Order”, for example, fluctuates between Carolyn’s relationship with Michael, Barbie and Lynn. There is a conflicting characterization of the old Carolyn (bar-hopping with Barbie) and the new Carolyn (the devoted and obedient housewife). There is even a momentary flash of tension between her and her own father. In Ray’s story, we see him as both a student and young professional, a devoted husband and concerned brother. But even something as unimportant as where he was and what he was doing when U.S. President Ronald Reagan was shot seeps its way into the narrative.

To me, this is how social psychology works. My characters are striving for identity and to find their place with other characters. Yet much of our identity is forged

through our contradictions. Each character here (as well as each one of us, I believe) is formed through a dense layering of snippets and pieces and contradictions and little narratives that go nowhere on their own until told in the light of other little narratives that go nowhere on their own. The source of the conflict between my characters is their struggles to deal with each other's compiled stories. And this takes us right back to the role of the eye and the ear in my thesis: It is the characters' harsh, unyielding eye/I that "sees" the individual stories that label and pigeon hole other characters; it is their softer, more communally oriented ear that allows them to "hear" how these stories transcend themselves.

I don't think writers can understand anything about social psychology with their eyes. The connections we need to make only come from listening. As a writer, I'm constantly letting people talk and tell stories and share their contradictions with me, and only by keeping my own mouth shut can I hear the deeper connections being made. The act of seeing, which is related to description and cinematic writing, has always been reflexive for me. The act of listening is a tremendous, deliberate leap of faith and empathy, and what defines me as a writer.