

THE PLASTIC CASTLE AND LESS OBVIOUS DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

This creative project is a manuscript of short fiction works, which explores the style of literary minimalism and its affiliate, 'dirty realism'. The stories utilize compact sentence structure, the element of exclusion, and compressed meaning to convey their significance. As well, several of the works in the manuscript employ ekphrasis, as a tool to expand and reflect the narrative.

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In memory of Mr. Rendulich

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INTRODUCTION

The Plastic Castle and Less Obvious Disasters is a manuscript of short fiction in the mode of literary “minimalism.” I was first drawn to minimalist prose because this technique suggested a certain trimmed down aesthetic structure which can evoke an interactive experience between the reader and the text, in that the reader contributes their personal experience to the analysis (and conclusion) of a story. In *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison*, Cynthia Whitney Hallett observes that “although minimalist fiction often appears artless, it is, in fact, highly stylized” (4). Though some critics may see minimalist writing as effortless, a considerable amount of thought is devoted to word choice as well as compact sentence structure¹ in order to achieve a form of compressed meaning (Koch et al. 59). Minimalist fiction requires the writer to devote a great deal of attention to detail and the equation of how much information to reveal, and how much to withhold. As a reader of minimalist stories by authors such as Raymond Carver, Richard Ford and Amy Hempel, I find myself scrutinizing every detail as layers of meaning become discernible within the narratives. It is intriguing that a story of relatively few words and often little, to no dramatic action can express complex, existential themes through what Hallett calls “symbolic associations” (4). While it is true that all literature can and does utilize these associations, minimalism uses them in tandem with what many critics have termed as the technique of “less is more” (Barth 1).

¹ Though a majority of so-called minimalist writers habitually rely on terse sentence structure some, like Beckett, do not.

Literary minimalism is a difficult concept to define as it seems composed of many attributes which are representative of other forms of writing, but uses these attributes in a highly condensed manner. One example would be that on a literary spectrum where one end is represented by writing crowded with diversion, explanation, and ornate detail, minimalism marks the near-polar opposite. Mostly, minimalism shares traits with short fiction as, according to Hallett, “both are compact, condensed, and contracted in design; both are especially dependent on figurative language and symbolic associations as channels for expanded meaning” (4). Like much short fiction, minimalism seems to base most of its artistic power in the tension it creates for the reader, prompted by the writer’s use of a few, choice words. The tension provokes deliberation, as it may cause the reader to be uncertain in contextualizing the meaning of the story. In my work on *The Plastic Castle and Less Obvious Disasters*, I sought to profile minimalist short fiction within the short story tradition.

Minimalism may be seen as what Hallett calls, a “hybrid system of short fiction” because it has been shaped by the works of many authors (16). Anton Chekhov, Ernest Hemingway, and Samuel Beckett², are some whose influence was instrumental in shaping the literary minimalism movement. This Modernist influence may explain the minimalist tendency to use non-linear plots and to explore themes that illustrate the rejection of social norms. As well, the modernist influence is seen in the 20th century Canadian short story, which I will discuss later. My interest, while working on this manuscript, lay primarily in examining authors in the brief period of time between the early 1970s and early 1990s. In response to a new wave of short fiction coming out of

² Beckett’s short texts as well as plays, such as *Waiting for Godot*, have contributed to shaping the minimalist style.

the United States in the early 1980s, Bill Buford, of *Granta* magazine, coined the term “dirty realism.” This short fiction exemplifies minimalism influenced by writers such as Hemingway and Beckett, but is imbued with the socio-political attitude of the 60s and 70s. “Dirty realism” appealed to me because of its specific aesthetic form and matter-of-fact subject matter. I decided to explore the style after it was suggested that my own writing reflected it. In my research, I found minimalist style the perfect vehicle for my own take on “dirty realist” fiction.

Minimalism and “dirty realism” are largely defined in terms of the American short story tradition. Though there is no doubt that minimalism exists outside the United States, critical theory on non-American minimalism is hard to come by. In fact, Hallett’s work is the only book-length publication devoted to the discussion of minimalism, and it focuses entirely on the American minimalist short story.

There are relatively few defining characteristics which clearly distinguish literary minimalist short fiction from the short story tradition. Since the former largely originated from the latter³, it is difficult to find clearly distinctive features which would separate the two. In “A few words about minimalism,” John Barth observes that the “cardinal principle [of minimalism] is that artistic effect may be enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means” (1). In writing minimalist short fiction, the writer attempts to shape the text to exclude that which is not strictly essential, as well as utilizing the excluded details, in communicating the meaning of the story to the reader. The true challenge of minimalism is to create an experience where the written word is only a part of a puzzle, which the reader must put together, without compromising “completeness” or “richness”

³ Some critics, such as Barth, maintain that minimalism has always existed in the forms of “oracles ..., proverbs, maxims, aphorisms, epigrams, pensees, mottoes, slogans and quips” (Barth 2).

or “precision of statement” (Barth 1). Although Barth’s definition may broadly describe the goals of minimalism as a genre, it can also be applied to the “dirty realism” writing of the late twentieth century.

The most descriptive metaphor for minimalist fiction is Hemingway’s “‘tip of the iceberg’ aesthetic principle” (Hallett 1). The principle proposes that, like an iceberg, the surface of a story shows only about 10% of that which is relevant. The other 90%, is the meaning beneath the words on the page. Literary minimalism seeks to “strip away the superfluous in order to reveal the necessary, the essential” (Barth 1). The composition of a minimalist story is largely based on the interdependence of text and the concepts it may represent. My story “Goldfish,” for example, follows a day in the life of an unremarkable character: an observer. Throughout the day the character recounts the inner workings of a commercial photography studio, an evening of babysitting, as well as encounters with those around her: friends, co-workers, clients. Through these limited observations, the story addresses the absurdity of life and the senseless actions of people. The interaction with the prideful priest, the news of the execution of a mentally handicapped death-row inmate, as well as the vilifying of a sexual harassment victim call to mind the perverse nature of human existence. The ultimate symbol of this futility is the chicken carcass that one of the characters prepares for dinner: “a limp, pale marionette in her angry hands.” The implication of powerlessness in a complex and senseless world is never directly stated, but insinuated through the meaning of words such as “marionette.”

To create an effective minimalist short story, “the writer must somehow frame the empty space carefully enough so that the reader has at least a faint chance of inferring from what has been given exactly what has been omitted” (Hallett 7). The minimalist

narrative never describes the entire story from start to finish; it is a snapshot of a moment in life that is influenced by implied events of the past, and suggests possible futures. The reader considers these implications and uses them to see beyond the writing, and into the meaning of the story. As Hallett points out, “within the realm of figurative allusion all events and behavior are governed by the same laws of relativity that apply in the [narrative], certain words and images contain connotations that generate multiple associations--social, psychological, historical” (10-11). Though Hallett’s point may be broad, it helps to explain how every story contained in my manuscript utilizes the cultural meaning connected to certain allusions to create a “complete” experience of the narrative. Moreover, Carver himself notes: “It’s possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language to endow those things--a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring--with immense, even startling power” (24). Ordinary objects, as well as ordinary events and interactions, can become symbolic of complex and compelling themes, given a thoughtful use and arrangement of simple words.

Hallett also theorizes that literary minimalism operates by manipulating what she refers to as positive and negative space. She suggests that, “minimalist writers appear to generate as much story (positive space) with as little text (any details omitted equate to negative space) as possible” (Hallett 2). The aim of the story is to convey what is essential with the use of few, carefully chosen words rather than detailed explanations and directives. My extensive editing of the pieces in my manuscript has done away with any description, action or reference that is not essential to the story, while also maintaining brevity. Moreover, I sought to exclude from my stories parts which could

exist in the story line, but are superfluous to relaying the meaning of the narrative. This allows the reader to exist in the moment, along with the characters. Also, parts excluded from the narrative carry implications of their own. In “Treason,” as the main character recovers from an invasive, if not complicated surgical procedure she is paired to a room with another patient, presumably suffering from a long-term illness. While the other patient receives visitors throughout the evening, the protagonist receives none. This detail is never mentioned within the story, yet it suggests a variety of implications about the protagonist’s life situation.

A minimalist story also “focuses on the [reading] experience” (Hallett 2). While an interactive approach is used in other forms of writing, it is amplified in minimalism, as the reader not only participates in the text but also brings collective and personal experience in his response to the writing. The reader can understand a story on an emotional level, as well as an intellectual one by relying on their real world experience. In this way they bring motive to minimalist characters, who live in a largely determinist world where they do not act, but rather react to their circumstances. These ‘reactions’ also serve to illustrate the persona of the character without the writer having to give an elaborate description. The sense of determinism that minimalist characters portray seems to stem from the lack of control they have, or feel they have, over their existing situation.

My story “Sunday Morning Monologue,” shows an example of how a response to an event can reflect a character’s mental processes, which would otherwise be obscured from the reader. Although the unnamed protagonist appears indifferent to doing the peculiar job of killing birds, his response to an incident reveals that his conscience may

not be untroubled. After killing a bird with his hands, the narrator is surprised by the security guard's comment: "'Filthy creature,' I hear the guard mutter over my shoulder. I look at him, startled, before I realize he meant the bird." While he never says so aloud, the protagonist's fear of judgment shows that he feels shame for his deeds.

A general lack of action is a distinct feature of minimalist characters. They appear to live a life of disconnected acceptance, one they are unwilling, or unable to change. Substandard socio-economic positions, as well as unresolved emotional and mental problems, often lead minimalist characters to hold fatalistic attitudes about their lives. According to Hallett, the characters "are isolated by inarticulation [*sic*], dislocated relationships, emotional paralysis, or an absence of the desire to participate--even in their own lives" (3). My story "Descent," which I will address in more detail later, embodies the sort of isolation to which Hallett refers. As the protagonist tries to make sense of a violent incident which has occurred, she asks her grandmother about a word (a homophobic slur) she doesn't understand. The grandmother is outraged at the protagonist's use of the word, but fails to explain her anger: "She wanted to say more, there was something like fury that made her seem to bulge with unsaid things, but instead she turned back to the pots." The reader can imagine many reasons for the grandmother's silence: her removed relationship to the protagonist, an inability to explain homosexuality, prejudice, or sexual assault to an eight year old girl, the unwillingness to expose a child to the brutal reality of life, etc. Knowledge of conventional human motivation allows the reader to imagine different reasons why the grandmother reacts the way she does. The reader will understand her motivation based on what his/her own experience leads him/her to infer. Regardless, the grandmother's

reaction boils down to silence, and turning away from the topic, as well as her granddaughter.

The importance of dialogue, and lack thereof, is also a mark of minimalist fiction. In numerous minimalist stories the communication between characters may seem ordinary but suggest “an inverse degree of importance” (Hallett 12).⁴ In the story “St. Mary’s,” the protagonist, Roy, reflects on a conversation he had with his partner, Eileen: “‘I was thinking about going up to see my sister in Newfoundland,’ Eileen said, ‘and while I’m there I’ll think about how I feel about all this.’” The conversation is commonplace, but the reader can deduce that there is trouble in the relationship between Roy and Eileen, and the outlook is not good. The idea is verified when Eileen tells Roy not to call her when she is gone.

Moreover, Hallett points out that, on the surface “meaningless conversation and meaningless action mirror the characters’ meaningless lives” (36). In much of minimalist fiction the mundane and ordinary echo the idea that human existence is inherently tedious and each individual is responsible for creating his or her own purpose in life, but also that life is full of potential for meaningful action. In the story “Monkeys,” the two main characters spend the better part of the evening hitchhiking around their small town. The action is fruitless: the girls never leave the town, and effectively end up where they began. Throughout this time, most of their conversation revolves around how to get drugs and alcohol. There is some trivial chitchat with police officers, who utter empty threats, and other interactions with fleeting characters who have superficial contact with the girls. The conversations between the girls reflect the oppressive socio-economic

⁴ This does not by any means apply to all minimalist short fiction. For example, Amy Hempel’s dialogue is often very perceptive and revealing, through her use of irony.

shape of the town as well as the hopeless boredom suffered by the characters. What appears to be an exciting evening is actually just a way of killing time and forgetting the troubles of an unhappy, shiftless adolescence. In the end the main character, Penny, realizes her temporary purpose is to protect those around her.

My story “Frailty” was written as an experiment in dialogue. The conversation between two people in a car makes up more than half of the story, an argument between the main characters about a previous relationship affecting their current one. The dialogue circles around the central issue, never mentioning the obvious: Greg’s fear of abandonment. His anxiety comes through in his complete lack of empathy toward Heather’s ex husband, who has just lost his father. Similarly, Heather quells Greg’s worry without being overt. She tells the story of an epiphany she had about the problem with her previous relationship, and alludes to the fact that her current relationship, with Greg, is not affected by the same thing. Reading between the lines presents an account of the state of the current relationship between the two characters. The male character may not feel confident in the partnership, but the conversation suggests, without blatantly saying so, that he should.

The minimalist short story is “often about the ways people communicate” without saying the “exact words” (Hallett 19). It explores such “communication” through “ready phrases, expected responses, innuendo, or euphemism” (Hallett 19). In “Descent,” the central character is found by her grandmother after a violent attack. The exchange between the two is brief, the dialogue even more so: “‘Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!’ Grandma yelled when she saw me. The look on her face made me start crying.” The grandmother shows her fright and concern within an expression familiar to a large

segment of society, doing away with the need for an elaborate explanation. Such collective knowledge allows the reader to infer the details of a scene, in this instance, the appearance of the main character after an attack.

The Plastic Castle and Less Obvious Disasters follows a trend shared by minimalist short fiction where there is no overt attempt at a “[resolution] within the narrative” (Hallett 14). The story ending depends on the reader’s interpretation which, in turn, is governed by the reader’s personal experience. Hallett observes:

Openendedness [*sic*] is only part of the generally anti-linear orientation of minimalist writers; they reject linear plot because for them linearity cannot fully account for the complexities ... of human existence, the randomness and indeterminacy of “reality.” (14-15)

In “Descent,” the ending of the story brings little resolution to the reader; if anything, it highlights that the narrator’s young life is filled with difficult questions that routinely go unanswered. The protagonist is aware that the image of red galoshes haunts her grandmother, and has questioned its relevance. The reader is told that the grandmother has supplied an answer, but one which offers no clear explanation. The irony is that while the grandmother appears to be trying to preserve her granddaughter’s innocence, she is only confusing and distancing the girl from herself. It is up to the reader to decide whether the grandmother’s protectiveness is beneficial. Most of the stories in this collection offer hopeful, though ambiguous endings. The onus is on the reader to provide a conclusion only she can perceive. Similarly, stemming from minimalism, uncertain endings are also a staple of “dirty realist” short fiction.

The term “dirty realism” was one of many, such as “Kmart realism,” “kitchen-sink

realism,” and “dirty surrealism,” which were used condescendingly by critics to insinuate inferiority in the style of writing (Koch et. al. 47). Critics have even used the term “dirty realism” as an alternative designation for minimalism, which has confused the two terms. For example, though Hemingway is heralded as a major influence on the evolution of minimalism, and often writes in the minimalist fashion, no critic has ever called him a “dirty realist.” “Dirty realism” encompasses minimalist stories written roughly between the mid 70s to mid 90s, which were influenced, on many levels, by the economic changes in the United States. For example, the resurgence of supply-side economics, which fostered “entrepreneurial capitalism,” led to a greater class divide by “shifting income from labor to capital” (Buchelle 30-31). Although Tom Jenks calls it, “a synthetic derivative of Hemingway,” the minimalist writing of this period is more likely only inspired by Hemingway’s short fiction (Koch et al. 44). While Jenks may argue that minimalism is “easy for writers to manage and for readers to... understand,” he may simply misunderstand the version of literary minimalism which is “dirty realism.”

I’ve chosen to use Brian Jarvis’ overarching list of traits associated with “dirty realism” to summarize the numerous themes I incorporate in my manuscript. These traits are not all attributed to any single writer, or any single story within the tradition but together they exemplify the “dirty realist” style. According to Jarvis, there are five essential traits to dirty realism: “class dimension ... [and] fascination for blue-collar lives,” “[a] minimalist economy of expression,” “[a focus on] contemporary socioeconomic developments, in particular, developments in consumerism,” “[a character’s] psychoanalytical self-consciousness displayed in [the] work,” and “[the writer’s focus] on sociopolitical history, [as] fiction in relation to the rise of the New

Right, reading it as a critique of the dominant discourses of Reagan's America, especially in relation to hegemonic definitions of gender and family” (192). I have amended some of these traits in my work, especially the last.

The characters peopling the stories in my manuscript are mostly low-income, manual workers. Their social class is reflected in the service and manufacturing employment they hold, which is typically the domain of the lower class. In the case of “The Collapse,” the setting is industrial and urban; in “Power” and “Convenience” a coffee shop and convenience store respectively. Even the photo studio in “Goldfish” shows a fast-paced, “wholesale” environment, devoid of artistic creativity. “Dirty realism” follows the lives of the working poor, and those associated with them. Although never blatantly said, except in the case of stories narrated by children, various signs in my writing point to a constant lack of money. For example, the main character in “Sunday Morning Monologue” is retired, but still does a job with which he is uncomfortable. The reader can only assume that the pay from this work supplements his pension.

The tedious lifestyle of blue-collar workers reflects the popular idea shared by “dirty realism” and minimalism that, as noted by Hallett, “humans are subject to either biological or a socioeconomic determinism” (6). Although true of more than one style of fiction, this observation helps to exemplify how characters in minimalist fiction are often at the mercy of their economic position, emotional and mental problems, or social status. In “Convenience,” Donna has a low opinion of the job she does and speaks of moving on to bigger and better things, yet remains in the same position for over two years (and maybe indefinitely). Presumably, since she voices contempt for her situation, Donna’s

stagnant life is dictated by some inability to change her circumstances. The main character of the story suffers from the same until an event makes her consider leaving. The ending of the story suggests a hopeful resolution, but leaves the actual outcome up to the reader.

Several of the stories in this collection include statements on what Jarvis calls, “contemporary socioeconomic developments, in particular, developments in consumerism and postmodern culture” (192). “The Collapse” portrays the harsh reality of capitalism upon industrial workers. The factory, which produces gum, is shut down suddenly, without consideration for its workers. The basically pointless product and the workers’ unspoken compromise to work in increasingly difficult conditions in order to keep their jobs, exhibit the force of tyrannical consumerism and the desperation of those trying to hold on to meager employment.

When it comes to “psychoanalytical self-consciousness,” the characters in this collection may express it, but are unwilling or unable to go beyond such awareness (Jarvis 192). In several of my stories, the characters notice their own reactions in response to a troubling event, and attempt to place it in comprehensible context. While there are no overt instances of self-analysis by characters in my writing, a number of stories hint at the characters being introspective within their own lives. In “Monkeys,” Penny indicates the contemplation of negative emotions she has started feeling towards her friend Lexi: “I just couldn’t stop worrying it, trying to figure out how and when the hate had become something I couldn’t ignore.” Although, within the narrative, the characters do not ruminate openly concerning their motives, they alert the reader to the fact that they are aware of and reflect on their actions.

In terms of “definitions of gender and family,” the stories in my manuscript take on both issues (Jarvis 192). Although the works are not overtly influenced by “Reagan's America,” they do address more conservative views on gender identity and family structure. Although these views may not be mainstream, they continue to subsist, and create friction in liberally-minded cultures. In “Descent,” the protagonist struggles with issues of gender and sexuality which culminate in a physical assault against her. In other stories, none of the characters are part of nuclear family units and some, like the children being raised by grandparents, show alternative, yet not inferior, parenting. In one instance, an adolescent cares for her grandmother, in opposition to traditional family dynamics.

As their monotonous work and living environments reflect the disconnected lives of the characters, so too does “[a] minimalist economy of [emotive] expression” (Hallett 16). The idea goes back to that of emotional incapacity, which leads the characters to a life of cold loneliness and isolation. Although the characters cannot verbalize what they feel, the reader can imagine their underlying emotions. In “Power,” Dawna witnesses the outrage of an elderly woman over (almost) being cheated by an unscrupulous store owner. Whereas Dawna does not react to the initial event, she does rebuke her co-worker, when he makes an insensitive remark. By doing so she not only shows empathy for the elderly lady, but also an awareness, and dislike for the unpleasant nature of her co-worker. Also, the ambiguity of her disapproval, a nondescript “shut up,” reveals her inability (or fear) to acknowledge or express negative feelings.

In addition to experimenting with the “dirty realist” style, I also found myself exploring ekphrasis within my writing. I was drawn to ekphrasis because of its capability

to provide a reflection on scene, plot, and character; however, it also serves an important function in my minimalist writing. W.J.T. Mitchell provides a direct definition of ekphrasis, stating that it is “the verbal representation of visual representation” (152). Ekphrasis enables the creation of an image within the narrative, doubling the effect of concentrated meaning. Anne Simpson further speculates that, “the power of the work of [visual] art, [is] similar to that of poetry, in the way it holds time in abeyance, interrupting it” (64). The ekphrasis in my stories momentarily interrupts the flow of the storyline, causing the reader to slow down, or stop, and reexamine what is taking place in the narrative. In essence, the literary description of a painting in a story prompts speculation about the scene and adds significance to events without the need for lengthy explanations. The length of the story may be brief, but the painting acts as an interlude, a fold-out panel of sorts, which invites the reader to explore the scene in depth. Ekphrasis can also link different texts or historical periods, as in the case of the Van Gogh print in my story “The Collapse.” The struggle of the factory workers in the narrative mirrors the toil of the potato farmers in the painting. The subdued, earthy colours and naturalistic subject matter of one of Van Gogh’s early works, also reflects the plain language of minimalist expression. Although separated from the subject of the painting by over a century, the main character’s description provides a commentary on the enduring hardship of menial labour.

As the goal of minimalism is to express a great deal of significance in relatively few words, ekphrastic writing, through the description of visual art, creates additional compressed meaning. This meaning is suggested to the reader through the literal portrayal of a piece of visual art, but it is also expanded further as the reader reflects on

the significance of both the art work and its description. Simpson describes this relationship best when she writes: “[both] literature and art involve representations or reality, translating it, and giving it back to us in sharpened, heightened, or compressed form” (64). The inclusion of an artwork within a story attempts to tell a greater, inherent truth about what is happening in said story.

One such instance lies in my story “Green,” with the inclusion of the painting of the protagonist’s great-grandmother. An image related to a hallucination suffered in illness, the woman in the red dress with a basket of apples symbolizes of the narrator’s mother. The mother in the story is a complicated figure because so little is actually known about her. Other characters in the story give clues as to the situation--the mother leaving in search of wealth, for instance--but these clues are unreliable, coming from sources removed from the central family unit. The grandmother in the story gives us the best hints about the mother, by giving away her clothes to strangers, and dismissing the narrator’s experience with the moving painting, lessening the girl’s ties to her mother. Her actions suggest that the mother has deserted the family and is not welcome back. The narrator of the story has a highly complex relationship with the painting. We can see that, although the painting represents an absent mother, the mother is not entirely gone. She still wields influence over the protagonist. Moreover, in considering the description of the painting, the reader may be led to contemplate certain preconceived notions which make the narrator’s situation more complicated. For one, the woman in the painting is imbued with a certain power, because of the illusion that she can leave the painting and come to life. This power is further magnified when the main character kneels before the unveiled painting with the box of money. In this instance, the painting becomes

indicative of an altar, and the money, a form of sacrifice. The reader can deduce that the narrator not only longs for her mother, but may also unconsciously idolize her. Lastly, the image of the apples in the painting calls to mind not only the symbol of knowledge but also temptation and moral corruption. This exemplifies the, earlier mentioned, use of “symbolic associations” (Hallett 4).

Most of the stories in *The Plastic Castle and Less Obvious Disasters* that use ekphrasis utilize paintings in the traditional ekphrastic mode, but a couple of the stories, such as “Sunday morning monologue” and “Power,” refer to visual media less commonly the subject of ekphrasis: television and graffiti. In “Sunday morning monologue,” the image on the television screens in the window of an electronics shop may not immediately come to mind as a work of high art, but its representation of reality serves a similar purpose: to show an imitation of life. When the protagonist sees himself picking up the bird he had killed only minutes before, he becomes aware of himself and what he has just done. The narrator unwittingly creates a temporary image of himself on-screen, sees himself in the sharp detail of HD, and is reproduced by the multiple screens. The narrator does not elaborate on this occurrence, but the reader can infer several things from the encounter. First, the narrator is suddenly faced with what he has done, is in the process of doing. Although we do not know his thoughts at the moment, we can guess his state of mind two paragraphs later, when he wrongly assumes his companion is condemning his actions. Second, the clarity of the image goes to the presentation of a greater truth, a clearer truth about the situation in which the narrator finds himself. This truth suggests that this event is a microcosm of the plague of mankind upon the natural world. The idea is furthered by the multiplication of the protagonist on the television

screens: it is not one man who has killed one bird, it is the everyman who is killing that which is natural.

In my use of ekphrasis, I found the function it serves is ultimately what Simpson terms as “reality [coinciding] with ‘possibility’” (70). In paraphrasing Aristotle, she elaborates: “Both the writer and the artist understand how things are, but they give us what might be” (Simpson 70). Ekphrasis allows the reader to envision alternatives to the offered story line. When she paints a landscape on a window of a closed factory, the protagonist in “The Collapse” envisions nature reclaiming the land. The issue alluded to, in the closing of the production plant, is one of abandonment of manufacturing and retail structures; especially in the image of the front-desk receptionist who flees upstairs, never to return. It has become a routine practice, among massive corporations, to renounce their manufacturing and retail locations with no consideration for either the natural or social environments. The abandoned buildings, especially in low-income districts, are left to gradually break down as they are stripped of any usable items, usually, by inhabitants of the neighbourhood.

What the main character’s painting presents is a possibility very different from the one described above, a possibility of responsible corporate practices which include restoring exploited green-space back to, more or less, what it had been before its use. The character does not elaborate on the intention of her painting; all she sees are empty manufacturing plants and a useless parking structure. However, her art demonstrates her hope for a sort of vindication; though the corporation has ruined the livelihoods of its workers, it could redeem itself by returning the natural world back to its former beauty.

As a Canadian writer, I also felt the need to link the works in *The Plastic Castle*

and Less Obvious Disasters to the Canadian short story tradition. One of the defining traits of the Canadian short story, according to Reingard Nischik, is a strong connection to nature. In the early days of Canadian short fiction “animal stories” earned international readership, “not least because they fit the image of Canada as a country of wilderness” (Nischik 5). After working on several stories I noticed an unconscious interest in nature in my own writing. Be it the characters’ interaction with various animals, a likening of human and insect industry, or the pathetic fallacy of struggling against the elements, the inclusion of nature has frequently made its way into my stories. Margaret Atwood mentions the idea that animals in Canadian literature are frequently portrayed as victims and symbolically represent human strife (75). She also mentions “the need [to identify with] a victimized animal” as a way of acknowledging not only one’s victimhood but also powerlessness to escape it (Atwood 81). Such a fatalistic attitude is often present in minimalist prose. I also arranged the stories in this collection to follow the progression of seasons, beginning with winter and ending in fall. Quite by chance, the stories in the manuscript number twelve, calling to mind the man-made structure imposed on the naturally changing seasons.

As the Canadian short story developed over the past century, it often followed in the steps of the American tradition. During the later half of the last century, the use of “ironic narrative voice, the ambiguity of plot and language, and, above all, the laconic diction, ... has time and again spurred associations with Ernest Hemingway” (Nischik 9). Authors began to use “vocabulary and syntax [to] create a deceptively simple and direct, deliberately repetitive, unadorned style” (Nischik 9). The style that Nischik describes mirrors that of minimalism, but he labels it “realist-modernist” fiction. Much like the

strife of the “dirty realist” blue-collar worker affected by his lifestyle, early Canadian short fiction of the 20s, often focused on the struggle of man in a cruel, natural environment, influenced by the hard-working life of a farmer. Later came the contrast of the urban and rural spheres, with the cities being shown as exciting and beautiful, yet threatening because of the nature of humanity (violence, vandalism, murder) (Nischik 11). As Canadian writing evolved, Atwood mentions, the physical obstacles faced by its characters gave way to obstacles that were “both harder to identify and more internal” (33). Nischik also points out that Canadian short fiction (as well as Canadian fiction in general) is roughly equally represented by both genders, as Canada has very well known female writers as well as male writers. He concludes that “this state of affairs has partly resulted in a gender-sensitive and gender-oriented writing style not only in Canadian literature in general, but also in Canadian short fiction” (Nischik 31). Although most of the narrators in my work are female, I strive to avoid gender stereotypes in any characters unless it offers additional meaning to the story.

The choice of perspective in the pieces in my manuscript was influenced by each individual story, and the impression I wanted it to project. In writing the stories in this collection, I considered how I wanted their content relayed and then experimented with perspective. The majority of the pieces are written using first-person point of view. I chose first person perspective to enhance intimacy and authenticity between the narrator, the reader, and the narrative because it suggests a confessional tone. First person narration also helps with the frank human nature portrayed in dirty realist writing. It shows the internal effect on characters as they respond to the events they encounter. Hallet observes that, “the chatty tone of certain first-person narrators ... imitates the

highly stylized behavior of denial that often occurs when someone is acting as if there's nothing wrong when, in fact, something is dreadfully wrong" (12). In "Convenience," the main character voices a disturbing image, in a tone that suggests banality: "For the most part, Donna and I took care of things ourselves. We kept a baseball bat hidden behind the hot-dog bun warmer. If things got out of hand." Although the character makes light of a potentially dangerous situation, the reader is aware that any circumstance which necessitates the use of weapons can be life-threatening.

The negative effect of using first person perspective may be that the narrator's account of events could be questioned because, as Wayne Booth remarks, it "does not allow any one person to know all that goes on" and limits "access to necessary information" (142-3). Booth observes that, "in fiction, as soon as we encounter an 'I' we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event" (143). The difficulty with the first person style is the characters' subjective approach to every experience; however, minimalist narrative decreases such subjectivity by using "simple language [to suggest] an objective perspective and [render] a tone of an official report" (Hallett 40). Moreover, because the language in minimalist fiction strives to be frank and impassive, "the reader is positioned as an objective observer, which by definition is a perspective that offers an unbiased or non-prejudiced insight, for it always seems easier to locate or 'see' the cause of other people's problems" (Hallett 38-39). Although the character's experience is subjective, the reader is put in a position where a certain amount of objective observation is possible. Even if the character misunderstands a situation, the basic description of events allows the reader to form an understanding based on their real-life experience.

In my manuscript, especially in the stories narrated by children, the characters may not comprehend an event which is understood by the reader. Though the aspect of a child narrator has been used in many other forms of writing more elaborately, it served as a challenging exercise in the writing of my own stories. In “Descent,” the protagonist is attacked by an older boy and reacts the way a child would: she is hurt and frightened by the attack, then scared about ruining a shirt. However, the reader can see beyond the narrator’s account of events, and realizes the actual severity of what could have been: a sexual assault. The first-person narrative allows the protagonist to remain innocent while the reader interprets the full extent of the incident.

On the other hand, third person perspective, which is conventionally more impartial and explanatory, often allows the writer to manipulate the reader’s interpretation of the narrative. For instance, in the story “Blood,” the troubled main character sees blood in the streets of his neighbourhood. If the narrative had been subjective, the reader would undoubtedly have believed that the image was simply a hallucination in the character’s mind. However, because the perspective is impersonal, it brings ambiguity to the story line. The reader, along with the protagonist, is unsure, to the end of the piece, whether the blood in the street is real or imaginary.

Unfortunately, there is relatively little current critical theory about minimalism and most of the writing on the topic focuses on a fleeting popularity of a 1980s literary fad. A roundtable discussion of literary critics even celebrated the ‘demise’ of minimalism in a publication entitled: “*Throwing Dirt on the Grave of Minimalism*” (Koch et al.). If the popularity of minimalism hit a high point in the 1980s, it certainly did not fade into obscurity or die. Though the study of minimalism is still an emerging field, minimalism

itself, as an artistic strategy, continues to flourish, reflected in the continued writing of authors like Richard Ford⁵, one of the original “Dirty Realist” minimalists, as well as authors such as Lynn Crosbie, who mixes minimalism with the confessional mode in her recent book of short fiction: *Life is About Losing Everything. The Plastic Castle and Less Obvious Disasters* is my addition to the ongoing minimalist short story genre.

⁵ Although Richard Ford’s most recent novel, “Canada,” cannot be classified as minimalist, the influence of the genre is discernible in the writing.

Sunday Morning Monologue

I hate Sundays.

The early morning rise don't make it easier. You'd think retirement would mean I'd get to sleep in.

There's freezing rain today, glazing the car in ice. It shines under the street lamps like a colossal, broken icicle flanked by snow. It begins to shudder helplessly as I wake it with a turn of the key.

The drive to the mall is painful. The car skids down hills and past stop signs. But it's alright, it's early and there's few other cars on the streets. The mall parking lot is deserted.

The night security guard meets me at the service entrance next to the loading dock. He looks uncomfortable. He can't stop darting looks at my sheathed rifle. He leads me in through the door, and locks it behind us. He checks it again before he takes me through the corridor, into the mall.

"We've counted four of them," he says, "they hang around the food court."

I nod. I'm not sure what he expects me to say.

Sometimes, I feel sorry for the poor bastards I'm here to kill. They huddle outside the loading dock in that cruel cold, and they feel the warmth radiating from inside the mall. Through those doors that stand open for hours on end.

When we get to the food court, we find one perched on a seat back. He's grooming diligently. I unsheathe my rifle, switch the safety off, lift the gun and line up the sights. I steady my elbow on a garbage container and will my trembling away.

The shot pops like a champagne cork at midnight.

We find him on the floor by the donut shop. The security guard hands me a slick, black garbage bag.

We walk through the empty mall. I keep startling at the mannequins in store windows, thinking they're live people. We find the second bird circling near the ceiling by the shoe store. I lead him slightly with the sights, then fire.

The crack sounds like a bat connecting with a baseball.

The bird's wings fold in as if clutching at his chest; a B-movie cowboy shot through the heart. It falls to the ground by the electronics store. There are flat screen T.V.s in the window. There's a live feed from a camera pointing into the mall. When I pick up the dead bird, I am five times duplicated picking up a dead bird. Seeing myself picking it up. Seeing myself. In high definition. We go on.

The third shot explodes like my knee joints in the morning.

But when we find it, the bird isn't dead. It's lurching on the faux-marble floor, beating its wings, trying to get back into the safety of the air. I pick it up, feeling the gossamer feathers, the frail fluttering wings, and twist its neck until it breaks.

"Filthy creature," I hear the guard mutter over my shoulder. I look at him, startled, before I realize he meant the bird.

The fourth shot sounds like a fuse being blown.

Lights out.

I sheath my rifle. The guard throws the bag of dead birds into the maintenance bin. He escorts me to the locked service entrance. Store employees crowd the opening door. They're here early, to set up window displays. They complain about having been

left out in the cold. They go inside, talking and laughing through shivers. They don't question being locked out.

The birds are huddling outside the loading dock doors. They puff up their frosted feathers and watch the people come and go.

Through the doors, the mall is warm and brightly yellow. Like the open mouth of a young crocodile, sunning along the river bank.

Treason

After the procedure they put me in a room with a cancer patient. The hospital was at full capacity and I was lucky, I was told, that I even had a room. They could have put me, on a gurney, in the coffee shop. But I had surgery. After surgery, the nurse told me, you had to be in a room. Not the coffee shop. She talked an awful lot on our ride up the elevator. I wished I could turn away from her, turn on my side, but the drugs were making me lethargic.

When the nurse wheeled me into the room, I looked at the woman in the other bed and she looked at me. She had a scarf wrapped around her head. She might have been middle-aged; without eyebrows it was difficult to tell. She looked up at me from a magazine she was reading, then went back to it when our eye contact became too long. I was put next to the window. It was dark outside. The nurse closed the blinds and drew a curtain, cutting the room in half.

“You sleep now. I’ll check in on you soon. If you need anything just push this button,” she said putting the call button under my hand. She adjusted the bed, but I was uncontrollably sleepy, so I didn’t tell her that I slept best laying flat.

When I awoke, it was later. The room was dim. There was a wilted sandwich and a small carton of milk on the tray, next to the bed. Behind the curtain, the woman had a visitor.

“What is she here for?” one female voice asked.

“I think I heard she lost a baby,” the other answered.

“That’s too bad.”

I stared at the curtain.

“I can hear you,” I said to the disembodied voices. They stopped. The curtain fluttered. A chair moved. The voices started again, hushed. Something about gardening. Which was stupid because it was November.

I looked at the sandwich. I should have been hungry. They don’t let you eat before surgery. I tried not to think about the food, and looked around me instead.

A window on my left, a curtain to the right, an open door beyond the end of the bed, that showed a dim bathroom. A print of a faded, pastel rainbow on the pink, pastel wall. My clothes and purse, in a semi-transparent plastic bag, on a stand next to the bed. An arrangement of confusing medical equipment on the wall behind me. I should have brought a book.

I lay back on the pancake pillows and stared at the ceiling tiles. The cancer woman’s visitor left. She turned on the T.V. I listened to her channel surf, over and over. I was about to scream at her to stop it, just pick a fucking show, when she settled on something. Her husband came. He brought food they ate together. Their conversation was morse code between prolonged silences. Probably because of the T.V. They talked in monotone voices about irrelevant things. I fell asleep.

The nurse woke me. She wanted to know if I could get up and walk around. She wanted to know how the pain was. Why didn’t I eat my sandwich, she asked. She made sure I swallowed my pills, and left. I wanted to sleep some more but the pills weren’t that kind. The woman behind the curtain got up and shuffled into my view, holding her I.V. pole with one hand, and the back of her gown with the other. She went into the bathroom.

The window blinds were open now, and I looked out into the night. I listened to the cancer woman in the bathroom: flushing the toilet, washing her hands.

“Was it your first?” she asked when she came out. I turned my head slowly.

“I mean was it your first baby?” she asked again. I stared at her white, round face. She looked away when I didn’t reply.

“It’s for the best,” she continued. She moved behind the curtain, out of view.

“How?” I asked. She didn’t answer.

“How is it for the best?” I repeated, louder than I meant to.

She was so quiet on the other side of the curtain, I wasn’t sure she was even there. Then, she cleared her throat. I could feel her watching the curtain, and me, behind it. Still, she said nothing.

I could have told her that the doctor said the same thing, and the nurses and even the goddamned anesthesiologist. It was all for the best. But no one said why.

The woman on the other side cleared her throat again. I looked out the window into nothingness.

“Consider yourself lucky, you could be sick like me. I could die, you know.”

The print of the rainbow made me nauseous. But I kept coming back to it. There was nothing else in the room to look at. The window, the print, the ceiling tiles. The window, the print, the ceiling tiles.

“It’s supposed to rain this weekend,” I said.

The next day, they let me go home. I was feeling better. I was healing fine. The nurse insisted I take the pills with me but I left them on the food tray.

“The pain isn’t that bad,” I told her. And it wasn’t. But the nurse didn’t understand.

“Why would you want to feel anything at all? Pain is so unpleasant.”

I looked at the cancer woman on my way out. She was reading another magazine.

She looked up at me. I tried a smile.

It almost worked.

St. Mary's

The first time Roy really thought there may be a problem was when he saw the blood in the street. Eileen had been gone for some time now, but still, he stood sideways on the front walk looking from the street to the front door and back again, as though any time now she'd come out onto the porch and maybe ask him what he'd been doing. And maybe he could mention the blood in the street, and then she could tell him that he was just imagining things again. And he would believe her and the blood would go away. But Eileen was gone, and there was no one else to ask.

He went down to the edge of the sidewalk again and looked at the blood. There was so much of it. It couldn't be real, of course. But the smell, my god, the smell. He looked at the house. He looked back at the blood.

It was still very early. He had gone out on the porch in his usual way, to wait for the paper, to wait for the people to appear on the sidewalk and the street. He liked to watch them, these people, walking and driving and doing the things that people did. He couldn't remember when he had been one of them, although it hadn't been that long ago. Was it only spring?

But today there was blood in the street.

Roy went back onto the porch, he couldn't keep looking at the blood. He glanced back anyway. He needed to make sure that it was only in the road, not coming down the path from his own house, not belonging to him or someone he had hurt. Not that he'd ever hurt anyone before, but he was sure he could. Anyway, it couldn't be. There was too much of it. He went down to the street again. He looked at the blood.

It went the length of the street, an endless stream, at least an inch thick in one place he could see. No, it couldn't have come from one person. Not even a dozen. But then, what was it doing here, where did it come from? He couldn't look anymore, he went up to the house.

He would have stayed on the porch and waited for the paper, if he could stop himself from looking at the street. He couldn't. He went inside.

The kitchen had become messy since Eileen left but Roy kept the table clear. Clear of everything except the phone. He didn't remember now why he had put it there, in the middle of the table, but it didn't matter. It sat there, a cordless receiver in its charger base, and stared at Roy.

There was no one to call. Except Eileen.

Roy went to the window and looked at the street. He looked at the phone on the table. He looked back at the street. He could see the blood from here.

If he could just make it until the morning news came on the tube. Something like this would certainly be covered. Or was the morning news just a repeat from the night before. Roy didn't remember. When was the last time he'd watched TV? He realized his mouth was dry.

He grabbed a bottle at random from the stash under the sink. He poured until the coffee mug was full, then drank. Gin. Roy squinted at the raw taste. There was nothing to mix it with, but he should have. Anyway, drinking usually made him better. Eileen didn't think so.

"I was thinking about going up to see my sister in Newfoundland," Eileen said, "and while I'm there I'll think about how I feel about all this."

Roy had only nodded.

Eileen sat at the kitchen table, smoking and looking toward the door.

“I’ll leave you the number where I’ll be at. But Roy, don’t call.”

She had asked him to get help. She hadn’t understood why he didn’t. But she wouldn’t have understood, even if Roy explained it to her. He couldn’t make her see that pills hadn’t worked for his father, that they only made him slow and dull and made his mouth twitch like people were always saying something funny. And Roy was not going to end up like that.

He took another swig of the gin. He looked out the window. The blood was still there. He wondered if maybe this was the point where drinking couldn’t help anymore. He wondered if this was it. There had to be a way to know. There had to be some way of knowing if the blood was real.

Suddenly he remembered the camera. He could take a picture of the blood. He would be able to see it right away on the camera’s digital display and know. The camera would show him if the blood was there.

But the camera was upstairs.

Roy hadn’t gone upstairs since Eileen left. He tried, a couple of times. But there was something about the empty bedroom up there... Roy had heard things up there even when Eileen was still around. But now that she wasn’t, there was no one to say he was just being silly. No, he couldn’t go upstairs.

He went to the phone. He would call Eileen, she would set him straight. He dialed the number and waited. With every ring he felt more and more sure that this was the

right thing to do.

“Hello?” a woman answered the phone. A woman who was not Eileen. Roy said nothing.

“Hello?” the woman repeated. He should say something, he knew he should.

“Roy?” It was Eileen’s sister, most likely. But Roy couldn’t think of what to say.

“Roy, I know it’s you. I have call display,” Eileen’s sister said.

“Roy--” He wished she’d stop saying his name like she knew him “--Eileen isn’t here. I told you the last time, she left a month ago.” She hung up.

He couldn’t remember calling Eileen’s sister before and that was a little disconcerting. But it didn’t matter all that much right now. Right now, Eileen was gone, and there was blood on the street. Roy took another drink. He thought about the camera and looked at the stairs. He would have to do it. He would have to go upstairs and get the camera.

He left the mug on the table. He went up to the foot of the stairs and looked up. He listened. There were no sounds other than his own breathing. He looked back at the table. The mug was on the table. He should have had another drink. But no, no more stalling.

Slowly, Roy walked up the stairs. His shoes made little noise against the carpet. He jumped when a stair squeaked beneath him but kept on moving, breaking out in sweat and beginning to shake. At the top, he didn’t look into the spare room, he passed it without even turning his head. The camera was in their old bedroom, on top of the tall-boy, beside a vase with moulding flowers. Roy picked it up quietly, listening the whole time. The room was silent, for now.

Roy made his way back to the stairs, more quickly this time. He kept glancing back

at the bedroom. He almost slid down the stairs when the hot flash of panic hit him, but then it was over, he was back in the kitchen. He let out a breath he'd been holding. It was done. Roy had made it up the stairs and had come back with the camera. It was alright.

Before he went outside, Roy took another drink. He tested the camera to make sure the batteries inside it weren't dead. He took a couple of deep breaths, he willed his hands to stop shaking. Then he went out.

He walked down the path eagerly now. The blood was still there. He stopped at the sidewalk and turned on the camera.

There was a sound to his left which made him look. Down the sidewalk he could see a couple. They were looking at the street. The woman had her hand to her mouth. She was gagging. The man squatted and reached out, but the woman stopped him.

Roy couldn't make out what she said, but it didn't matter. The blood was real, the couple was seeing it too. He looked at the camera in his hand. It seemed ridiculous now, but he took a picture anyway. He went back to the house and sat on the porch.

Today's paper wouldn't mention the incident, but tomorrow's would. Then Roy would find out, he would know what all this was about. But it was all right now. He'd made it up the stairs, after all. Wasn't that something? He didn't need Eileen, although he missed her. But Eileen wanted things from him, and this, this was his alone. No one could take this away from him. He would be alone, but he would have himself, he would carry the burden.

Goldfish

11:30am

We sat in the dark waiting room and ate our lunches. We watched the people on the street through the storefront windows. Some tried the locked door to the studio, then read the hours of operation and left. Some pressed their faces against the windows, and were startled when they noticed us watching them.

It was a late spring Sunday and most of the stores on the strip wouldn't open until noon. The yoga place next door had been open since 8:00, and made all the other stores look open. The owner of the flower shop complained routinely. It didn't bother me. I liked to see how long someone would try the locked door before realizing the studio was closed.

Amanda nudged me with her elbow. We got going. Last night was a busy one, the rooms in the studio were a mess and the film in the cameras wasn't changed. There was a scribbled note of apology taped to the till.

Changing the film in the cameras was my favorite part of the job. After tonight I couldn't do it anymore, the studio was going completely digital. It had been half and half since I started working here, a year ago. Digital images of what was pictured on film showed up on computer monitors in the camera rooms.

I found the light-proof black-bag and got the film canisters ready.

"Thank you," said Amanda coming out of camera room #1, "I hate changing film."

Her arms were full of old stuffed animals and the giant plastic number three we used as a prop for birthday pictures. She went into room #2.

I put my hands into the sleeved black-bag and changed the film in the canisters. I watched the shapes made by my hidden hands. With my fingertips, I read the fine, converging circles of the film edge on the spools. I traced the sharp edges of film canisters and their lids. I loosened screws and tightened them blindly.

I remember learning how to change film in high school art class. Trudy, the art teacher, said we needed to go into ourselves, to re-learn our ability to control our limbs, to re-establish ourselves within space. She took us into pitch black darkrooms and introduced us to black-bags.

“Let your hands tell you what they’re doing. You can’t see them, but you don’t need to,” Trudy said. She walked between the desks and watched us fumble through loading film onto spools. I looked down at my forearms being swallowed by the black rubber sleeves leading into the bag. They looked amputated.

1:24pm

“Please, please, just one more time honey,” the mother said to the eight-month-old sitting on the platform. The boy was mewling. His eyes were red and his nose leaked snot over his upper lip. The kid was scared of the strobe light. The mom wouldn’t let me do my job. She looked at me distractedly.

“He just needs more time,” she stated.

“We don’t have any more time, we’ve been here half an hour over your session” I told her. I began to straighten up the props.

“But no, see, we haven’t got any good pictures.” She moved away from the baby

on the platform. I glanced at the baby. He went down on his belly. He crawled toward the edge of the platform.

“Ma’am”

“No, listen. I’m paying good money,” she continued.

“Ma’am, your baby” I pushed past her and grabbed the kid by the back of his overalls as he took a header off the platform. He started screaming.

“Oh geez,” the mother rushed over to calm him.

“Ma’am, this is why we have you sit beside them,” I watched her face fold. She was going to cry. Fuck.

I grabbed a box of tissues and began cleaning the kid’s face as best I could. He was quieting and I didn’t want to waste any chance for a shot.

“Now you just sit here and keep an eye,” I told the mom calmly.

The kid was already trying to crawl away but I sat him back down facing the camera. I faked an exaggerated sneeze. The baby seemed stunned. I jumped back and grabbed my camera remote. I faked another sneeze, this one bigger, louder. The kid laughed. I snapped the picture. The strobe flashed and popped like a kernel. The kid flinched. He looked at his mother and began to snivel.

I sneezed again, loudly. The kid stopped crying. I faked another sneeze complete with an exaggerated hair toss. The boy giggled. I zoomed in for a close-up and took the shot. The strobe went. The kid jumped. I sneezed. The kid laughed. Between shots I ran back and forth between the stage and the camera, unceremoniously arranging the kid into different poses. Four shots later we were done.

“That was wonderful honey,” the mother kept saying to the kid. She used a \$5.99

coupon to buy a single picture and left without a word.

“God, what a piece of work,” Amanda leaned on the counter next to me, “I can’t believe she’s in here every other week with that damn kid and those coupons. You’d think she’s making a flip-book. I hear she photocopies free passes from the Yoga place.”

I shrugged. I didn’t care if someone was scamming free yoga classes. I hardly understood why anyone would even want to.

One time, the yoga place gave all the studio employees free passes to a class. Amanda and I went together. The instructor had all the people meditate. She told us to find the pulse in our wrist with the fingers of the other hand. Our life energy. We were supposed to feel our blood, our life energy, flowing through us. Making us one with the universe.

I couldn’t find my pulse. I tried for a bit, first with my left wrist then with the right, then I just faked it. I sat there listening to all the other people breathing in and out and feeling their blood running through their bodies and thinking maybe I had no pulse.

“Well, that was pointless,” Amanda said after the class.

We didn’t go back.

3:42pm

A family of four. Mom, dad, teenage daughter, pre-teen son. The girl didn’t want to smile because of braces. The boy made fun of his sister. Dad made corny jokes. Mom fussed over everyone’s appearance.

Adorable. Norman Rockwell, eat your heart out.

I kidded around with the dad and assured the mom that I had my eye out for

flipped collars and messy hair. I told the daughter the braces made her look much older and asked the kid brother whether he was driving yet 'cause he was so tall. I had them say "pickles" and took my shot. I had them say "shenanigans" and took another. One pic of mom and dad alone. One of the kids together, one of each of the kids alone.

"You were so great," the mom said to me, then to the dad, "wasn't she great honey?"

They bought prints of all the poses.

"That kid reminded me of your brother," Amanda said after the family left.

"Sort of, yeah," I said. There were more ways that my brother wasn't like other kids than ways that he was. The kid who came in with his family for pictures was normal. My brother wasn't.

Norman Rockwell was told by his shrink that he only painted happiness, he didn't live it. Maybe that's the thing about happiness, you have to choose between recording it and experiencing it.

4:45pm

My last appointment of the day was a priest. He was getting a 16 by 20 portrait of himself to put at the entrance of a church.

"Can you just make sure I look welcoming? And righteous and benevolent. If you can."

He wasn't happy with the digital images of himself that appeared on the monitor. After twenty shots I lied and told him we were out of film. He settled on a pose, an exact copy of the other nineteen, but one that he thought made him look more "stately" than the others. I couldn't tell.

“This is a bit pricey. Have you got any coupons, or maybe a discount for clergy? You know I could put in a good word for you?” He smiled. I looked at him like I didn’t get the joke. He gave me his business card before leaving.

“This is why I don’t go for that religion crap,” Amanda said after the priest had gone. I couldn’t see why not, she’d fit right in. I thought she could have passed for an angel with her cornsilk hair and her white eyebrows. I’d never tell her that.

We locked the door ten minutes early. Amanda’s last appointment hadn’t shown up and she was ready to go home. I took the film out of the cameras for the last time while Amanda cleaned up the rooms. I cranked up the radio. We danced as we counted the till.

6:00pm

Crystal was waiting in her car, in the nearly empty parking lot. After I locked up the studio, and double checked the door, I got into the passenger side of her rust-red Chevette. She was listening to the news on the CBC. She changed the station.

“They killed off a retarded guy in the states, you know, for murdering somebody,” she said. “This lawyer was saying how some people on death row have mental problems and they’re executed even though they’re not supposed to be. The guy said once this schizo was given pills to make him better and then they put a needle in him because he was normal again.”

I looked at Crystal. She looked like she was waiting. I was supposed to say something. But I didn’t. I didn’t want to know things like that happened. There was nothing I could do anyway.

When we got to her house, Crystal’s husband Doug was asleep on the couch in the

living-room. She turned down the blaring TV as we passed him. He reeked of booze and sweat.

In the kitchen, we sat around the table and lit our smokes. Astrid and Paige came down from their rooms and started climbing all over Crystal. She hugged them, then chased them away like flies. They scaled my lap instead. Paige played with my necklace while Astrid found something to colour in the mess on the table.

8:30pm

Doug stumbled around the house getting ready for work. Crystal rolled her eyes when he went by us. I re-read some article in a rag-mag I found on the kitchen table.

“Hey, Jodie,” Doug muttered in passing. He started making sandwiches.

“Can you bring back some bread for tomorrow?” Crystal asked.

“We’re only baking the 12 grain tonight.”

“I don’t care. We need bread.” Crystal lit a new cigarette with the butt of an old one.

“I thought you hated 12 grain.”

“I’m not the only person in this house Doug. You want the girls to starve?”

“Don’t be a bitch.” Doug put his sandwiches in tupperware and left the kitchen.

We heard the front door slam.

“Douche-bag.” Crystal took a hard drag on her smoke.

We put the girls to bed in Crystal’s room.

“Are you going to sleep in my bed Aunt Jodie?” Paige asked.

“Sure am.”

“Are you gonna sleep in my bed next time?” Astrid asked.

“Sure will.”

9:00pm

“Why does she have to come to dinner every week?” Crystal furiously massaged spices into the carcass of a chicken.

“Because she’s your mom?” I took a drag on my cigarette. My mom hadn’t come to see me since I moved out, three years ago. I went to visit her once a month. She kept asking when I would move back home, when I would help her take care of my brother.

Crystal picked the chicken up off the cutting board. It was a limp, pale marionette in her angry hands. She squinted over the smoke drifting up from the cigarette between her lips. Ashes from its end dribbled onto the chicken. Crystal just rubbed them into the chicken along with the spices. Her hands were caked with marinade. When Crystal’s cell phone rang, I answered it. It was Tony.

“Hey Jodie, what’s going on?”

“Hold on, Crystal’s just washing her hands,” I told him.

“You don’t wanna talk to me? I wanna talk to you. When are you going to come see me, huh? When are we gonna have a good time Jodie ...” he kept talking but I was no longer listening.

“Hey Crystal, pencil-dick is calling for you,” I said loudly and handed her the phone. She shot me a frustrated look.

“Hey Tony. No, she didn’t mean it. No, I’m sure. Don’t say things like that. When

are you coming to get me?”

I went upstairs and lay down on Paige’s bed. I didn’t want to listen to Crystal talk, or be in the kitchen when she got picked up. I didn’t care that she was screwing around, she had done it before. But I had told her about Tony and the things he said to me. I told her about the time at the coffee shop, in the women’s bathroom, when Tony followed me in. If the clerk hadn’t noticed and raised a stink, some serious shit could have gone down.

“Then you shouldn’t lead him on, now should you?” she had said to me. I didn’t know what to say to that.

1:36am

I woke up to the sound of what I thought was the ocean. Paige was in the bathroom with the door open, sitting in the tub with the water running. She was using a soapy sponge to cover herself with lather. I sat down on the edge of the tub.

“Paige, we talked about this. You can’t take baths in the middle of the night.”

She didn’t answer. I got down on the floor by the tub and used another sponge to start washing her back.

“Let’s just hurry up this time, ok?”

“Ok. Can you wash my hair, Aunt Jodie?”

I used a plastic tumbler to pour water over Paige’s head. She squinted and wiped at her face as I lathered her hair, then held her breath as I used the tumbler to rinse.

“It’s my turn to take Franklin home next week, Aunt Jodie,” Paige told me when I was drying her in a giant towel.

“Franklin?”

“The goldfish in my class. It’s my turn to take him home for the whole week.”

“That’s gonna be fun.” I pulled the towel over Paige’s head and rubbed her hair dry. She giggled.

“It’s not supposed to be fun. It’s supposed to be responsibility,” she said seriously when I pulled off the towel.

“How’s that?”

“Miss Gauthier told us that goldfish don’t remember anything. So we have to remember to feed them and stuff. Because they won’t remind us.”

“Oh yeah?” I tried to sound interested but I just wanted to go back to sleep.

“Yeah, but if we forget to feed them just one day it’s ok. Because they won’t remember that we forgot anyway,” Paige laughed.

4:00 am

“Hold the wheel for a minute,” Crystal said to me in the car. I leaned over and steered while she used one hand to shield her cigarette as she lit it. We had the windows down as we drove down the highway, cold wind filled the car. There weren’t any other cars on the road, just semis. The girls were in their pajamas in the back seat. They were arguing.

“Mom, Astrid is touching me!” Paige whined.

“Stop it! Both of you!” Crystal barked at the back seat. She looked tired.

“Sometimes, I just don’t get him,” she said quietly. She stared straight ahead and sucked on her du Maurier. I wasn’t sure who she was talking about, but didn’t care. I just wanted

to get home. I had to be back at work at 10am.

“Did Doug call?” Crystal asked, breathing out smoke.

“No.”

“Oh.”

The girls started up again, but Crystal wasn't listening. She held onto the cigarette looking down the highway with unfocused eyes.

“Mommy!” Paige whined as she tried to get away from her sister. Astrid lunged for her against the seatbelt.

Suddenly Astrid kicked the front seat. Hard. It was an accident. The front seat bucked. Crystal's cigarette dropped from her mouth onto her lap.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Crystal batted at the smoldering butt rolling down her thigh. When she caught it, she threw the cigarette out the window, and spun around in her seat.

“What the hell are you doing?! Can't you just shut the hell up?” Crystal started yelling at the girls, one hand on the wheel, one waving behind her seat. Astrid pulled up her legs, but not fast enough. Paige started crying. Crystal kept yelling and struggling to slap at the girls, looking behind her. By the time I realized the car had already drifted into the next lane, it was inches away from the trailer of a passing semi.

“Crystal!” I yelled grasping an armrest.

She turned around just as the corner of the trailer made contact with the car. The squeal of metal on metal was deafening. The kids screamed in the back seat. Crystal jerked the wheel to the right and pulled the car away from the trailer. She turned on her four-ways and pulled onto the shoulder of the highway. She stopped the car. I was breathing hard, swallowing around a dry mouth.

Crystal unbuckled her seat belt and turned in her seat. Astrid and Paige were crying. Crystal pulled them toward her and hugged them close. She was crying.

“I’m sorry babies, I’m so sorry. Are you alright? Are you ok? I’m sorry. It’s ok now. It’s ok.”

I sat numbly in the front seat, my mouth suddenly flooding with spit. If I were a goldfish, I could forget about this. I could just swim around my bowl and think that everything was alright. And everything would be.

Convenience

The night I started working at the convenience store, Donna told me that the night shift was for whores and losers. She said if I knew what was good for me I'd get transferred to days or afternoons. God knew she wouldn't be doing the night shift for much longer, things were going to happen for her, damn if they weren't.

But that was two years ago, I told the cop. His face was blank.

Some weeks I'd start at eleven and finish at seven, some I'd start at midnight, ending at eight. Donna and I rotated. On Fridays and Saturdays we'd have a couple of boys from SecuriTech, from ten till three in the morning, to deal with the drunks and the kids and the crazies. Most of the time, the guards stood around looking bored, reading muscle mags and hitting on the drunk girls. Sometimes we needed them. For the most part, Donna and I took care of things ourselves. We kept a baseball bat hidden behind the hot-dog bun warmer. If things got out of hand.

"You keep a weapon in the store?" the cop asked, looking up from his lap top.

"No, a baseball bat. It's not a weapon, it's a discourager."

Anyway, Donna loved to mess around with the drunks. She'd short-change them and talk down to them and, if they drove, call their license plates in to the cops. After a while I started doing the same.

When I came in last night, Saturday night, the party had already started. One of the SecuriTech boys had busted up some guy's face and tossed him outside. He was sitting in front of the store blubbering into his cell. Inside the guard stood by the door, looking around the rest of the store, taking in anything that looked shady.

There were a few people in the store: a couple getting money out of the ABM, some teens messing around with the slurpee machine, a guy browsing the magazine rack, and a meth-head collecting penny candy into the palm of his dirty hand. The meth-head was a regular, the others I didn't know. John was the clerk on the afternoon shift, leaning on the back counter, looking bored. He nodded in my direction. After I got my smock on, I made it to the island and got behind the counter. John was scratching lottery tickets.

He told me it was busy around 10pm, then it slowed down. He didn't know what kind of night Donna and I were going to have. Sometimes you can't predict things like that.

But I didn't care. It was my last shift for the week. There were security guards. I wasn't concerned about how the night went. Tomorrow night I'd be just as drunk as all these people, in the same bars, doing the same things as they were tonight.

John got his paperwork together for end of shift and we shot the shit for a while. The people came and went. The meth-head left a fistful of sticky change on the counter to pay for his candy, and neither one of us wanted to touch it. We rock-paper-scissored who would mop the floor by the slurpee machine. I lost.

Donna came in a minute before midnight. John wasn't impressed. We set a new speed record for the shift-end till switch. John locked himself in the employee bathroom to count the till and do paperwork. The lock on the office door was broken and we'd

already been robbed twice. After shift changes we left the float money under the garbage bag in the bathroom garbage can. Sometimes I wondered what would happen if I took the money and just walked away from this place.

I didn't tell the cop that last part. Some things aren't meant to be spoken aloud.

The early bar crowd started rolling in soon after. They needed money for drinks from the ABM and gum to cover the smell of booze, and condoms for whoever they met flashing their money and spearmint breath. They milled aimlessly around the store or lined up in clumsy, winding lines. They hardly ever caused problems. The security guards were bored.

Donna and I stayed on the island until the first wave of people left, then took our smoke breaks. One of the guards joined us in front of the store. He told us there was still one guy in the store, looking at mags. Donna said she'd go in if the dude wanted to pay. We watched him from the outside through the store windows. We smoked ...

"Isn't one of you supposed to stay in the store at all times?" the cop interrupted. He typed something on his computer.

"Yes, but this is the real world," I told him.

So, we smoked our cigarettes. Moths bounced off the store windows trying to get inside. Those fluorescent lights must have looked like daylight. We talked about how we hoped the night would be busy and time would go by quick. We stubbed out our smokes

in the kitty-littered ashtray.

Well, we got our wish. The night exploded with people. Most of the ones heading for the bar had been pre-drinking, or had come from other bars. Yelling and laughter and crying mixed like cocktails in the aisles. The guards trolled through the crowd. They broke up scuffles and consoled crying girls. Donna and I watched them between customers. Security guards were as much trouble as anyone when they were looking for that knock-down, drag-out fight.

The customer bathroom went out of order pretty fast. I told the guards to toss out anyone who looked ready to puke. That kept them busy. Donna and I took turns at the register, while the other scanned the store for shoplifters. We didn't much care if a couple of things got pinched, but bar nights seemed to be the magic time for five-finger discounts. On top of the drunks, whose stealing was slow and tragically awkward, neighborhood kids would use the crowds to perfect their petty crimes. They collected cigarette butts out of the ashtrays outside and smoked them to the filter in front of the store. They stole like it was going out of style and they were difficult to catch.

When I saw a girl duck in the door among a group of people, I knew I had to get her out. She was a regular. She'd spent a night last summer huddled behind the lottery stand in the corner of the store. You can only pretend you don't notice things like that. She looked like maybe she cut her own hair.

The guards were both busy because someone had cut in line at the ABM and words were being exchanged. A fight was revving up.

I told Donna I'd be back in a sec and she gave me the finger. She hissed, either at me or the drunk customer trying to find money she'd hid in her bra, to hurry the hell up.

I trailed the kid and she didn't notice me. She was half bent, weaving between people. She was good, but I was better. I waited until she stuffed a bag of chips into her collar and grabbed a good handful of shirt. She fought and pulled but I managed. She shouted and swore a bit, but with all the noise in the store she could have been whispering. On our way to the door I got the chips back. I walked the girl out and shoved her down the sidewalk.

I told her: "You're lucky I don't call the cops." She shouted that I was lucky she didn't fuck up my face, and ran away. I turned to go back in the store, and that's when I saw him.

He was leaning on an angle, wedged between the front store window and the windshield washer stand. I went up to him for a better look. Late teens or early twenties, scrawny, over-dressed to be a part of the bar crowd. But there was no doubt he was drunk. Seriously drunk. His eyes were closed but flickered half-open every once in a while. He made feeble attempts to right himself. His head lolled. He mumbled incoherently.

I'd seen this before.

I looked for help to the guards or Donna inside the store but none were looking my way. I grabbed the guy by the forearms and yanked. He did enough to help me get him up. I leaned him against the window. I glanced over his shoulder, just in time to see a serious fight breaking out inside the store. I had to get back.

I heard a voice behind me. A girl walked up with two guys. She was calling the drunk guy by name. Ryan. She looked remotely competent. I asked her if she knew the guy, if he was her friend. She said he was in two of her classes at the college and that she

didn't really know him. She tried to walk past. One of her friends was pulling her arm. I grabbed her other arm.

I told her: "Listen, your friend, --Ryan-- he needs to be taken care of. Can you do that for him?"

The girl started looking like she didn't want to be there. I could tell she'd been drinking. She said she was going to the bar, that she didn't have time. I told her she had to, that he needed to go to the hospital and she needed to get him there. I wanted to slap her, to make her understand.

She kept looking at Ryan, then me, and saying she didn't know. Like it was fucking Jeopardy, or something. The girl's two friends came closer. One grabbed Ryan under the arm. He said they would take care of Ryan. I could smell the booze on the guy's breath.

"But you left him with them, even though they were all drunk," the cop said.

"Yes," I said.

When I got back inside, I thought Donna would knock me out. She didn't say a thing, but I took over the till and gave her a break. The fight by the ABM was winding down. The guards had separated the guys going at it and had shown them their own methods of peacekeeping. When I looked out the front window, Ryan and the rest were gone.

Last call always brought another wave of drunks into the store, but these were different drunks. These were manageable drunks. They were tired and gloomy or

irrationally happy. The worst we'd ever had at last call were flashers and flirts. An occasional crier.

The boys from SecuriTech were looking bored, so Donna and I let them go at 2:30. We could handle the few people who staggered into the store. At a quarter past three the night went dead and we were ready to start our cleaning. But first, we went behind the store to get stoned.

I didn't tell that to the cop either.

We never went far, just to the side of the store where the streetlights didn't quite reach. There were no houses behind the building, just an empty, graveled lot, but either way, we wouldn't have cared. Saturday night to Sunday morning was the dead time. Not even the cabbies were around.

Donna leaned against the building as she smoked. I lit up a cigarette and stood where I could still see the door.

Donna was pissed that I was getting a night off and she'd be stuck working with Tracy. We smoked and switched places. She took my cigarette and I took the joint. I started bitching about Tracy, but Donna wasn't listening. She was looking around the corner, behind the store.

She said: "Shit. There's somebody sleeping in the lot again. Scared the bejesus out of me."

I came over to where Donna was standing. I could see somebody sprawled in the dim lot, but they didn't look like they were sleeping. Maybe passed out. Or the other

thing.

I didn't want to go, but I had to. To find out. I couldn't go on living without finding out. That was definitely the weed talking. Donna hissed at me as I went.

It was a guy, that I could tell. The smell of vomit was everywhere. I got close enough to kick at his boot. I knew then.

I went back to Donna. I said: "Call the cops. That guy's dead, Donna." She started freaking out but I was just tired. I wished she'd just go and do it.

I talked to the cops while Donna stayed in the store. She looked out through the side window while cleaning the grill. She watched me smoke one cigarette after another. The cops set up their tape and their lights. The ambulance came: slowly, without a siren. When I finally looked, I recognized the guy. It was Ryan.

That's what I told the cop. I didn't know how much of it made sense. I was pretty stoned. He sat in the passenger seat of his cruiser with the door open and a computer on his lap. I sat on the curb, smoking.

"So you didn't call an ambulance? Or us? You could have called us," he said with distaste. I took a long drag of my smoke.

"Last month, a guy drove his car into the store through the front window, at two on a Friday morning. You guys took four hours to get here. Our only witness took off. The driver took a cab to the hospital." I shrugged. "Don't tell me you'd send a car to pick up a drunk on a Saturday night. Not in this neighborhood."

"But you knew he was in trouble," the cop said, "you should have ..."

"Should have what. I'm a goddamn clerk at a convenience store. You think anyone

listens to me? You think Ryan's friend listened to me?" I looked in the direction of the body.

"Fuck." I spat.

I crawled into bed that morning, like every other morning for the past two years. I thought about Ryan. I thought about the cop. I thought about quitting nights, getting a life, getting a career, getting somewhere else. It was spring after all. Renewal, and all that shit. I slept until eleven that night. When they started calling, I sat on the couch looking at the phone. It rang and rang.

Green

Pulling weeds was the first job I ever got paid for. It started when Mr. Vladek, from next door, asked me to pull the dandelions from his front lawn. He gave me five bucks. It was the most money I had ever held.

Mr. Vladek became one of my better regulars. He always trusted my count of pulled up dandelions. He didn't haggle over the price or watch me from the window, and Grandma never had to go and 'have a talk' with him, 'cause he always paid.

By the middle of summer I had people from all over town calling the house to get their lawns cleared and their gardens tidied. Word got around. Grandma said I was a real business woman. She gave me one of Grandpa's old wallets and a little black notebook to keep track of the money.

Sometimes, I didn't understand why some people even hired me.

The Kirbys, who lived right at the end of town, got me to come by once a month. Grandma said they were dirt-poor, but that we shouldn't hold that against them. Mrs. Kirby had nine kids. Mr. Kirby had old car parts on the lawn. There was hardly any grass.

All the Kirbys would come out and watch me for the whole time I worked. It creeped me out. The first time I came by they wanted me to pull up all the thistles. They got upset that I charged more for thistles and wouldn't pay after I had finished. I had to get Grandma to come down and get me my money. After that, all they had me pull up was the dandelions.

Mr. Wimes had the world's most perfect lawn. I could swear I'd seen him using

weed killer once, but he still had me come over to check his yard once a week. Grandma told me to never go inside his house.

Mrs. Reichelt's lawn was my favorite. After I took care of the weeds Mrs. Reichelt served me iced tea and lady-fingers in her gazebo. She never let me help her carry the tray, even though she was bent near in half and could only shuffle to walk. We sat in the gazebo on fancy wrought iron chairs, drinking tea from gold-rimmed teacups and had conversations across the fancy wrought iron table. Mrs. Reichelt once told me I came from good people. Mrs. Reichelt said that just between us and the lamppost, my Grandma had once borrowed money from her and had, not only returned it, but baked her the best carrot cake she'd had ever had. But that was ages ago, when my mother was still in her nappies.

"Don't take it personal," Mrs. Reichelt said after telling me the story, "your mama leaving and all. She was just tired of not having money. Who could blame her for that?"

This is what I remember about my mother leaving: the portrait in Grandpa's study came alive.

It was the portrait of Grandpa's mother, in a red dress, holding a basket full of apples. It was across from the daybed in the study, the daybed I was in because I was sick. I don't remember being sick but Grandma said I was and that talking about it was just bad luck altogether. She didn't believe me that the painting came alive. But it did.

The woman in the picture leaned out of the frame, reached across the room, and put her hand on my forehead. Then she flinched. I wanted to tell her to be careful, that she would spill her basket of apples. She squeezed my shoulder and said it was alright,

and that she was going away and to be good to Grandma. Then she went back into the painting.

I swore up and down I had seen it happen but Grandma said it was impossible and I had only dreamed it. She could have been right because my other memories from that time are of beetles crawling all over me, and the daybed just falling and falling and falling.

Mrs. Reichelt said she didn't know at all about moving paintings, but she thought that anything was possible, especially with the riffraff hanging around. She always walked me to the front gate, and locked it behind me with an old-looking, fancy key. I bet it was wrought iron too.

The riffraff were just the poor people that kept moving in around the edges of town. They worked at the recycling plant and the Walmart, and had many loud, dirty kids. Grandma said they were hard on their luck and she always had bags of old stuff to give them. Mostly that stuff was my mother's.

I didn't really pay attention to the poor people. I was pulling weeds and making money. The summer was winding down and I started walking dogs for the Barrigers and Mr. Lienke. I couldn't do enough.

Mr. Lienke wanted me to call him Ted. But I felt weird doing that. He had seven little wiener-dogs that he called dachshunds. My friend Lisa said that her mom told her Mr. Lienke was a pervert. Grandma told me that Lisa's mom didn't like people who were different and what she said about Mr. Lienke was nothing but lies. But I wasn't supposed to go repeating any of that. Mr. Lienke paid me well to walk his funny-looking

dogs, and that was all I cared about. Sometimes I picked up the garbage that always ended up on his front lawn. Once, I even offered to help him paint over some of that graffiti that someone had put on his house, but he just got upset at that.

One day, when I was just about to go down to the Barrigers, Grandpa called me over. He was watching the six o'clock news. I had gotten too old and too big to sit on his lap anymore, but Grandpa set one of the dining-room chairs next to his Lazy-boy for me.

"Feels like I haven't seen you all summer," he said to me. I told him I had to go.

"Now, you can sit with me for five minutes, can't you? That dog isn't going to crap himself if you're five minutes late, is he?"

I giggled and sat down. I hugged Grandpa's arm.

"Good god girl, look at your arms! You look like goddamn Popeye!"

I giggled. We heard Grandma sigh loudly from the kitchen. Grandpa ducked his head and winked at me.

"It's from pulling all those weeds, I bet ya. Your Grandma's been telling me you've been making some money." He smiled. I nodded. I showed him my little notebook. Grandpa whistled.

"That's a lot of weed pulling and dog walking! What are you going to do with all that money?" he asked.

My mind went blank. Until Grandpa had asked me, I didn't really think about what I was going to do with the money. I didn't think anything about it except how to make more of it. Grandma changed the coins into bills for me and I put it away in a shoebox in my closet. Grandma said that we should go to the bank, and open an account for me, but I liked having the money right there, where I could always look at it.

I thought about the money the rest of that day. I dragged the Barrigers' old hound around the block a couple of times. I went over to Lisa's. She told me if she had the money she would get all new clothes for school, instead of having to wear her sister's old stuff. And a cell phone. A couple of girls from our school got cell phones this summer. I didn't want a cell phone, or new clothes. But I didn't tell Lisa.

There was really nothing that I wanted to buy. I wanted the money. I thought about asking Grandma, but I knew she'd just tell me to put it in the bank. Maybe, I could just give it to her, like a present. Grandma never talked about money, but she wrote down everything she bought in her own little notebook. People who had money didn't do that.

When the streetlights came on, I left Lisa's house. I walked home thinking about the money. It had become a problem, I would need to do something with it.

There was a kid standing by our front gate when I got home. One of the dirty, loud ones. He stepped back to let me pass. He had a plastic bag of my mother's things in his hands, and he was waiting.

Inside, Grandma was making ham sandwiches. She asked if I wanted one. I went upstairs to my room. I sat in front of the closet, took out the shoebox and looked at the money.

The painting of my great-grandmother had been taken down some time ago, and was wrapped in brown paper at the back of the closet. I took it out and ripped the paper off, just at the front, so I could see the woman in the red dress again. I propped up the painting against the closet door behind the box of money. I knelt in front of it and waited.

I wanted the woman in the painting to move again. I was pretty sure it wouldn't

happen, but it felt good just seeing her again. I wanted her to reach out of the painting and touch me. I wanted her to talk to me. And she would sound like my mother.

Descent

Aggie and I met in church at Children's Day mass. We were the only two kids who didn't go home with presents. Grandma said it was because the old priest kicked the bucket and nobody bothered to tell the new priest how things were done. But I knew it was all about the white envelopes that the parents of the other kids put into the collections plate. Grandma didn't know because she didn't go to church.

Aggie thought she had done something to make God stop giving her presents. She hadn't gotten a gift at Christmas mass either, but she thought maybe God just forgot. I didn't know what to say to that.

We started walking to church together on Sundays. Aggie's mama worked near every day, since she had two jobs, and her step-daddy liked to sleep in on all the days he didn't work, which was every day. Aggie's family was dirt-poor, Grandma said, but I shouldn't hold that against her.

Aggie's house was at the very edge of town, a block further than mine. It was separated from the train tracks by the dirt service-road. I only went there once.

Nan paid us for picking gooseberries for jam. We always went to the booth by the train station, for candy and pop. On the way, when we passed Aggie's house, she stopped.

“What?”

“I'm gonna see if my dad wants anything,” she said and ran down the path. Nan told me Aggie's house used to be a laundry building a long time ago, before the world

war. It was small and square and concrete and had one window. Over-turned mangles and washtubs stuck out of the tall grass in the yard like rusty tombstones.

It was dark and damp inside. The air was slimy and smelled like burned milk. There was only one room inside, but there was a curtain in the middle of it. Aggie's step-daddy was behind that curtain. I could hear him snoring. Aggie pulled back the curtain and I saw him. He was in his underwear on a bare mattress. He was all hairy and fat and dirty-looking. I looked away when Aggie tried to wake him.

"Daddy?" Aggie touched his shoulder. He snorted and opened one eye.

"What you want, Aggie?"

"Did you want something from the store Daddy? I'm going to the store. Can I bring you anything?" Aggie talked all nervous like. I looked around the room. There was a stove in the corner. There was a dirty pot on one of the burners. I wondered where the bathroom was.

"Damn it Aggie, I don't got no money! What are you, stupid?"

His voice was like dog shit that won't scrape off your sneaker. He was drunk. As I stood there, trying not to look at him, I suddenly knew that Aggie's step-daddy wasn't saying her name like I thought, but instead he was saying "ugly." It just sounded like "Aggie" because his voice was all sticky. I started feeling funny then, but a terrible kind of funny, like when I saw that mole in the road that had been ran over and its guts all popped out of his belly. I had to leave. I was going to throw up.

"I'll wait outside," I said and went out. I ran behind the house. I heaved but nothing came out. Then the feeling started to go away, slow but steady. I leaned against the concrete, that was warm on the surface but cold if you waited, pressing my cheek

into the gritty wall.

It wasn't like it mattered to Aggie that her step-daddy was mean. She always talked about him like he was the most wonderful person she'd ever met. It was because Aggie was going to have a baby sister and her mama told her it was her step-daddy's fault.

Aggie was so happy, it was like she was the one having that baby. She wanted to play house all the time. So we did. All summer. By the end I was so sick of it, I'd have rather started school. But, one day, that all changed.

"I told you I don't wanna play house, Aggie. We played house this morning," I said. We were in my front yard, as usual, using the trash bins and the corner of the fence to make our pretend house. Grandma gave us an old blanket and we used it as a table or a roof or a cape for Teddy, my dog, when we had him over for dinner. Teddy wasn't a very good guest though, because he took off barking whenever someone passed on the other side of the fence.

"C'mon, just one more time. This time let's pretend we're making a baby," Aggie said. This was different, we'd never played like that before.

"Ok," I said, "but I don't know how."

We used the blanket for the bed. I was the mom and Aggie was the dad.

"Ok, now you have to lie down on the bed and I have to lie down on top of you," Aggie said. So we did. It was uncomfortable and funny, so we started laughing. Aggie said we had to wiggle all over, and that was even funnier. So we were wiggling and laughing and then Aggie disappeared. Not really, but at first that's what I thought happened.

What really happened was that Grandma had pulled her off of me. I sat up on the blanket, confused. Grandma had Aggie by the arm and was walking to the gate. She opened it and pushed Aggie out. Aggie looked scared. There was a look on Grandma's face I'd never seen before.

"You go along home now Aggie, it's dinner time. And you tell your mama to keep those curtains closed when she's fooling around," Grandma said. Her voice was all tight and calm. I wasn't sure about everything she'd said, but it was the weirdest thing I had ever seen Grandma do. Aggie took off running toward her house. Grandma closed the gate and looked at me.

"Go wash your hands, and set the table. It's dinner time."

Neither Grandma or Aggie ever said anything more about what happened, and I didn't know how to ask. Aggie didn't want to play house as much as before, but even when we did, we just played the regular old way. Especially after what Pete Tricolli did.

I didn't know that anyone besides Grandma had seen Aggie and me pretending to make babies, but Pete Tricolli from the house across the street did. That was very bad because Pete was always looking for something he could make fun of you for, or beat you up over. He had to get home-schooled because he got kicked out of St. Barbara's, for bringing a knife to class, and they didn't want him back.

The Sunday after the whole thing with Aggie, I came home after church to an empty house. Grandma was spending the morning going to yard sales with Mrs. Gourdin and Grandpa was visiting his mother in The Home. I'd never met my Great-Grandma because she got confused a lot and it upset her to see me.

Walking home, I had the key to the gate on a string around my neck, underneath my Sunday clothes.

The house was unlocked, because Teddy was on guard. Teddy was pretty scary when he wanted to be. That's why we kept the gate locked; Grandma said we didn't need any lawsuits. I got as far as to put the key in the gate lock and even got it turned, before I got shoved against the gate. I turned around, and there was Pete.

Behind me, Teddy exploded with a raw, furious barking, but Pete didn't even flinch. He grabbed me by the throat and pushed me up against the gate.

"Goddamed dyke," Pete said. He squeezed harder on my neck. "Don't think I didn't see you, you little queer."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but the hurt made me scared in a way I'd never been scared before. I tried to pull his hand away from my throat, but he was too strong. I tried to hit him, but he was just out of reach. Then Pete started pulling my shirt out of the waistband of my skirt with his other hand. That was somehow even more scary. My world was a picture that somebody had thrown on a fire; black holes appeared and grew larger and larger.

Suddenly the gate swung open behind me. I must have leaned on the handle. Pete and I fell into the yard. The back of my head hit the concrete walkway. All the sound in the world went away. The black holes changed into white ones. I could see the branches of the tree above me moving with the breeze. Birds moved among the limbs.

When the sound first started to come back, it came as a ring. It kept getting louder and louder, and with it, came pain. Some of the colour returned to the world and I noticed Teddy's snarling. I knew he was attacking Pete. I knew he'd probably bitten

Pete. And that was ok.

Then they were gone.

I didn't know how long I was on the ground. When I sat up, my head hurt something awful. I touched the back of my head. It was wet. There was blood. I probably got it on the back of my shirt too. I was going to get in so much trouble. I hid in the bushes, beside the front steps to the house.

Time went away from me. It could have been hours or minutes or days before Grandma came back. I couldn't see her from my hiding place, but I could hear her.

"What the hell?" Grandma said.

I heard Teddy. He was whimpering with happiness at Grandma's return. I didn't know when he came back. Then he found me in the bushes, and licked my face until Grandma came to see what he was up to.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Grandma yelled when she saw me. The look on her face made me start crying. She pulled me out of the bushes and carried me up the stairs and into the house, even though I was eight years old and way too big to be carried. That's when I knew I was probably going to die, which was alright, because I wouldn't get in trouble for wrecking my Sunday shirt.

But I didn't die. Grandma just made me sit at the kitchen table with my head down so she could see what the damage was. I put my forehead on a towel on the table and stared at my hands dancing on my lap. Grandma called Dr. Frank, but he wasn't going to come over. I sat at the table while Grandma fussed over the back of my head.

"Quit fidgeting," Nan said above me. I was unprepared when she put a cold, wet

dishcloth on the back of my head. I shuddered as the streams of water made their way down the sides of my face and neck.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s cold,” I felt her put a dry dishcloth around my neck. She left the kitchen, I could hear the quick, determined shuffle of her slippers. When she returned, she slid the giant zoology book onto my lap.

“How about you read me something?” she asked with a smile in her voice. I heard the banging of pots and the running of water, and knew she was getting ready to cook dinner. I lifted my head to look at her. For some reason, I wasn’t going to get in trouble. It was weird, but I wasn’t going to ask about it. I needed to ask about something more important. I read aloud for a few minutes, then lifted my head again.

“Grandma?” I asked, water running down my neck. “Am I a dyke?”

She spun around from the stove. Steam was coming out from the boiling water behind her. For a second, I was scared.

“Don’t you ever say that word! Only ignorant people use words like that.” She wanted to say more, there was something like fury that made her seem to bulge with unsaid things, but instead she turned back to the pots.

“Put your head back down. Keep reading.”

I read about bonobos.

After, Grandma brought down the big book of Grimm’s fairy tales and read out loud. I could see her shadow on the floor around the kitchen stool. Her deer-hide slippers, with the worn out toes, moved like bumper cars. Her voice was low and smooth, she was a great reader.

In the middle of “The White Snake” she started talking about red galoshes, and I

knew that she was falling asleep. She always talked about red galoshes in that place between asleep and awake. She once told me it had to do with growing up on a farm and sticking pigs. I didn't know what she meant by that, but she wouldn't tell me.

She said I wouldn't understand.

Monkeys

In the summer of '09, the smell of rotting garbage dotted the “i” in my misery. The strike had hit an impasse in early May. The dull, parched garbage bags that lined the sidewalks were randomly gutted by scavengers. The summer had been hot and dry. The grit blowing in from the fields, on the outskirts of town, permeated our lives. It creaked and snapped under slipper soles and covered windows and skin with greasy film.

I usually didn't leave the house until after curfew. Back when the car-parts factory was still open, the curfew was meant to cut down on vandalism in our town. But now no one enforced it.

I told Gran I was going to bed. She sat in her easy-chair, wearing her ratty bathrobe and waved her hand at me distractedly. She never looked away from the T.V. In the living-room I shut the door, grabbed my messenger bag, and snuck out through the balcony. I scaled the wrought iron fence surrounding our property and dropped to the sidewalk.

Lexi was sitting on the curb in front of her house. Her long, skinny legs stretched out into the street. She held up a giant, green wine bottle and took a swig. I looked past her to two silhouettes far down the street. Robbie and Martin. Spotlit by streetlamps, they glided--on their roller-blades--in converging circles. I glanced back at Gran's bedroom window. The glow from the T.V. shifted on the pane. My chest ached. I sprinted down the street to feel the air move against my skin. I knew Lexi would follow.

We raced past the half-built houses (on permanent hiatus), the weed-infested desolate lots, the flop-houses behind those, to the cabbage field. We ran through the field

punting wilted cabbage heads. They pulled out of the parched, fragile dirt effortlessly, feeble roots clutching dust. The field was sharply ended by a county highway. Beyond it, a dark forest loomed like a wall, cutting us off from the sunset. We crossed the highway and nestled in the brush like a pair of quail. Soon we were drunk on Lexi's cheap wine. Darkness boxed us in as we smoked one cigarette after another.

"I dare you to stop a car," Lexi said in that arrogant way she had. Sometimes I hated her.

It had begun last summer, after the thing with the jogger, like a dull ache. I just couldn't leave it alone, trying to figure out how and when the hate had become something I couldn't ignore.

Getting up, I moved to the shoulder of the highway, and stuck out my thumb the next time I saw a set of headlights. When I noticed who I'd stopped, it was too late. Fear tightened around my throat as the cruiser came to a stop before me.

"Oh shit," I heard Lexi mutter, followed by the musically hollow thunk of bottle hitting ground.

The passenger window of the cruiser rolled down.

"Hello ladies. What is it that you're doing out here tonight?" the cop closest to me asked. My mind staggered drunkenly through an obstacle course of excuses.

"Got a light?" I finally asked and heard Lexi snort behind me. The cop flashed her a tired glance and looked back at me.

"You girls shouldn't be out here in the dark."

"We were just on our way home," I said, avoiding his eyes.

"Well, see to it. I don't want to see you here when we come back." The window

rolled back up abruptly. When the tail-lights disappeared around the bend, Lexi got hysterical. We laughed so hard Lexi puked, which got us laughing even more.

The next car I flagged down was an ancient, red, two-door Chevette, driven by an awkward twenty-something. I stared at his receding hairline as I squeezed into the back seat. There wasn't any leg-room between the front and back seats, so I sat cross-legged. Lexi sat in the front and immediately started rooting through the glove-box.

"So w-where are you g-girls g-going?" the driver looked overwhelmed as he kept turning to look at us. His face contorted as he wrestled with the stutter.

"Where are you going, ... Paul?" Lexi asked, reading the car's registration.

"I'm k-kinda just c-cruising," he said.

"Think you could just cruise down to the store and pick us up some beer?" Lexi asked coyly.

Paul told us he needed to go see some friends first, but after that he'd get us some alcohol. Lexi found a Katy Perry CD in the glove-box and played "I kissed a girl" incessantly. We both knew all the words. I think we scared Paul a little. Lexi took his pack of cigarettes off the dashboard and tossed it to me. I put it in my bag.

We pulled into a parking lot of a clump of apartment buildings. Six guys were leaning on three beaters, one of which was bellowing death-metal out of crackling speakers. Paul stopped some distance away and asked us to stay in the car.

"Your friends look like stoners. Can you get us some weed?" Lexi asked as Paul got out of the car.

We watched him walk up to the group. I didn't have to hear what they said to know that the others were making fun of Paul. He was smiling awkwardly.

“God, what a loser,” Lexi exhaled. Suddenly, something Paul said made all the other guys turn to look at us.

“What do you wanna bet he just told those guys he’s gonna bone us? Let’s split, I don’t need this shit,” Lexi said.

“Come on Lexi.” I felt kinda bad for Paul.

“Whatever. Fine. This’ll be my good deed for the year, or something.” She leaned over the driver’s seat and rolled down the window. She screamed Paul’s name until one of the guys turned down the volume of music.

“I know you wanted to see me make out with my friend Paulie, but if you don’t hurry up I’m gonna start without you,” Lexi sang. I screamed with laughter and fell back onto the seat. Then Paul was getting in and starting the car, and we were moving again.

“So, you can get us some booze now?” Lexi asked.

We went to a convenience store that sold beer from a locked cooler in the back. While Paul went to pick out what we wanted, with the clerk trailing behind him, Lexi grabbed handfuls of impulse-buy candy and stuffed them into my bag. When the clerk came back carrying a six-pack, Lexi took it from him, caught my hand and dragged me out of the store, leaving Paul to pay. Then we ran.

We hid in an alley a block from the store. Sitting on overturned garbage cans, we chugged our beer, making faces at the cheap bitterness. We smoked Paul’s cigarettes and laughed at what a putz he was. Lexi wanted to keep moving.

We walked down to the gas station where the night attendant hated us. I liked making him angry and watching his helplessness. Sitting down on the curb by the pumps, we lit cigarettes and drank beer. The attendant was too lazy to come out of his

booth, so his voice crackled through a speaker above our heads.

“You two, get out of here now.”

Lexi raised one arm and extended a finger.

“So what do you wanna do next?” she asked me.

“I’m kinda bored, let’s go see Robbie and Martin.”

“Those losers?” Lexi scowled.

“They probably have some weed or something.”

At the mention of pot Lexi brightened up.

“Ok. Let’s go.”

The attendant’s voice sounded again.

“Get the fuck outahea!”

Lexi grabbed some paper towels and started burning them with her cigarette.

When they caught fire she tossed them by the pump, grabbed my hand, and ran. Over my shoulder I saw the gas jockey running out of his booth to stomp out the flame.

Lexi thumbed our next ride. I was too hammered to pay attention to the driver. The air inside the small car was hot and thick, but my world was beautiful and dark, zooming past the car. I pressed my cheek against the window. The conversation between Lexi and the driver was a blur of words. I could tell that Lexi was giggling. And that was bad. People were always taking advantage of Lexi. Like the jogger. I forced myself to focus just in time to see the driver’s hand cross the gap between the two front seats. Lexi giggled. Anger sobered me. I hated them both. I lay back on the seat and kicked the driver in the side of the head with the heel of my sneaker. His head bounced off the side window like a plastic ball. He braked, hard enough for the car behind us to swerve. Tires

squealed. The other driver leaned on the horn as he passed us. Our driver started yelling.

“What the fuck!?! Goddamn crazy cunt! Get out of my car!”

Lexi got out, babbling while the driver yelled. She opened the back door and I rolled off the seat, dropping onto the street. We staggered to the sidewalk. Lexi started blubbering.

“What is your problem Penny?” She pushed me. I shoved her back, hard. She fell backward.

“You’re such a bitch! He liked me Penny! Why do you have to wreck things for me!?” Lexi shrieked.

“Wreck things for you?” I yelled so hard spit flew from my mouth.

“He liked me,” she whimpered.

“You are a goddamn idiot!”

Fury swallowed me whole. My lungs burst open like milkweed pods, but there just wasn’t enough air. I was trapped in disgust. I didn’t understand.

“I hate you. You’re weak and you’re stupid. You let these slimes use you and then come crying to me. I’m not your fuckin’ mother!” I staggered backwards, pushed by the force of my words.

Lexi cried harder. She made me so tired. My chest started to hurt again. I hated her for how helpless she was. I wanted to leave her there, I’m not sure why I didn’t. I just stood there until she was done. I was too.

We weren’t far from home, so we decided to walk. I felt Lexi’s hand take mine as we walked the empty streets. Crossing the train tracks, we tripped and lurched in the dark. We came out at the empty lot across from my house. I dropped Lexi’s hand as we left the

darkness behind. At the end of the street Martin and Robbie looked like they were jumping over something in the middle of the road. We looked at the dark windows in Lexi's house. Her dad slept on the second floor; looming over her, even in his sleep. I looked away. The blue glow was still coming from my Gran's window.

"You coming?" Lexi asked heading down the street.

"I'm kinda tired," I half lied. She shrugged. I watched her walk away as I climbed over the fence.

Back in the living-room, I took off my bag and went to see Gran. She had fallen asleep in her chair, as usual. I turned off the T.V. and put my hand on her shoulder. She startled awake. Holding her upper arms, while she clutched at my forearms with her bony hands, I lifted her onto her feet. Unsupported, she stood hesitantly while I turned down the covers. I helped her out of her bathrobe and into bed.

"I know you were out tonight," she said as I pulled the covers around her. I said nothing.

"You know that girl's mother ... she drinks."

"Gran ..." I sighed.

"They tell people that she's visiting her sister, but she's really in a 'place', you know... . That girl, Penny ... no good will come to you by going around with her."

I felt like telling her she was right, that I wouldn't hang out with Lexi anymore. But that would have been a lie.

"Gran, not now." I patted her hand and tried to smile, then left before she could go on. Back in the living room I opened up the pull-out couch and lay down. I stared at the slanted, whitewashed ceiling. It spun lazily.

When I was little, before I lived with Gran, my parents took me to the zoo. I wanted to see the monkeys. I cried. But when we went into the monkey house the smell, oh God, the smell. I started heaving and mom got mad and I told her that I'd be good, that I just wanted to see. Then, I got used to the smell and we saw the monkeys. They were great. I had fun. But when we got back outside, the air smelled so good and clean and sweet that it was almost better than seeing the monkeys at all.

The Collapse

Yesterday.

We came early, as always four to a car. I rode shotgun, while the operator of line #31 drove. A couple of girls from #36 dozed in the back, leaning against each other.

“I’m having a shit day,” the operator said to no one in particular. “Just wanted to let you know.”

In the parking lot we found the material handler from line #32 going home. She moved in place, from foot to foot, as she waited for us to park. The sun was climbing out from behind the pile of dirt beside the factory. Grass and weeds had begun growing on the hill in patches. The dirt was a remnant of the construction of the three-tier parking lot the company had built here three years ago. But months after it was finished no one wanted to park in the dim, echoing building. There had been an assault. We parked in the old lot we shared with a closed down factory next door.

We crawled out of the car’s warm cocoon into the cool morning air. Handler #32 had the post-shift shakes, the cold exhaustion of adrenalin leaving the body. She wiggled and lurched and danced as she spoke. The night had not been good, she told us. #32 had rioted all shift, spitting out product and pieces of itself. It was the fault of the gum, the handler said, it jammed at every section of the machine. The girls had wrestled with it all night, the mechanic had come several times. He had adjusted things, though none of it helped, he just sweated all over the machine and it had to be washed. #32 had only done 50,000 during the night.

We had been expecting what she told us, but it left us feeling deflated anyway. We

filed into the factory through the side door, humming with sleepy, disjointed conversations. We passed through the cafeteria, drowsily grabbing white ceramic mugs from their ranks on the chrome counter. The morning staff didn't come in until seven, but the night staff left out plastic carafes filled with coffee over night. We crowded around the tables, nursing lukewarm mugs, chair legs fencing with one another as they scraped the floor in search of space.

For months there had been dangerous talk among us; of course, ours was the last production plant left in Canada. There was no way we could ignore that the head office in Chicago had closed. The company had tried, they built a plant in the south, across the border, but it had only lasted a year. There had been no further word from the higher-ups, but then again we were too afraid to ask. The wrong kinds of questions could get us the answers we didn't want to hear. We were already hanging on with everything we had. Often now, we didn't know why.

We went to the locker room and changed into our uniforms. The corporation had had them changed from white to sunny yellow a few years back. They had been into industrial psychology back then and heard that yellow would increase team spirit, increase productivity. The yellow had stayed bright for an average of three washings, then became faded and, along with a patchwork of bleach marks and grease stains, made the colour look more like bile.

The locker room was alive with sound. It simmered with conversation, shuffling of steel-toed shoes, flushing of toilets and creaking of locker doors. In minutes we began leaving for the factory floor: at first trickling, then pouring out the change-room entrance. Hands reached into the boxes of hair-nets and ear plugs by the door. Above

them, some well-meaning soul had put up a poster for an exhibit of artwork by Vincent Van Gogh. The picture on the poster was called “Farmers Planting Potatoes.”

I didn’t know what the intention had been when the person, likely one of us, had taped that poster on the wall. I hated myself for looking at it, but couldn’t stop. The dusty tones of the painting, the forms of farmers like crooked twigs with limp faces, seemingly working together but really, alone. I had begun to fear seeing it. The poster had become badly dog-eared over the years, and started to tear around the tape supporting it. I couldn’t wait for the day when the tear finally made its way too far, and someone would be forced to take it down.

The thing that hit you hardest when you walked through the swinging double doors that led to the production area, was the sugar powder. Some of us, especially those with asthma, had petitioned for face masks some time ago. The powder was hardly visible but it permeated the air. We inhaled it, tasted it, smelled it. We battled with the fine, white film it left on everything, but still ended up with dusted machines, and frosted eyebrows. The powder was laced with a sweet mint that stung our eyes, burned inside our noses, and played on the backs of our tongues. We coughed and sneezed making our way to our respective lines, finding the night shift still spastically moving around the roaring machines, trying to downplay exhaustion. Each line connected five machines: the processor, the stacker, the sealer, the packer, and the case former. Loose pellets of gum that entered the processor would exit the cycle packed five different ways and ready to be shipped. The only way we’d been able to meet forecast, to make the numbers, was to keep the machines going non-stop.

Kathe Reynolds, the shift supervisor, was already in her office, her hunched back

visible through the large, sugar-dusted office window, as she sat at her desk. Hers was a job even more thankless than ours; the company had gone through five shift supervisors in the past three years. Kathe had lasted the longest of all these, probably because she had turned her desk away from the window.

We swarmed our machines. Operators talked to operators, the packers and stackers and sealers intermingled with each other, trading information while doubling on their duties. The material handler from #32 had been overly kind in her description: the night had been a massacre. The gum had been so bad that three of the nine lines had run for only half an hour, and even at that they had run their teams ragged. Stopping every few minutes, the processors had mauled and crushed the gum pellets, jamming parts with gummy residue. The teams had battled valiantly, then had cleaned and abandoned their stations, helping at other machines instead.

We looked at the gum with loathing. The normally rectangular tiny forms had taken on imaginative abstract shapes. The machine spat them out like watermelon seeds. The rejection bins had to be emptied every seven minutes, or they would empty themselves onto the floor. Two girls had been taking turns running from their work stations, at the stacker and sealer, to empty the bins all night; their knees buckled feebly as they watched the day shift take over. The desperation in their faces was obscene.

The stacker, loaded with packs of gum, clattered relentlessly, sending them along to be vacuum-sealed in sleeves of plastic wrap. They were packed into boxes and stacked onto a skid, like a giant game of Jenga. Frowning in effort and concentration, the girls at the different stations of the line moved in fluid, repetitive motions, mesmerizing in tempo and grace.

At first break, we all glanced at the clock, then at each other, then kept working. It was all about making the numbers. For the next fifteen minutes, we cast quick glances at Kathe's rounded back in the office window. Skipping breaks was not approved, and if we were caught But we weren't. With her back turned there was no way Kathe would see us, and she couldn't hear anything over the roar of the machines, and those ear-plugs they made us wear. The earplugs didn't help all that much anyway, the yearly hearing tests proved that much.

An hour later Kathe appeared at her office door and waved us to come in. The operators reluctantly shut down the processors and we all packed into the small room. We stood around fidgeting impatiently, humming with tense energy. Kathe got right down to the point: there had been problems with numbers not being met. All of us began to shift with a nervous, angry shame. It was electric.

“It's the gum Kathe.”

“It ain't made right.”

“We can't pack gum that hasn't been made right.”

Voices foamed in protest. Kathe looked down and shook her head.

“The state of the gum isn't our problem. Packaging it is our problem. We need to bring up our numbers, ladies, so let's hear some ideas about how we can do that.” She looked at us expectantly.

We looked at her, then at each other with blank faces. We became quiet. The operator of #37, an unassuming Romanian woman with wiry salt n' pepper hair that defied her hairnet, cleared her throat gently.

“We can pick through gum before it go in the processor. We can pick some bad

pieces by hand, have less rejecting,” she said meekly. There was a pause in the room as we all looked at her. She reddened.

“That’s one idea, any others?” Kathe asked, already glancing at the paperwork on her desk. The silence in the room was painful. The meeting was over.

We went back to our stations. Operator #31 waved me over to help her sort gum by hand. Line #30 was down, its team dispersed among the other lines. I got one of the girls to take over my station and went to the processor. We watched the white pellets bounce and shiver on a conveyor belt. Our hands pecked at the gum pieces, tossing the bad ones aside.

“Kathe’s a cunt!” the operator yelled to me, spittle raining from her mouth. I barely heard her over the noise. I nodded. I didn’t think that Kathe was a cunt at all but it was better to agree, especially with operators. There’s always a pecking order.

We couldn’t skip lunch, even Kathe took lunch, but we left the floor late and came back early. All the girls took turns picking through the gum. Watching the jumping, monochromatic gum messed with our eyes. At the end of the shift, we had a hard time focusing, everything we looked at vibrated.

We didn’t realize it was time to go until the afternoon shift poured in through the doors. Last break had come and gone unnoticed. We left the machines and the noise for the unnatural quiet of the locker-room. The lethargic rustling of changing clothes was barely audible over the flat ringing in our ears. No one spoke.

We moved out the door one by one, past the poster of farmers perpetually planting potatoes, into the sunlight of a September mid-afternoon. We packed into our cars, bodies itching from sudden inactivity. Leaving the lot slowly, we tried not to, but still

looked at the Sony factory building, with which we shared our lot. Sony had closed seven months before.

On the car radio, the CBC was featuring a segment on the unexplained, increasing disappearance of bees around the world. Rampant in the States, the condition had recently been noticed in Canada, though only in Ontario and Saskatchewan, which was somewhat disconcerting. The cause was still largely unknown, the researcher from Guelph University was telling the smooth-toned host, who periodically interjected comments appropriately laden with concern. If bees went extinct, researchers predicted, one third of the world's flowering plants would follow. Could you imagine, the tranquil voice asked rhetorically, one third of the colour gone from the world?

Today.

We came early, as we now always did. There were not enough hours in the work day. I rode in the back of the car, one of the girls from #36 sleeping on my shoulder. We parked in the darkened lot.

We found all the girls from the night shift by the side door. They were standing close together, looking like cows before slaughter. There was a sheet of paper taped to the door. When the girls saw us, they made room but no sound. We went up and read the fine print. The text blurred with confusion, parts of sentences slid together and apart. "In order to compete in a global economy," "eliminate excess capacity," "economic necessity requires," "close doors and change locks to protect assets," and finally, "arrangements can be made to pick up personal property". It was signed by no one we

knew.

More and more workers began to arrive, milling around the side door. Questions began to fly. The girls from the night shift said that it had all happened too quickly, much too quickly. They were told to shut down the machines and change and leave. No one said why. The night shift supervisor had followed them outside and had posted the note on the door. Then he'd gone back inside. The door was locked, someone had already tried it. After that, they didn't know what to do.

Our voices began rising in volume; our conversations became one, teeming with anger. No one knew who went first. In one swirling mass, we moved around to the front of the building. The face of the factory was made of tinted glass panes. We could see the foyer, the waiting area, the receptionist. She was trying not to look at us.

There was no need to try these doors; we knew they'd be locked. We spanned the length of the windows so we could all see inside. Our hands landed on the glass. We all stared at the woman behind the desk. She looked up fleetingly and startled at the sight of so many eyes looking back. She lowered her head and hunched her back. She picked up the phone receiver. We watched her mouth words, tilt her head, put the receiver down. She uneasily glanced at us again.

Her fear began to feed us. It gave our anger life, made it bloom into rage. Someone hit the window pane with open palms. More of us followed. Our pounding grew, making the windows buckle and shake. The sound built and crested in thunder. The receptionist had flinched at the first strike, and now she left her post and ran up the stairs. Her sudden retreat took away our drive. Our attack on the glass slowed, then stopped.

We waited for the receptionist to return, maybe with someone from upstairs,

someone who could explain, who could be reasoned with. But she didn't. We stood together but separate, shifting restlessly, looking at each other for answers we couldn't give. What would happen to us now? What were we to do?

We began to slip away. Operator #31 touched my shoulder and we left together, the girls from #36 following us furtively. We got into the car, like we'd done countless times before, and left the lot. The operator took the usual route home, although we could have gone anywhere, it didn't matter. The girls from #36 were dropped off first. They seemed reluctant to leave the car. The operator drove me home, the air between us thick. When we stopped in front of my house, she suddenly broke the silence.

"You give them years of your life, and one day it's, 'don't let the door hit ya where the good lord split ya.'" I wanted to say something or do something, anything to make those not be the last words between us. Instead I reached for the door handle and got out of the car. I waved and smiled as she drove away, but she didn't wave back.

Inside, I sat on the couch for a while, not watching some sort of the home improvement show on TV. I thought about that Van Gogh print in the change-room and how I was never going to see it again. I wondered if someone would call to pick it up and wondered if I should. I grew tense and restless. An unfamiliar feeling swelled inside me. Then swelled some more.

For the first time since college I thought about painting. My supplies had been packed away and stored in a succession of closets and basements since then. I found them now and stared at the box of paintbrushes and tubes in various stages of emptiness. I didn't have a canvas.

Getting into my car, I had the intention of finding an art store, but ended up at the

gum factory instead.

Somehow I had driven up onto the immaculate front lawn.

The glass paneled wall brazenly stared at me through the car windshield. The box of paints and brushes was on the back seat. I had no idea why I brought it with me. Now, looking back at those dark windows, I knew I had found my canvas.

I painted a landscape, the one I imagined existed here before the factory was built. I wanted to erase the building, replace it with what had been before. The oil paints broke the smoothness of the glass, created grass and trees. I painted for hours, thinking nothing.

I drove by the factory every day for a week; my artwork remained untouched. It was the rainstorm on Saturday that began flaking the paint in the thinner areas of the picture. Someone else had been by and left a funeral wreath against the wall, under my painting. I didn't come back again after that. It made it easier to think that the painting was still there, that nothing had changed.

Power

The lights went out just after 4 o'clock. Dawna waited until she ran out of coffee before locking up the store. Justin couldn't work in the back room, so he came to the front and hoisted himself onto the counter. He rubbed the shin he'd barked, in the dark, against the muffin trolley. Dawna's ears rang in the silence of the dim coffee shop. Justin wondered aloud about the power.

Dawna tried calling the manager but couldn't get through. It was ok anyway, Gary showed up ten minutes later.

"Why is the door closed? Where are the customers?" Gary wanted to know.

"We ran out of coffee. I tried to call you," Dawna said.

"The network is down, my cell is useless. Never mind the coffee, sell what you can. I don't pay you to sit around."

Dawna opened the front door and Justin made a sign on the back of a donut box. He hung it in the window. "No more Coffee!" it said. The electricity stayed off.

Customers came and went. Everyone wanted to talk about the blackout but no one actually knew anything about it. Dawna nodded to the customers, not really listening. Some bought donuts or cold drinks that wouldn't stay cold for long. Others just stood around with their arms crossed and waited.

Justin couldn't fry or bake in the dark kitchen, so he stayed at the front and helped with sales. The customers looked at the manual receipts with suspicion. They checked over Dawna's math. They wanted fresh coffee, they wanted to pay with credit, they wanted the power back.

Gary found an emergency flashlight in the office and stayed for nearly an hour. He came out to deal with the most irate customers.

“Why are people such dicks?” Justin asked, his voice a little too loud. Everyone in the store looked at him.

Over the next hour the traffic slowed, then stopped. Dawna stared outside from behind the counter while Justin played games on his cell phone, until the battery died. Then, he went outside and sat on the curb in front of the store.

The landline phone still worked, so Dawna called her mother. Long distance. She was pretty sure Gary would lose his shit when he found out.

Dawna’s mother’s power was out too. Everybody in the neighborhood was out on their porches yelling. Like animals, she said. None of them knew what was happening. Mrs. Lam, in the next house over, thought it had to do with the heat. Mr. Beadle said that the power plant probably couldn’t keep up. Or it might have been a terrorist attack. Regardless, Dawna’s mother said, if the electricity didn’t come on soon she’d have to barbecue some of the meat from the freezer, so it didn’t go bad.

After she hung up, Dawna went outside. Justin was smoking a menthol cigarette.

“Yuck,” said Dawna pulling out her own smokes, “you smell like candy and desperation.”

Justin smiled.

“You should talk, with your backwoods stogies. Did they run out of brand name cigarettes at the store?” Justin batted at her ponytail. They laughed together.

They sat and watched the empty parking lot. The dark traffic lights, over the intersection, swayed slowly and heavily with a gust of warm wind. The only motion in

the street.

An old woman came out of the convenience store next door, yelling over her shoulder. She flogged the sidewalk with her cane as she passed Justin and Dawna. She looked at them with bitter eyes.

“That man,” she said breathlessly, “that man tried to charge me ten dollars for a can of cat food!”

Dawna stared.

“Cat food!” the woman repeated, “I’m calling the police! That man is a crook!”

Dawna watched the woman make her way across the parking lot, then down the street and out of view.

“Well, that was dramatic,” Justin said in a monotone.

“Shut up,” Dawna said at the sky. She took a long drag of her cigarette.

Justin shrugged.

The afternoon changed into evening, but Dawna didn’t notice. She sat on the curb with Justin and smoked cigarettes. She brought out cold drinks, which were now just cool. They drank in silence.

People came by and talked, some about the blackout, most about nothing at all. Dawna smelled burning wood and charring meat and the dusty smell of an ending day. She closed her eyes and lay back on the still warm sidewalk.

In her dreams about high school Dawna was always waiting for Steve. She was sure they’d had other classes together, but she didn’t notice him until grade eleven

calculus, when his mother came into the class wearing her bathrobe and slapped Steve across the face. When he asked Dawna out, later that year, she said no. She liked him, she really did, but all she could think of was his mother. Until then, Dawna didn't think you could have a problem with alcohol. Now, there were months when Dawna didn't think of Steve at all. In the dreams though, she was always waiting. But Steve never came.

When the deep darkness rolled in, Dawna went inside. She watched Justin's fuzzy shape, and the glowing end of his cigarette, to make sure he was still there. Gary had left them the flashlight and some candles he found. Dawna lit them all. When the phone rang, she screamed. Then she laughed.

Lisa was on the phone. Dawna got Justin. While he and Lisa talked, Dawna went to change the garbages in the back room. She always felt funny about listening in.

She pushed through the back door, hauling black trash bags full of raw dough and cold coffee grinds. The dumpster was just around the corner. The flashlight flailed in her hand. Dawna put it on the ground to heft the bags into the bin. It lit the back wall of the shop in concentric circles.

There was new graffiti scrawled across the brick facade, joining the older tags and maxims. Above the suggestion that "Sylvie Clifton sucked 27 cocks!", memorialized in permanent marker, someone had spray-painted: "This life will be my death." Dawna touched the letters, only to find the paint still tacky. As she tried to wipe her fingers on the wall, she realized that the lettering was a part of a bigger mural. She stepped back and illuminated more of the graffiti with the flashlight.

The artwork was decent. She could clearly make out the image of a cloaked skeleton using a pole to propel a barge through, what looked to be, flaming water. The artist should have worked on their perspective; the skeleton looked too big for the boat, making it seem comical, rather than frightening.

Looking up at the painting, Dawna suddenly became aware of the night sky above the building. She had never seen stars like these before, not in real life anyway. There were so many, so brightly lit. She could see several constellations without even trying. A ribbon of densely packed stars, Dawna realized, was probably the Milky Way.

Dawna noticed she had stopped breathing when the flashlight fell from her hand. The light went out, as it hit the pavement and rolled. The world became a layering of shadows. The sky threatened to consume the earth.

Dropping to her hands and knees, Dawna fanned her arms out in search of the flashlight. Her fingers brushed against it, sending it rolling further, but she managed to catch it. She slapped the flashlight against her other hand, but it stayed dark. A noise behind the bin startled her, and Dawna looked up, to where there should have been shrubs. Something brushed against her leg. She knew it had to be a cat, it felt like one, but in the dark she imagined rabid raccoons and pythons. Dawna shook the flashlight and slapped it again. It blinked into light.

The cat wandered around her, rubbing itself against the garbage bin. It seemed unfazed by the situation. Dawna used the flashlight to search the bushes. She slid the beam of light over the brush, not seeing anything. But there was something. Small glints of light she noticed out of the corner of her eye. The cat cried at Dawna.

Cats, she realized. She was seeing cats' eyes. Looking at her from the shrubbery.

There had to be at least a dozen, maybe more. Hiding and watching. Freed by the lack of street-lamps and cars. Regressing into primitive predators. Dawna called out. Two cats materialized out of the bushes and ran to her. One, jumped into the garbage bin. The other rubbed against her legs.

She heard the shop's back door open, and Justin came around the corner.

“What are you doing? You've been out here forever,” he said.

“Nothing. I dropped the flashlight,” Dawna shook her head. She passed the flashlight to Justin and began hoisting the garbage bags into the bin.

“So, Lisa's still going to work. They have emergency lights at the factory, and they're going to clean or something. Instead of production, I mean. Anyway, she'll be gone like regular. So, you want to come over?” Justin moved toward her. She could see he wanted to touch her, maybe even kiss her.

Dawna looked at the bushes. She could feel the cats watching her. Seeing all the way through her. To the person she really was.

“Not tonight,” she said.

Frailty

In the end, he drove her to the airport. He carried her bags down the front steps and loaded them into the car without a word. She let him.

“You don’t have to go, you know,” he said in the car.

“God. Just ... don’t,” she looked out the window.

“I’m just saying.”

“Well ... don’t.”

They drove through the waking suburbs. The dull, September sun was rising in bungalow windows.

“When do you think you’ll be back?” he asked.

She looked at him.

“I’m just asking. I didn’t mean anything by it.” It was a lie. They both knew it.

“I divorced him Greg, he didn’t drop off the face of the earth.” She sighed.

“I thought that’s what was supposed to happen.”

“Just ... shut up.” He did.

They got out to the city limits. The highway opened up before them, the fields surrounding it shorn and quiet.

“I just think ...” he tried again.

“Greg” He raised his hand to silence her. “I just think that you think you owe him something. You don’t. Parents die, Heather. People get over it. People deal with it.”

“Greg.”

“All I’m saying is Phil can deal with it, Heather. Without you.”

“Greg, look,” she pointed to the road ahead.

He’d been looking at the highway, but not seeing it. There seemed to be something wrong with the asphalt. Was it gravel? Shredded paper? Some kind of garbage? He couldn’t tell.

“What is that?” he asked just before they got close enough to realize.

Butterflies.

A carpet of white wings. Fluttering and mashed and crushed and flattened. The butterflies were coming from the fields. Landing on the highway.

There weren’t many cars on the road. Greg saw one heading in the opposite direction, grill and tires stuccoed with white wings. He imagined his car looking the same. His car. A mass of metal cutting a swath through a field of white butterflies.

“Cabbage whites,” he said. He glanced at Heather. Her fingers were tight on the armrest. She watched the butterflies in silence.

“I’ve never seen so many in one place before,” he continued. He wished she would say something. He wished he could stop the car.

“It was the dry summer. I’ll bet that’s ...”

“I loved him, you know,” Heather cut him off.

“Well, I assumed, since you married the guy.” He hated the sarcasm in his voice.

“No, not Phil. His father.”

Greg opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Things weren’t going badly for Phil and me, you know. That’s not why we split.

We went to a barbecue at his parents' one day. You know, a family thing. Anyway, afterward, after Phil's sister and I cleaned up, we were sitting around on the front porch shooting the shit, and we see the parents: Fred and Helen. They went for a walk, you know, together. Alone. Anyway, so we see them coming back and they smile and wave and I notice they're holding hands. Just like that. Like people do. Except Phil and I never did. And it didn't cross my mind before, but at that moment, I knew that Phil and I never would."

She was quiet then. The butterflies on the highway had thinned out, then disappeared altogether. The darkness of the asphalt was a relief.

"We hold hands all the time," Greg said to the windshield.

"I know."

The small airport was almost deserted but she didn't want him to wait with her.

"I'll call you when I get there," Heather said after she'd checked her baggage at the counter. Greg nodded distractedly.

"Call when you're coming back, I'll pick you up."

They didn't hug. Not yet. The argument was still fresh. He left her at the gate.

He was thinking about the butterflies, how they were drawn to the blacktop. He wondered if they knew they were heading for death, if they understood something he didn't.

He took a different route home.

Domestic

Nan and I were in the kitchen, making dinner, when we heard Grandpa getting ready to die again. He was in the foyer, mumbling to himself as usual, just low enough to be heard but not understood.

“Walt?” Nan asked in the direction of the kitchen door, “Walter, where are you going?”

He offered no answer. She asked again, louder and shriller.

“I’m heading out to pick those pears! I told ya!” he called out.

“Jesus on a bicycle!” Nan muttered under her breath, “Did I not tell him half an hour ago to leave those damn things be? He’s fixin’ to get hurt today, I’ll tell you what!”

I glanced at her and went back to peeling beets. My hands were bloody with juice that leaked down my forearms. I could hear Grandpa in the hallway as he dropped the metal shoehorn.

Nan was quartering the potatoes I’d peeled earlier, her cutting increasing in force and volume as she listened to the noises coming from outside the kitchen.

“Penny!” she whispered. I looked up from the beet. Eyes narrowed and mouth set, she motioned toward the door with her head, so forcefully I thought she’d topple herself. I put down my peeling and went to rinse my hands. The water got rid of most of the red juice but left my hands tinted pink.

“Grandpa!” I yelled over the sound of water. “Grandpa, can I come with you?”

I didn’t hear his answer but it didn’t really matter. I left light pink stains drying my hands on the off-white dishtowel. When I got to the foyer he was still wrestling to get his

shoes on.

I watched his hands. They disgusted me. They used to belong to an architect. They had played the viola. In one of the wars, they even held a gun. Someone once let this man hold a gun. In those hands that now lurched and shook.

“Can I come with you? I like picking pears. I can go up the ladder for you.”

“What? Yeah. Get the basket will ya? Goddamn this shoe!”

I watched him use the wrong side of the shoehorn, then get it tangled in his sock, then realize he was putting the wrong shoe on the wrong foot. I put on my own shoes, and watched him with annoyance until he got it right. There was a piece of electrical tape stuck to the heel of his right shoe, left over from fixing the lawnmower cord that morning. He'd ran over it again while cutting the grass. I saw the entire thing from my window, thinking this would be the time he finally fried himself. I always watched him mow now; the haphazard way he pushed the mower over the lawn while the orange cord, striped with black tape, twisted and uncoiled behind him.

I grabbed the pear basket from the floor. He kept looking around and asking where it had gone to and I kept telling him I had it, it was fine, I had it. We went into the living-room: him tripping over his own toes, me weaving cautiously behind him. He asked me where the basket went to again. I told him.

He pried open the old doors that led to the garden. The white paint had been peeling off the wooden frame and now more flakes floated to the ground. He turned to me, maybe to ask about the basket again, I don't know, when a flash of green shot into the living-room, passing inches from his face. It ended whatever thought he was going to voice. His mind took a minute to refocus, he stared straight ahead and rocked back on his

heels.

I looked around the living-room for what had flown in. It was a green and yellow budgie. It sat on top of one of the four seasons paintings, the ones done so badly I couldn't tell spring from fall, above the couch. I dropped the basket and moved toward it.

Slowing as I climbed the couch, I stopped within reach of the bird. It had been watching me with its unflinching eyes, until I got on the couch, then started inching along the frame, away from me. It wanted to take off, I could feel it. That's when I reached out and, with a swipe of my hand, grabbed it. I didn't expect to catch it, but there it was, in my hand. As if I did it every day.

My fingers closed around the budgie just as its wings started to spread, forcing them back against its body. The bird clamped his beak down on the webbing between my thumb and forefinger. Momentary tears blurred my vision. My fingers twitched with the need to let go.

I stepped off the couch never looking away from the bird. I was fascinated by its weightlessness, its impenetrable black eyes, the sleek smoothness of its body. It was beautiful in that way that wild things are: compact and intricate.

I didn't notice grandpa until he was standing right next to me. The smell of Old Spice and rye distracted me from the bird, and I looked up. There was a time when I used to love that smell; when I thought everybody's grandpa smelled like this. But now I was twelve, and had known better for a while.

"Would you look at that! That there's a budgie. Must have 'scaped someone's house 'cause those aren't native, y'know," he said. I nodded and looked back at the bird. Its eyes betrayed nothing. Its beak was still clamped onto my hand with unyielding

determination.

“Y’know, Nan and I had budgies. A long time ago. Long time. Forgot ‘em on the porch one night and the cold killed ‘em.” His voice was uncontrollably loud.

I couldn’t look up. I knew that story. Nan told me once about when she had found them: all on the bottom of the cage, stiff and scattered like unripe pinecones that had fallen to the ground. Grandpa cried when she told him what he’d done.

I kept looking at the bird. I stroked its head with one finger.

“Looks like he’s got a hold on ya. Careful ya don’t squish ‘im. Think I still got that old cage up in the attic, if you can hold ‘im a while longer. I’ll go get it. It’s a good thing ya caught ‘im, he’d die out there on his own.”

I looked up at grandpa looking at me and the bird. He was smiling through unfocused eyes. I saw love in his face, that horrible, horrible love. I wanted to hate him.

My eyes went back to the bird. It hadn’t stopped pinching my hand with its beak. Its eyes seemed to be looking everywhere and nowhere all at once. I felt the crazed throb of the heartbeat in the small, rigid body against the palm of my closed hand. Grandpa turned unsteadily toward the stairs.

“Won’t be but a minute,” he said. My chest tightened. I thought about killing the bird, just squeezing it until I felt something break.

“Ow,” I said. Grandpa stopped walking. He began turning, but not toward me, toward the open doors.

“Ow!” louder now. Grandpa started to stagger to the doors. But there was still time.

“Oww, Oww, Oww!” I yelled and opened my hand. The bird flew up, disoriented

by its sudden freedom.

The doors were wide open.

NOTES ON STORIES

“St. Mary’s” - St. Mary’s is a town in southwestern Ontario with a population of roughly 6.5 thousand people. On November 7th, 2008, the residents woke to find the streets of the town slick with blood. A broken valve, on a truck carrying fluids from Schneider’s Poultry, doused the town’s streets in 4.5 tonnes of chicken blood.

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