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UPSTAIRS IN THE CRAZY HOUSE

THE LIFE OF A PSYCHIATRIC SURVIVOR

PAT CAPPONI

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This book is dedicated to my first family, who survived, and to my second family, some of whom survived, some of whom could not.

And, of course, special mention to my niece and godchild, Julia.

Acknowledgments

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I am very pleased to acknowledge the support and assistance of a diverse group of individuals, without whose help this process would have been much more difficult.

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Introduction

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Pat Capponi had already taken on the character of a legend long before I met her. She seemed to be on every committee in Toronto that had anything to do with housing people discharged from psychiatric facilities. In the network of people who circle around Nellie's, a women's shelter, the name Pat Capponi was common currency. Pat was from Montreal, people said, raised by an unspeakably abusive father. She had been in mental hospitals many times. Suicidal. Then she had a breakdown in Toronto, and when she was discharged from the psychiatric ward, she was placed in one of the infamous boarding houses in Parkdale. Hers was called Channan Court, a fancy name for the squalor in which seventy ex-psychiatric patients lived. I was told that Pat ended up running Channan Court, then she and the other residents put

Page Image out their own paper, *The Cuckoo's Nest*.

Pat was the driving force behind the city's Parkdale Working Group on Roomers and Boarders. That was when people began to realize that something had gone frightfully wrong with the government's policy of emptying the infamous back wards of psychiatric hospitals, where neglected people had been warehoused for years. The release of dazed ex-psychiatric patients into the community was hailed as a victory for human rights, and the government spoke glowingly of the supports that would assist these former patients to integrate into society.

Pat Capponi was one of the first anywhere to declare that those supports didn't exist. The hospitals were simply dumping patients, clutching their prescriptions for powerful psychotropic drugs, into the streets. Parkdale, a residential area surrounding Toronto's Queen Street Mental Health Centre, was full of ex-

psychiatric patients stumbling around, drugged to the ears, broke and unable to function.

A new group formed to help them, the Supportive Housing Coalition, which was made up of front-line workers, many of them from the staffs of hostels. Nellie's was a vigorous participant. Margaret Frazer, a retired schoolteacher and a member of Nellie s board of directors, became the hostel's tireless representative on the Supportive Housing Coalition. One day Margaret said to me, "There's a woman from Parkdale in the Coalition, Pat Capponi. She's really nifty. Very tenacious and very intelligent."

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The fight to help people trapped in Parkdale boarding houses heated up, and the carrier of the flame was Pat Capponi. She guided the Minister of Health, Larry Grossman, on a tour of the wretched places, and television interviews revealed a stunned politician.

That led to an invitation for Pat to be on the advisory committee of a new provincial Patient Advocate Office. Someone told me she was also on the advisory board of Archway, an organization set up by the Queen Street Mental Health Centre to help place discharged people more humanely in the community. Whenever a former psychiatric patient died on the streets or in a rooming-house tire, Pat Capponi could be expected to attend the inquest as an expert witness. She seemed to have as much credibility as any professional in town. Maybe more.

A hundred tedious committee meetings and numerous theatrical conducted tours of Parkdale resulted in no detectable change, which Pat found intolerable. She moved to the offensive. In the years between 1978 and 1984, she was full of ideas. One day she informed horrified City Hall officials that she was planning to lead ex-patients into stores to take the food and clothing they couldn't afford to buy. She also intended, she announced, to round up homeless ex-patients and occupy Queen's Park, the Ontario legislative building, where they could keep warm by burning red tape.

With a sympathetic alderman, David Reville, himself a psychiatric survivor, Pat hosted what she described as "a boarding home lunch" in a committee room at City Hall. It came complete with cobwebs, dead

Page Image cockroaches, brightly coloured pills and people snarling and slapping one another. Saul Alinsky, the American activist who specialized in guerrilla theatre, would have been proud. The mayor and members of the Ontario Legislature attended and were aghast.

Pat kept going to meetings and shaking things up. Margaret Frazer told me, "Pat Capponi came to a stuffy meeting of social workers last night. She was wearing this crazy hat, a kind of flat-brimmed stetson, and she didn't take it off. They didn't know what to make of her, but they had to listen. She's got all the information, and all the ideas."

Some of this time, as far as I knew, Pat Capponi was living on welfare. A shortage of income didn't seem to slow her down, though. She helped a City-TV reporter, Jo Jo Chintoh, who bravely dared to acquire firsthand experience of living conditions in Parkdale by moving into one of the notorious boarding houses for a while. His report put the appalling situation into everyone's living room. So did a very moving series in the Toronto *Star* written by Betty Jane Wylie. Pat Capponi helped Betty Jane fake the symptoms of a heavily medicated ex-psychiatric parient and walk in those shoes for a few days. Someone even told me they'd seen Pat Capponi on cable television, hosting a show called "Cuckoos Nest Cable." Apparently, the woman's talents were limitless.

Eventually, Pat found a job at PARC, the Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre, a storefront location that is a magnet for ex-psychiatric patients. I heard reports everywhere about how effective Pat Capponi was there.

Page Image "She's perfect for that job," someone told me. "She's the best friend people with a mental

illness have ever had."

I read that Pat Capponi was on yet another advisory committee, this one the Mayor's Action Task Force on Discharged Psychiatric Patients, formed in direct response to her own activities. Dr. Reva Gerstein was chairing it. I perked up. Reva Gerstein is a formidably effective woman. She wouldn't be heading a committee bound for the nowhereland usually reserved for government task forces.

When the Gerstein report came out it soundly condemned the lack of support services, especially housing, for people discharged from mental facilities. At last, some of the miserable boarding houses were closed. Suddenly there was a bit of money for a few housing projects, for social and recreational programs like PARC and for support staff for discharged patients.

After years of patient effort, the Supportive Housing Coalition began to open residences. Among the first was a big house next to Nellie's. The residence houses homeless women with histories of psychiatric illness, and the Coalition decided to call it the Margaret Frazer House, a richly deserved honour. I went to the opening and hugged Margaret, who was to be found in the kitchen demurely stirring the hot cider.

"Pat Capponi's coming," Margaret told me, beaming. "You'll have to meet her." I hung around for a while, but Pat was delayed and I left. I could picture her, though. I imagined a big, confident woman, full of gusto and good humour.

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Then, in February 1985, Margaret Frazer learned that she had inoperable cancer of the pancreas. She had no family living in Toronto but she wanted to remain in her home for as long as she could, enjoying her music, her cat Cleo, her spring garden. In her weakened condition, it was impossible for her to care for herself, but Margaret had endeared herself to dozens of people who wanted to help. One sizeable group came from her parish, Holy Trinity, an Anglican church known for its social activism, and the other group was made up of staff and board members of Nellie's.

I don't think Pat Capponi attended meetings that the Margaret Frazer "team," as we came to call it, held at Holy Trinity. In fact, I didn't know she was part of the group until I saw her name in the team's log book. We didn't meet because my shift was Thursday afternoon and Pat was doing the Friday overnight shift. She wrote cheery encouragements to us all and signed her entries with a flourish.

Joyce Brown, a staff person at Nellie's who is possessed of awesome calm and competence, did the schedules for the Margaret team. She was moved by Pat's commitment to Margaret's care. Joyce told me, "Pat called me out of the blue and said 'Sign me up.' She picked Friday night because it's the only one when she's not likely to have a meeting scheduled. And she's the most reliable person on the team. If anyone cancels at the last minute, Pat promptly agrees to fill in."

None of us knew then what it cost Pat to join the team. She had weighed the possibility that watching

Page Image Margaret die might flip her into another suicidal depression. The risk was very real, as she knew, but she decided to take it. If she slipped over the edge, it wouldn't be worse than turning her back on a friend.

Then Margaret weakened, and two people were needed for every shift. Margaret's doctor, that splendid woman Linda Rapson, called me one night.

"I just left Margaret," she explained. "I won't have to worry tonight because Pat Capponi is there. Have you met her yet? She's *wonderful*. She's very strong."

I said, thinking about Margaret's frailty and her need to be carried, "Is Pat a big woman?"

Linda answered quietly, "Not that kind of strong."

The night after Margaret died, Pat Capponi came to the wake wearing a strange black hat pulled low over her eyes. She appeared uncomfortable and left early. We talked briefly, but an immediate bond of affection was made, and we'll be friends as long as we live.

The picture I had formed of her in my mind proved to be totally wrong. Instead of being big and dynamic, Pat Capponi is of average size and she moves quietly. Her hats distinguish her everywhere she goes, all of them wide-brimmed with a short crown and worn low over her watchful eyes. There is something of the mythic western gunslinger about her appearance, and a certain sadness and resignation about the way she carries herself, but her voice is low, her manners pleasant and her sense of the fundamental ridiculousness of existence is fine-tuned.

As the Margaret team gathered a few days later for the memorial at Holy Trinity, Pat approached me.

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"I've written a poem for Margaret," she said. "Would you read it at the service?"

I was honoured. "Certainly not," I replied. "It's your poem."

As people went to the microphone one by one, with long, reflective pauses between each speaker, I feared that Pat would not have the courage to join the parade. Finally, near the end, she rose. As she spoke, people were seized with a great stillness. The poem was a celebration of Margaret's life and her triumph over death. It began, "There is no shame in losing such a terrible battle Margaret...."

I was among those who wept throughout. I had been hearing for years about Pat Capponi, a hero to thousands, a social activist passionately devoted to justice, but no one had ever told me that she's an extraordinary writer with a glittering eye and a compassionate heart.

Upstairs in the Crazy House is her book about the Park-dale boarding house where she scraped bottom. It's a book that, oddly enough, is full of hope for the human condition. In the midst of despair, people are kind. In the midst of miserable poverty, people share. That they go on at all is a testament to spirit, or maybe soul.

Pat Capponi lives an intact life, a valuable life. She is governed by an ideal of conduct in which the centrepole is responsibility, though anyone examining her suffering might think she could not have survived such pain. She wades through grief, as Emily Dickinson described it, because she has decided she must — and because she must, she can.

June Callwood

1

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Trapped between unwashed, unidentified bodies in the darkened hall. Trying not to breathe, keeping my arms pulled in close, feet shuffling forward, eyes not daring to leave the ground. Snarling starts further down, and I retreat further into myself, careful not to make any contact with anyone, not to aggravate the already unbearable. Unattached voices heard throughout the length of the line-up: "Get the fuck off my foot!" "Quit shoving, or I'll shove you into next week!" The line is restless, hungry for food or action. "Don't throw your goddamn butt on the floor, I got bare feet —" "You're stupid enough not to wear shoes, that's your problem." "Gimme some room, you fuckin' assholes." The line wavers back and forth, towards and

Page Image away from the disturbances that erupt throughout the length of it.

"I didn't touch you. I touch you, you'd know it."

"Get off my back!"

The kitchen door is still shut. Someone kicks it, hard. Harsh laughter. I talk to the closed door, begging it to open: when the line-up explodes, I will be caught, unable to move, unable to protect myself.

Sixty or seventy bodies crushed together, smells of dried vomit and urine, rotting armpits, sour wine and beer at the back of my tongue, coating my throat. I breathe through my mouth. I'm getting dizzy from the heat, the weight of their anger. Another kick aimed at the door.

"What the fuck's taking so long?"

"You'd think they were really trying to cook something in there."

Someone is shoved hard. Everyone responds by jerking forward.

"Open the goddamn door, Jack!"

More shoving. I can barely turn my head. I see an old man crouched like a trapped animal, holding his fork like a switchblade, jabbing at the fellow turned to face him.

"I didn't touch you, you fucking maniac, put that stupid thing down!"

The old man doesn't move a muscle; his face is twisted with fear and hatred. From the kitchen comes a shout: "Get back, I'm opening the door!" The old man is forgotten, overwhelmed as everyone pushes

Page Image back. I can't see, but I imagine him frozen in his threatening, rat-in-a-corner stance.

A man and woman stand behind the serving table. He has a smug, knowing expression; she just looks tired. He dumps food on the first plate:

"I catch the son of a bitch that kicked my door, it's the last thing he'll ever kick. Got that Andy?" Andy turns away with a muttered "Fuck off, you fucking asshole."

Pushed forward slowly, each advance marked by the man's individualized insults, heard clearly from where I am, tangled somewhere in the middle of the line-up.

"Dennis, you start to sing and you'll never eat in this dining room again."

Move up one space.

"What did ya steal today? Don't lie to me, you little shit... get out of my way!"

Move up.

"Can't you even hold your plate up properly? Jesus!"

Shuffle forward.

"Don't you ever take a bath? Shit, you stink worse than Bong over there."

Move up one. I can see into the kitchen now, a little light.

"Hey Momma! Gonna put on some more fat? The only place left is your toes, but you'll never see them

anyway, right?"

Closer, not sure I want to be.

"Alice, you finally crawled down? Tell your drunken roommate she's got ten minutes to get here, or she's shit outta luck again."

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Me. Holding out my plate, hating this, preferring to imagine crashing it down on the table, shattering it (though it's the unbreakable kind), turning my back, walking intact through the remaining line-up.

"Hi, Pat." He lifts cutlets with his fingers, examining them for something. I wait for my insult, uncertain as to how I'll respond.

"Aw, this one you cooked right. One out of seventy! You're getting better, Haddie. Pat, there's a jelly roll for dessert." He gestures to the radiator beside him on top of which sits a plate of crumbling cake, sliced thin. No insult, he smiles, friendly. I back away, confused.

I turn into the dining room and stand, paralysed. It's so crowded. Every table seems jammed with people. A chair screeches against the wooden floor; someone is leaving. Pushed from behind, I head towards the vacant spot. I push the abandoned dirty plate to one side, put mine down and sit. An old man opposite me removes his upper and lower dentures, puts them in his shirt pocket and starts forking potatoes into his rubbery mouth.

Next to me, a middle-aged woman sniffs at her food, muttering suspiciously. The man opposite her tries to take her plate. She slashes at him with her fork till he withdraws back to his own food. A tiny old lady stands by the boarded-up fireplace, her dish resting on the mantel, almost level to her head. She eats in delicate motions, dabbing at her lips with a rag from an old blouse.

At the next table, a man pours tea over his plate,

Page Image mushing everything, then spooning it into his mouth. Another man roams from table to table, darting his fingers at finished plates, sucking up whatever he finds.

No conversation, no laughter, no sound except the scraping of forks and knives, the scraping of chairs on wood, the noise of open mouths chewing, the grumbling of protesting bowels, upset stomachs, the hacking of tar-filled lungs, the ugly wet whoosh of spitting.

Supper time at the boarding house.

This is where they sent me.

This is where they said I belong.

2

I lived the first eighteen years of my life in circumstances that paralleled too closely what I was facing now. Deeply disturbed by what I saw around me, unable to clearly distinguish between reality and delusion, I saw my presence in this boarding house as evidence of a malevolent hand at work, orchestrating my destruction. Alone in my third-floor room, unable to shut out the thuds, shouts, occasional screams and the maniacal giggling that went on for hours at a time, the beginnings and this end of my life merged to leave me a captive of memories and feelings I thought I'd successfully left behind me.

I learned fear long before I learned anything else. In our family home, we breathed it, ate it and slept with

it alive in our beds. We were six victims — a mother and five children — totally dependent and viciously Page Image controlled by her husband, our father.

Beatings were the most consistent feature of our lives. There were beatings for not learning to walk fast enough, beatings for crying in a crib, beatings for not eating enough or for eating too much. Beatings for poor grades, a broken dish, an unmade bed, a scuffed shoe. Sometimes beatings just for standing too close when the impulse moved him. Beatings always accompanied by a verbal violence even more brutal.

It was his vacation time. He'd been home for four days now, counting the weekend. Things had been bad enough before that — beatings almost every night, with either us or our mother bearing the brunt of his rage. There was no let-up in the tension we felt; in fact, it seemed that things were more dangerous than they'd ever been.

The five of us shared the same room, with a bed against each wall and a crib for the boy. We kept very still, listening for the sounds of the house. We hadn't eaten that day, and it was now close to supper time. He'd refused to buy groceries — punishment for some wrong someone had done. The night before he'd yelled that bread soaked in skim milk was plenty for "goddamn brats," and that was what we'd eaten when he'd yelled us out of bed close to midnight. Still, we preferred hunger to the looming fight over groceries.

We heard her bedroom door open, heard her in the bathroom. I held my breath, hoping my mother would just go back to her room, but I heard her footsteps along the hall, past our room. I was cringing inside. She wasn't

Page Image going to let this go, she might "provoke" him again.

For some nights now, I had taken to lifting the butcher knife out of the kitchen drawer just before bedtime, slipping it under my pillow, then putting it back in the morning. Each night, I stayed awake as long as I could, which at eight years old wasn't as long as it seemed, listening for the sound of the doorknob turning. I knew he hated us enough to kill us in our beds. I would play through scenes in my head, trying to steel myself for the moment when I would need every ounce of desperate courage I could muster. I didn't feel courageous, especially when I pictured myself creeping up on him while he was throttling one of my sisters, pictured him turning just in time to catch me coming at him.

Now, as a steady rain pelted against the window, I missed the knife, and the illusion of protection it gave.

We heard her ask when he was going to stop blackmailing her with our hunger. Silence. She raised her voice a little: "Mike, I asked you when you're going to get the groceries?" His muffled voice came back. Probably he was facing the back of the couch, warning her to get back to her room. She didn't. Her voice now had a hysterical quality to it; she was not going to back off. I tried to wish myself out of existence. The fear, the waiting, was unbearable.

"Goddamn it, I told you to get in your room! You're going to start listening, you bitch, and right now!"

We heard the shrill screeching of the couch as he jumped up, then her screams began, and continued,

Page Image rising higher and higher in wringing desperation. We heard many of the blows as they fell. I saw that my older sister was sobbing. The two youngest clamped their small hands over their ears. I felt only fear, and I fought to contain it.

Furniture was crashing to the floor. We moved as one to the door, opening it, crowding together in the doorway. He had her by the hair, her long red hair, and he was pulling her after him into the kitchen. She caught at the chair and table legs as she was dragged past them. He was beating her about the head with his other fist. Now he was in the hall, dragging her past us, her hands tearing at the one that gripped her hair. He kicked open the bathroom door. It slammed back against the wall. Our mother clutched at the doorjamb while his fist beat down harder, abruptly cutting off her shrieks of terror. He rammed her head

into the toilet bowl, holding her down; the sputtering, choking sounds had a nightmare quality. He let her head out for an instant. She vomited as soon as her head cleared the water, then he pushed her down again, and again.

"Mike, stop, you're killing me!"

We heard that so clearly. It cut through our crying, our pleading. He picked her up and threw her in the tub; her head made a hollow sound as it struck the bottom. He turned on the shower, and in seconds steam rose and covered her. He turned. We ran back to the room, slamming the door and pressing our bodies against it. He thudded past, not stopping.

We went back to our beds. Some of us tried to sleep

Page Image while others sat on the edge of our beds, just waiting. The rain had stopped in time for darkness to fall. I wondered if she was dead.

The door opened — too softly to be him — and there she was, very pale except for the ugly bruises covering the right side of her face.

"Put on your coats, we're leaving."

All of us, even the boy, were ready in scant seconds, not even stopping to wonder where we were going, just grateful that finally we would all be safe. We crept through the kitchen and out the back door, careful not to alert the monster on the couch. Our mother had no more words for us; she just led us in a raggedy line down the street.

We walked for a long time. There was a song popular on the radio then, "A Place in the Sun," and I kept humming the words quietly to myself as we trudged on. The streets of the suburb were almost deserted; we passed few people on our strange parade.

As the night wore on, I began to suspect we were walking in circles, but I said nothing. We came to a park, one of the boring kind with no swings or slides, only benches, and we scattered ourselves around, glad to rest for a while. I watched my mother from the corner of my eye, suspecting the truth: there was nowhere for us to go, no one to run to. I heard her mumble something, and watched as she rose and picked up the boy, who was dead on his feet, to carry him. We followed her, and soon realized she was taking us back home. All of us walked very slowly.

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When we reached the house, she tried the side door and found it locked, so she took us around, into the backyard.

"Please, just lie down on the grass, try your best to sleep."

There was a terrible weariness, a worse defeat, in her voice. We lay down with no protest. The ground was rough and damp from the earlier rain. She took off her coat and laid it down for the boy to sleep on.

We were quiet enough that we heard him unlock the back door, heard him open it just enough to let us know it was open.

Then silence again.

Our mother's voice was filled with pain, and something else I could not recognize.

"All right children, get up. We're going back in."

3

Someone was at my door, calling and knocking to rouse me. I jerked out of bed, where I had spent a restless night anticipating this interview. Finding my glasses safely stashed on the window ledge, I yelled out I'd be right there. I combed my hair in frantic strokes, noticing how my hand shook. I opened the door to the welfare worker, an impatient, well-dressed woman about my own age who clutched an expensive-looking briefcase.

"P-please come in," I stuttered, finally faced with the reality I'd been dreaming about.

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Not introducing herself, she followed me into my room, pointedly looking around for a chair. I reddened, gestured apologetically to the bed. For a week now I had been sleeping on top of the blanket to avoid seeing the bugs I was sure ate through the mattress every night, so the bed looked made, though crumpled. The stains and cigarette burns seemed to stand out more than usual. She pursed her lips, staring at the bed for long seconds, then gingerly lowered herself, keeping the briefcase on her knees, snapping it open, pulling out forms and a pen.

I sat as far away from her as I could manage at the head of the narrow, metal-framed bed against one flat pillow, my knees drawn up almost to my chest. I was already intimidated, already feeling blameworthy for my surroundings.

"Your complete name, please."

A rush of preliminary questions, answered automatically.

"Married?"

"Separated."

"Children?"

"No."

"Why were you hospitalized?"

"Depression."

"How long were you hospitalized?"

"Three months, eleven days."

"Was this your first hospitalization?"

"No."

She talked like the form read.

Page Image

"Please list all your hospitalizations, last to first, with dates."

I noticed I was actually wringing my hands, her refusal to make eye-contact, her palpable disapproval rocking me. I was certain it could only escalate.

"I, I have trouble with time, with dates. I've been in about seven times."

"Approximate dates!" she snapped.

I stumbled through, making up those I could not recall. Anything to keep her hand moving, her voice — accusatory and chilling — silent. She catalogued my failures, she wrote them down.

"Have you ever worked?"

"Yes, of course. Four years, in Montreal, as a group-home mother."

"Name of employer?"

Nothing had moved so fast for days. Her barrage of questions left me breathless. Before I could think, could add something that would speak of me, the person, she was rising, energetically brushing the back of her dress where it had come into contact with the blanket.

"Fine." I was looking at the back of her head as she hurried out of the room. "Your cheque should be here within the week." And she was gone, leaving a trail of perfume.

I stood there, motionless, for some time, staring after her. I had counted on being recognized as different, being assured that this was the wrong place for me.

Time passed. I crept down to the second-floor washroom and stared at my reflection in the cloudy

Page Image mirror nailed through its frame to the wall. I tried to see, objectively, what had brought me to this. My face was pale, puffy, my eyes swam a bit behind my glasses, my hair was dull and limp, but surely it was still me. I lost myself in the glass, wondering where I'd gone, till someone kicked the door and I scuttled back to the room that had now really become mine.

4

I spend hours piling bricks upon bricks, first in front of the thin plywood door, floor to ceiling, then against the wall facing me while my mind drifts in a fugue state, playing endless variations on unformed ideas. I can feel the texture of each imaginary brick, each slowly blistering fingertip.

I don't stop, don't come back to vulnerable plaster, except when I leave the room to use the second-floor bathroom, an ugly precursor to the rest of the house. I haven't extinguished the bare bulb in my room since I moved into the house. Now I'm afraid it will burn out, leave me alone in the dark, at the mercy of scurrying things.

I try desperately not to think, not to feel, but there are memories and questions I can't block. The frustration of looking for a sheltered place to live. Being turned away from two women's residences because they'd already reached their quota of ex-psychiatric patients. Not knowing where else to look on my scant income. The nurse looking up a phone number, calling.

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"Hello. I'm calling for a young woman who will shortly be discharged from our hospital ward. She needs a place to stay, and I was wondering if you had any empty beds?" She was smiling so happily as she turned to me, glad to have found me a place.

"He does have an empty bed. You can move in on the thirtieth." I keep seeing that smile, feeling her warmth.

I also remember before that — flashes of brightly lit corridors, medicinal smells, glimpses of faces.

The hospital's occupational therapy room was a jumble of craft materials and tools: leather, wool, needles,

paints, posters and scissors. It was a small room, easily crowded by the tranquillized patients as they were herded up from the psychiatric ward. Some were drawing, others breaking bits of tile and gluing them onto ashtray forms. Some were just staring blankly ahead, oblivious of where they were.

The twenty-four-hour constant-observation staff assigned to me, my "constant," would ease off her watch in here, feeling, I suppose, that it was a contained, safe place, with other staff available to keep an eye on me. Making my way to the supply cabinet was not hard or a cause for suspicion, though my heart beat loudly enough to give me away. In one box, I had noticed before, was a large, vicious-looking pair of scissors, just waiting for someone like me. I poked around with one hand while the other lifted the scissors, jamming them deep inside my housecoat pocket. I was sure, as I made my way back to the table, that some

Page Image observant, interfering person would pick up on the flush in my cheeks, the sweat I felt trickling into my eyes. It was hard to concentrate on the task at hand: "Draw the kind of tree you most identify with."

A half hour later, back in my room on the ward, I went to the small table by the bed and, keeping my back to the constant, managed to extract the scissors from my pocket and hide them beneath the few items I had salvaged from my former life. My escape route intact, I already felt better, almost light-headed. I was cheerfully friendly to the woman whose job it was to stay within inches of me, instead of glaring at her resentfully as had been my practice. I even experienced a brief flash of guilt, thinking, if I succeeded, she might lose her job.

Since there was no telling when the missing scissors might be reported, I knew I had to act that night or lose the opportunity. I hoped that my night constant would be a sleeper; they varied from painfully conscientious to those who snored so loudly our roles were reversed and I ended up watching them, unable to sleep.

I'd had this one before: she always looked as though she'd already done a twenty-four-hour shift before coming to me. She sat by the door, about five feet from my bed, in order to take advantage of the hall light. On her lap was a pile of *True Romance* magazines. I feigned sleep, hoping to encourage her to drop off, and ran through my options behind closed eyelids as I listened to paper rustle. Every half hour or so, the floor nurse would click her way down the hall, into each

Page Image room, shining her flashlight in the patients' eyes to ensure they were there and breathing. After her third visit, I waited five minutes, then sat up, cursing softly. The constant, who'd been absorbed in a story, almost jumped out of her skin.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"It's okay, I just remembered something I'd like to write down."

I got out of bed and, with my back to her, rummaged around in the table drawer, managing once again to get the scissors into my pocket. I closed the drawer and turned to face her, looking a little puzzled.

"Now I've forgotten what I wanted to write down ... well, it'll come back to me. I'll just sit up for a few minutes."

She smiled, hiding her annoyance that I was awake and thereby requiring her attentiveness. I perched on my bed, facing away from her, looking out the window into the night. I stayed motionless until I heard the pages turning again.

My movements masked by darkness, I got the scissors out of my pocket, and, clutching the handles in both hands, pushed the tip hard just over my navel. I closed my eyes, trying to regulate my breathing, trying to find the inner strength to break through the barrier of flesh that kept me chained to hospitals, to

life. I pushed steadily harder, getting cold, very cold. I was no longer aware whether I had succeeded or not. My mind was already far, far away. There was a pulsing noise from somewhere.

Page Image

I heard her voice, the floor nurse's voice. It seemed to come from a distance, and yet was close. I twisted my head to the side — my body was rigid and non-responsive — and saw her standing inches from the foot of my bed.

"Pat, what are you doing?"

I heard, again from a distance, the magazine drop to the floor, the legs of the constant's chair scrape back.

Not now, I thought wearily.

"Even if you were able to stab yourself before I could reach you, Pat, this is a hospital, filled with doctors, operating rooms.... You wouldn't die, you'd only cause yourself unnecessary pain. Please, give it to me."

I couldn't speak. I was still somewhere else, though anger, shame and frustration were bringing me back far too fast. Her hands were on mine now, prying my fingers from the scissors.

They gave me pills to sleep. My psychiatrist was woken up at home, my constant changed.

All that determination to keep me alive.

Now, surrounded by the imagined brick walls in my boarding house room, it all made sense. Why I hadn't been able to get better, in spite of taking the pills they prescribed and attending the mind-numbing outpatient programs, in spite of the three months in the Toronto hospital. Why, when I'd started, just started, to feel there were still possibilities, that was abruptly ripped out of my life the moment I walked into this house. Of course, there would be more sadistic

Page Image enjoyment squeezed out of the suffering of someone who had started to hope again than there would be in tormenting one who'd given up.

The welfare worker's indifference collapsed the last thin hope I'd held like a shield between me and an escalating certainty that I was precisely where I was meant to be. A week had already passed in this third-floor room, I'd left only for meals and to use the bathroom, hating the need to risk myself in the hallway, or on the darkened flight of stairs, dreading coming face to face with any other tenants.

I was struggling to define for myself what was real and what was not, moving closer and closer to the realization that what I had tried to dismiss as delusion was in fact true. I no longer made any effort to remind myself that, each time I got sick, I would feel the same foreboding, this surrounding awareness that the usually benign God I believed in had become a very different entity, manifesting many of the worst features of my own father. The knowledge that this was a patently Freudian twist has generally enabled me to argue against the evidence, but now, alone, I had no arguments left. And I was certain that in this metamorphosis, God was single-mindedly obsessed with my personal abasement and destruction.

I was so certain of who was behind my being here that I never thought of just walking out, although it was doubtful anyone would have even noticed I was gone. There were no guards, no locks on the front door. One phone call would have taken me back to

Page Image Montreal, but I was so defeated, there were no options. Who do you get to protect you when God is intent on destroying you? The only struggle, the last struggle ahead of me, was to accept what was happening and what would follow with grim dignity — no tears, no self-delusions.

There was little comfort for me in that room during the first long week, except for the knowledge that I'd

fought a good fight against impressive odds in the eleven years since my first hospitalization; I'd made a difference in the lives of some people, done some good. If I could only have felt assured that dying wouldn't bring an eternity of damnation, I wouldn't have feared it or regretted the ending.

There was no day or night for me that first week. I lived in waking dreams and nightmares, a very private madness in a house where madness was the norm.

5

In the years following my first hospitalization and my first explorations into myself, I determined to become someone I could live with, if not, in the words of the therapist, someone I could love. My first efforts were based on my blanket acceptance that I wasn't a very good person, and that I should change those parts of myself that could be changed. I hadn't yet realized that I'd simply internalized all the verbal assaults that characterized the first eighteen years of my life.

Page Image

The way I chose to effect change was not the most constructive or safe method. I self-prescribed judicious amounts of LSD daily for over a year, not for partying with my peers, but to take me on solitary excursions into myself, to force an opening up, a sensitization that I felt would reduce the selfishness and destructiveness that were the main elements of my character.

I experienced a mish-mash of revelations about myself, my motivations and my continuing depression, culled from psychology texts, psychotherapy sessions, anti-psychiatry tracts and my own drug-induced insights. Although I believed at the time that I possessed all the awareness I needed to make conscious decisions and choices in my life, in retrospect there were a lot of gaps. But my experiences as a student activist helped me to decide that fighting for change when change was needed, standing up for people who were nervous about the consequences of standing up for themselves, helped me to expiate a lot of the guilt I carried, guilt shared by most abused children, for not preventing the violence the six of us had suffered. Going head to head with a college administrator or professor over an issue helped me rework my self-image from that of a cowardly individual into a person who simply wouldn't take abuse from anyone, no matter what their position. I felt I was saved from feeling arrogant or superior about this because of the absence of altruistic motives. I also enjoyed the complexities of politics, compromise, even professorial mind-games. I came to realize that having some cause or some issue I

Page Image could submerge myself in made life bearable and interesting enough that I could convince myself on the dark days to hold on just a little longer.

I'd never felt crazy. The depression was too obviously a justified reaction to reality for me to get worried about my sanity. Even my frequent and imaginative suicide attempts were a logical result of bad beginnings. People get used to chronic health problems. I felt I could simply work around mine, at least till this last year; the year all the rules changed.

1

Page Image

The front porch helped. From there I could see the three buildings that comprised this boarding house. The house was in fact three houses, which altogether took up a third of a city block and three street numbers. My porch stretched across 1241 and 1243. These had once been semi-detached houses, but walls had been opened up between the two, so that they became one house. A set of stairs led to each entrance-way. Immediately adjacent was the corner house, 1245, whose ground floor was taken up by the kitchen and dining room. To get to my porch retreat, I had to walk past an office on the first floor. It was easy to peek in the mostly glass door, but I had yet to see anyone actually sitting behind the old-style office desk. It was as sparsely furnished as the few bedrooms I had seen: the owner's chair was behind the desk, and a

Page Image couple of dining-room chairs sat in front. There was a jumble of pill bottles on top of the desk, a phone and a chess set that looked as though it had been left in the middle of a game. Once I heard someone who I assumed to be the owner screaming loudly enough to be heard from behind my closed door on the third floor. Something about idiots and drunkards. I was not looking forward to meeting him.

I spent whole afternoons on the porch in the sun, my back against the railing, watching the line-up start to form around three in the afternoon for the five o'clock supper. I could look at individuals without having to speak to them, sneaking glances as they sprawled on the steps or made their way between the buildings.

Seen in the light, some were less scary, some even more frightening. A few poorly dressed but tidy middle-aged women would smile shyly at me as our eyes accidentally met, or as I passed them on the stairway. An old Korean gentleman bowed to me every time he saw me, proudly displaying rotten and missing teeth, laughing at whatever tickled him.

A horrible man with crawly lips and a head that seemed glued to one shoulder gave me the shivers. There were others with missing arms or legs. The old guy who'd wielded the fork in the line-up turned out to be fairly pleasant, buying me coffee the few times he went down to McDonald's. He wouldn't speak; I wasn't sure he knew English. He'd just shove the cup at me, piled high with sugars and cream, then sit a few stairs down from me and point his face at the sun.

Page Image

The first person to really speak to me was Andy, which was lucky, since he was the least crazy. He stank, but I suspected I did too. I never took off my clothes, always ready for fight or flight, needing to feel a little armoured. Deodorant was a luxury I couldn't afford, and I wasn't about to attempt a bath in a room that didn't lock, and which was always in high demand. Not to mention that there was no plug for the tub, or hand soap, or towels, or curtain, or mat.

Andy walked funny, with a kind of flat-footed waddle, but his eyes looked unmedicated, and he was polite and friendly, not given to sudden moves or bizarre statements. We were probably the same age; certainly we were in the same circumstances. Names first, then the important stuff out of the way, like what hospital we were from, I could finally begin to ask some of the questions milling about in my head.

The house was owned, according to Andy, by a couple who'd bought it a few years before. The husband was the one who ran the place, who bought groceries and collected the cheques. Andy didn't appear to know any more than I did why this kind of place existed, but he assured me there were hundreds of them. He'd been in half a dozen or so himself.

He'd lived here for five years. I couldn't believe he could say that so matter-of-factly. He shared a room on the first floor, to the right at the bottom of the staircase, with three other men. He seemed to hold most of the tenants in easy contempt. He warned me about how many thieves there were in the building, warned me

Page Image about Jack, and a couple of other bullies whom he dismissed as loudmouthed drunks.

As people would appear on the porch, he'd give me thumbnail sketches of who they were and how long they'd been here. Occasionally he'd yell at someone to come over, and then he'd introduce me.

It was always like being introduced to the bogeyman. Long minutes would pass before the fear stopped distorting my vision and I could see them as people, as individuals caught up in the same mess I was.

There were very few women in the house — less than a dozen out of seventy — and those were mostly elderly alcoholics.

"There's the Phoney Father, he's away now, but he'll turn up soon as Miss Pattison's money runs out."

Miss Pattison liked to feed the birds with leftovers, but was otherwise known as the house tyrant. Everybody in the house had been, or was on the way to being, crazy. "But if they get too nuts, the owner gets the hospital to take them back, or kicks them out."

Andy went on to tell me that his second roommate, Old Bob, was only really crazy on weekends, when he was more a pain than a problem. "Tve shared that room with him for years, and it's always the same — up early, to bed early, yelling at us to turn off the light around seven. Then he listens to religion on the radio Sundays, and walks around yelling and cursing at the program, damning everyone to hell. Him and that stupid pipe of his. He's always setting off the smoke-detector and getting yelled at. Then doing it again."

Page Image

One afternoon, a man-mountain with straggly black hair, a growth of something on his chin that couldn't really be called a beard, a bare, sunken chest and a lowriding, ballooned-out stomach that hung over his belt wandered out onto the porch. My hands began to sweat and my breathing constricted.

"There's never a goddamn chair. I always bring one out, and some stupid son of bitch goes and moves it!" He spat something disgusting over the rail onto the brown lawn, a gesture accompanied by hawking and deep rumbling.

"Shut up, Gary, I'll get your bloody chair. This is Pat, the girl I told you about."

Gary stuck out a grime-encrusted paw, and having no choice, I offered my own, only to see it disappear in his.

"Hi. Seen you around. Felt sorry for you, you looked so scared. Don't have to be scared. Get my goddamn chair, Andy. And bring one for Pat."

He released my hand from his surprisingly soft grip, and we waited in silence until Andy came back, dragging a few kitchen chairs. In a moment, we were lined up at the rail, our chairs tilted back, our three pairs of feet hanging over, Andy on one side of me and Gary on the other.

Andy continued, "I been telling Pat about the house. She's not from around here, she's from Quebec."

Gary was trying to roll a cigarette, sprinkling tobacco around his gaping navel and onto the porch.

"Well, you just don't worry. Andy and I have the front bedroom." He gestured over his shoulder, sending

Page Image more tobacco flying. "Anyone bothers you, come and get us. I been here for years. I come trom Whitby Psych. Where you been put? Third floor? You got your own room? Good. Ask Jack to put a lock on for you, or Andy can do it."

"Sure," Andy added, "ask me before you ask that bastard Jack." The epithet didn't surprise me, since I'd figured out that Jack was the one who served up insults with the dinners.

It didn't take long to figure out that Gary's bark was considerably worse than his bite. When he told me he'd spent seventeen years in Whitby Psychiatric, I stared, open-mouthed.

"Yep. They sent me there from training school. Then the assholes give me a bus ticket and an address and I wind up in this house."

"What got you sent to training school?"

"I don't know. Supposed to have tried to strangle my mom when I was in grade school. That's what she says. Training school scared the shit out of me, I was always crying, then I got sent to Whitby."

He'd been here seven years. He remembered the last owner, a born-again Christian.

"Ha! Some Christian! She had a mouth on her. And the crap she called food ..."

Over the next few weeks, we talked, smoked and drank coffee on the porch every sunny day. With names and faces and histories to attach to people, the shadows receded and I felt freer to move around the house. I was accepted as Gary's friend, and protected.

Page Image

I thought a lot about Gary's life. He was very sweet most of the time, but not a thinker, or if he did a lot of thinking, he never shared it. There seemed to be a number of people in the house whose life stories were similar: a decade or two in hospital, then an abrupt discharge to a boarding house. I knew how weird it felt to return home after five months on a ward. Things seemed to go so quickly. I'd forgotten how to do things like cooking, wouldn't want to go to a restaurant or shopping centre because of the crowds and the pace. But after seventeen years? He admitted that one of the first things he did was attempt suicide, hoping to get back to hospital or die. He was kept overnight, then sent back to his new home.

A long-standing habit of mine, developed during my college years, was to try to reach beyond the barriers of my own experience by attempting an empathetic understanding of someone else. Sometimes consciously, sometimes not. In the long, dangerous night hours, I would try to relive parts of Gary's life in his skin, feeling what he could not or would not express.

Imagine being taken away, sent away at a tender age, pulled from your family, friends and school. Imagine being taken into a hospital building where all the people look possessed.

Imagine being told you have to stay. You have a sickness. Staff tell you when and what to eat, when to wake up, when to sleep, take medication, have a bath. You

Page Image become a teenager, and then a man. Through years of forced inactivity, outside life, outside memories slip away, less real than the hospital staff and the pills and the harsh lights. You're treated like a recalcitrant child, a handicapped child that's not expected to learn new skills or experiment with autonomy. Wars and presidents come into vogue and disrepute. Kidnappings, assassinations, oil crisis — nothing touches you, the news doesn't get in.

Imagine being told over and over for years that you have to be locked up. And then some clown is standing there, talking about how it's time for you to go; being in hospital so long isn't good for you. Here's a ticket and an address; a welfare worker will be by to see you, good luck.

Imagine you have no more control over this than anything else in your life. This hospital, this staff, the patients and the people you've been locked up with for years have become closer than siblings you no longer remember, but no one seems to mind that for the second time you've been surgically removed from your family. No one talks about missing you. No one addresses the fears that are churning up your guts. Seventeen years later, bloated by meds and starchy foods, in donated clothing, with a cough that can be heard four floors up, they send you out. No nurses, no shrinks, no clean sheets, no full meals, no daily ration of tobacco — you have to swallow this thing called freedom.

2

Page Image

"Ya play cards?" Gary asked me one rainy afternoon.

"Sure, I know a few games."

"Like what?"

"Gin Rummy, Thirty-one..."

"Good enough, follow me."

Delores, to whom I'd already been introduced on the porch, was drumming her fingers impatiently on the old desk that had been the centrepiece of the common room since a "crazy lady" had smashed in the television screen.

Two cloth couches faced each other against opposite walls, replete with torn cushions revealing dribbles of stuffing. Their original colour and/or design had long ago been lost to coffee and urine stains, cigarette burns and miscellaneous splotches better left unidentified. The bare wooden floor had its own collection of *objete d'art*: large soup tins overflowing with butts that served as an emergency supply towards the end of the month. As in my room, one bare bulb hung precariously on loose wires from the ceiling.

The room was empty, except for Delores, who looked even more normal than Andy. She wore her hair curled and styled in the same way many overweight, middle-aged ladies preferred; she even carried a purse, knitting needles and a few balls of wool.

Delores rivalled Gary in size, and she was always first at the dinner table in order to lay claim to the least uncomfortable chair. This frequently led to a five-minute argument, which Delores always won, since

Page Image it would have required a great deal of muscle to pull her out of the chair.

I had begun to identify the hierarchy in the house; it was a peculiar one, and jealously guarded. It was accepted that Jack, who was a fellow resident but also worked for the owner, ruled the kitchen and dining room at 1245, with the more likeable Haddie as second-in-command. In 1241-43, however, Gary, Delores and Andy reigned supreme: partly because they, too, occasionally did odd chores for the owner, partly from simple length of tenure. Yet Andy and Gary shared their bedroom with Old Bob. Andy slept on what was little better than a cot, and Gary on a mattress so done in that when he lay down the springs would practically touch the floor. Delores herself shared with three other women. Obviously, seniority was no guarantee of better accommodation.

Although my room was no prize, I was beginning to appreciate how much worse off I could have been. Andy had already told me my "single room" had had two men in it before my arrival. They'd been exiled to the upstairs of 1245.

We sat around the desk, from which the drawers had long since disappeared, awaiting a fourth player. Normally it would have been Andy, but he was in his room, asleep. Delores had the cards out and was peeling them off a very sticky deck.

"Want me to get Little Pat?" Gary asked.

Delores rolled her eyes, shook her head emphatically "no."

Page Image

I was puzzled. Little Pat seemed very shy, obviously mentally handicapped and awfully scrawny.

"You don't like playing with him?" I asked her, still wanting to get a handle on everyone.

"Not unless there's absolutely no one else. He can't play five minutes without cursing and storming out."

Nervously, I asked if he got violent. Both Gary and Delores laughed.

'Only if you're a window or a Coke bottle. He always has to break something when he's mad. You could be standing right beside him, looking at all the pieces all over the place, but when you ask him about it, he has no idea who did it."

An old lady I had seen from time to time in the dining room shuffled towards one of the cloth couches, carrying in one hand a shopping bag that looked as though it held crumpled up mounds of paper, her other hand clutching the worn coat she tried to keep around her shoulders.

"No wonder there's so many bugs in my couch," Gary muttered meanly, though she didn't appear to hear him.

It took her a while to settle. First the bag went right beside her legs, next her coat slipped in back of her as she kind of collapsed backward, landing on the cushion nearest the armrest. She had to struggle halfway up, reach down to pull her bag closer, readjust the coat, pull her dress over her knees and try to straighten the runs that were all that remained of her pantyhose. I watched, mesmerized. As soon as she appeared to reach a degree of comfort, she nodded off.

Page Image

"That's Alice. She's an old drunk, nasty, too."

"She's a good one to stay away from," Delores agreed.

Pigpen, appropriately named, came in next. He shoved one hand into a soup can for butts, then flopped on Alices couch, jarring her and earning a stream of abuse which he didn't seem to hear as he searched for a cigarette paper. Alice's head dropped again. We could hear soft snoring as Pigpen tore apart the butts for the precious remaining tobacco.

Andy finally woke up and, without stopping to wash or comb his hair, joined us at the desk.

"When the fuck are the cheques due?" he demanded.

"Not for another week, and don't forget you owe me five bucks."

"Just deal the cards, Delores. I don't forget nothing."

"How do we get the cheques?" I asked, aware that they were referring to the welfare allotments.

"We don't. What are you on, welfare or family benefits?"

"Welfare, I guess. I saw a welfare worker."

"Whoop-de-do. You get the same as me. Eighteen bucks. The rest the owner keeps. This fat son of a bitch," he said, nodding at Gary, "gets family benefits. He gets to keep a hundred, and I mean *keep* it, the stingy bastard."

"Shut your mouth, Andy. I've brought you coffee lots of times, you never pay me back. C'mon Delores, we gonna play or just listen to him bitch?"

Dealing the cards was by no means easy; accumulated grime and sweat had scored them and months of use had

Page Image left them thin as rice paper. It turned out that Andy, like me, paid $200 room and board, Gary and Delores $315 out of a $415 cheque. They also informed me that family benefits always arrived first, welfare a few days later. I asked how they cashed their cheques.

"The owner cashes them. He won't let us have them. Says we'll take off and blow the rent money."

Eighteen dollars. Four packs of cigarettes and a tin of aspirin. Or a tin of tobacco and a box of tampons. Sanitary items were not supplied, though toilet paper was supposed to be in every washroom. Deodorant was almost unheard of. There were no laundry facilities in the house, and little likelihood of finding or affording a Laundromat.

I played my hand, keeping my head down, shocked at what I'd heard. I was getting more depressed by the minute. Not that I'd ever rolled in money, not that I hadn't ever experienced poverty, but the grind of a caffeine-less and tobacco-less existence was wearing me down. I had been looking forward to having some cash to spend, some "tailormades" (as packaged cigarettes were referred to in the house), some temporary relief.

I continued to play listlessly, no longer participating in the jibes that now sounded stale and tiresome. In the back of my mind was a memory of a social worker who, when I worked at the group home in Montreal, taught Special Care Counselling to people already working in the system. She had complained bitterly about welfare recipients who, on cheque day, would ride in a taxi to the liquor store, keeping the meter running while they

Page Image went in and loaded up on booze. I had argued with her, suggesting she was being judgmental, and she accused me of naÃ¯vety. Small satisfaction in being right.

I left the common room, claiming a headache, and spent most of the subsequent week in an over medicated fog, reminiscent of weekends slept away in the hospital. It seemed as though most of the others coped in the same way. From behind floor after floor of closed doors came sobbing, fighting, cursing, hoarse voices speaking to blank walls at all hours of the day and night.

3

I'd grown up with thoughts of death, always keeping that final exit close to me. Every time I fell into depression, every time life around me grew grim, I would hold the possibility of escape like a secret promise, and I did that now.

My earliest suicide attempt, clumsy and ineffectual, happened when I failed an Easter report card in grade five. I believed what my father had always told me: I was stupid and lazy. I'd heard it so often I couldn't choose to disbelieve it. It seemed I'd always been slow and stubborn. I still couldn't tell time in the fourth grade, couldn't add or subtract, despite my father's nightly tutorials. I couldn't understand why I persisted in my laziness when it always brought me so much grief. I have very few memories of the time I spent in early grade school, and those I have are riddled with beatings and shame.

Page Image

I remember the small apartment in downtown Montreal, the one with the alley in the back where all the other kids played through long summer evenings. I remember the dining-room table where he'd make me sit beside him, grade four math book open in front of me. I remember how quiet the house was with everyone else in bed.

He'd make me leave one hand flat, palm down on the table.

"Ten times ten."

I'd scratch the page nervously with my pencil, unable to remember the right response.

"I said ten times ten."

My head would go blank. His heavy fist would come crashing down on my hand till it seemed I had no bones left unbroken. Every wrong answer brought pain, causing me to panic so much that the few correct answers I could remember scooted right out of my brain, abandoning me to, his cruelty.

For years after I left home, and nightly in the boarding house, memories would crash into my head, triggered by screams or noises in the night.

Roars of anger. A single fork found dirty in the drawer. Everything in the kitchen — plates, pots, cutlery — emptied out and thrown on the floor, the five of us dragged out of bed, beaten and forced to wash and dry everything again. A fingerprint on the wall resulted in us having to clean all the walls with rubber erasers, finally released to bed as the sun rose. Dinners flung off the kitchen table, children with their faces rubbed in

Page Image their plates — I still can't sit at a kitchen table without tensing, without waiting for the blows to fall. Guilt always with me, always feeling on the verge of being found out. Deserving of punishment.

After that Easter report card, I knew I couldn't go home. Walking was difficult because I'd lost a boot miles back. The mud had sucked it right off my foot. For a panicked minute, I thought it was some weird form of quicksand, and for someone who wanted to die, I moved pretty fast to pull myself out. I didn't attempt to rescue the boot, I just kept walking deeper into the woods that bordered the school. I made progress, even though I stayed off paths where the going would have been easier.

The snow was humped into little mounds that were grey and hard. In several places, large pools of water had been created by the gradual melt. I got colder. I could no longer feel my foot; it was like walking on a stump. There were no spring sounds, no scampering squirrels, only ominous silence and a sky filled with dark clouds. Maybe, I thought, it will snow and cover my tracks. That would be good, lessen my chances of being caught.

The afternoon seemed to be edging towards nightfall. Turning in a complete circle, I could see no civilized area in any direction. It might be all right now to rest, to stop, to do what I'd come to do. I picked out a large, lifeless tree and sat down on the damp ground, my back against its trunk. Fumbling around in my schoolbag, I searched for the knife I'd lifted from the kitchen that

Page Image morning, rightly anticipating the kind of report card I'd receive.

My mitts were stiff and wet, my fingers numb and unresponsive. I was afraid to think, could still hear echoes of my father's rage, hear his condemnation of me, all the warnings he'd screamed about what would happen if I didn't smarten up. I didn't know what was the matter with me, why I was so stupid. Why, every time I was asked a question in class, my insides would seize up, my mind desert me. It wasn't as if I wanted to be that way, even though he often said I chose to be stupid. Maybe my mind didn't work the same as other kids', maybe I was slow, like that one teacher had said.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered, hugging myself and shivering violently, "I'm sorry." Words I'd spoken all my life. I'm sorry for my lousy grades, sorry for the dirty dish, the broken cup, sorry for all the bad things I've done, all the beatings I've caused. His voice surrounded me: "Sorry!" Dripping with scorn. "Sorry? If you think you're sorry now, just wait, just wait till I get my hands on you!"

I tested the tip of the knife against one finger and stared in awe at the red seeping into the mitt. Was it that easy? Working the buttons on my coat was hard with frozen fingers, but I got them undone. My body was shivering hard. I dropped the knife and vomited into the patchy snow.

I huddled into myself, pulling my coat tighter, sick and increasingly afraid. How long does it take to freeze to death? I wondered in my sluggish brain. Or simply to starve?

Page Image

It was getting darker. I shrugged the coat off my shoulders and lay on it, not allowing myself to pull it over me. I'll just fall asleep and never wake up, that's all. It can't take that long, it's so cold here. More time passed. All there was was cold, inside, outside. Neither sleep nor death came to rescue me. Everything hurt. Why did everything always have to hurt?

I heard something. That was a train whistle! I held my breath, waiting for the sound to come again. It did, and all my plans fled. I managed to stand up by hugging the tree trunk, got my coat off the ground and back around my shoulders. I followed the sound of the train, limping on feet that felt swollen and dead. Even as I trudged through icy puddles and packed snow, I wondered if they'd have to cut them off. The tracks were surprisingly close, and in my desperation I was hysterically happy to see them.

I didn't know which direction meant warmth, but chose one, moving automatically, keeping my eyes on the closely spaced railway ties. It was a very long walk. Still, all too soon, there, just ahead, was the house. The sight of it hit me in the chest like a blow from a fist. I could hear my heart in my ears. Still, I trudged on, up the stairs, to open the door, to hear him shout:

"Where the hell is the bitch? It's six o'clock!"

I'd only been gone three hours. He was in the hallway, ready for me. And it started. Through it all, I was dimly aware that whatever he did to me was nothing compared to what I'd done to myself ... by coming home.

4

Page Image

Andy jarred me out of my comatose state by banging on my door and calling out to me that Gary wanted to see me. I was shaky from the week's retreat, dull-brained, headachy, but I went down the three flights to see what was up.

Gary was caving in the centre of his mattress, feet planted wide apart, demolishing a Big Mac. He reached behind his considerable bulk to grab something and thrust it at me. Fresh-cut flowers wrapped in pretty paper blossomed from his meaty fist.

"Here. Don't say I never gave you nothing."

Amid the odour of dried urine and stale farts, the roses smelled like a bit of heaven.

"Ah, Gary." My voice sounded rusty and strange after days of non-communication.

"And these too." He produced two packs of tailor-mades, a Big Mac and a coffee. After days of deprivation, these were indeed significant gifts. I knew this time the blurred vision wasn't caused by the medication, and I leaned over to kiss his grizzled cheek, touched deeply by his gruff thoughtfulness. He hurriedly waved me back, blushing wildly.

"Get away, get away! Wimmin, jeez."

The card games that night were much livelier, and I caught sight of people I hadn't yet realized lived here.

For some reason that evening I kept thinking about the rare times my father would bring us anything sweet or special. He would call us down to the "family room," saying Ed Sullivan was on, and during the show

Page Image he would throw five Eat-More bars on the floor in the centre of the room, hoping, I guess, that we'd dive after them. Bone to a dog. Whereas this man, who lived with nothing, gave with grace and love.

5

With no calendars or clocks in the house, it was hard to tell what day or month it was. So many days were simply slept away, thanks, in large part, to the profusion of psychotropic medication lying around everywhere: Largactil, Nozinan, chloralhydrate, Haldol.

On my way to the porch, a day or two after Gary's magnanimous gesture, I was forced to pick my way through a crowd of tenants who'd spilled up the stairs from a line-up that started flush with the owner's office door. It was a growly, restless crowd, almost as bad as the supper line-up, so I was relieved to make it outside without incident.

Gary was already in his chair, and he lit a smoke for me, waving back at the house.

"See the vultures waiting? That means he's cashing the welfare cheques. Try and grab him 'fore he leaves, if you want your bread."

I nodded but stayed in my chair for another hour or so, until Andy came out to tell me the owner wanted to see me. It was like being summoned to the principal's office. I didn't know what to expect from this mysterious figure.

Page Image

His office door was open, so I just walked in and stood waiting to be noticed by the brown man who was ensconced behind the desk, and yelling into the phone in a language I didn't recognize. I picked up one of the scattered chess pieces, a white bishop carved from pale wood.

"Do you play?" asked an accented voice, startling me into dropping the piece. He'd hung up the phone and was looking at me hopefully over dark-rimmed glasses.

"Not too well, but I enjoy the game."

"Good! Set up the board while I find your cheque."

Before we started, he counted out a ten, a five and three ones, as I scribbled my signature on the back of the cheque that lay face down on the desk. It was the first cash I'd seen in some time, and I pocketed it with mixed emotions.

It wasn't luxuries I missed, or at least what I used to consider luxuries. Before I'd left off working at the group home, I'd smoked two packs of Gauloises a day, was used to having some money in my pocket, could buy music tapes when I wanted, ride city buses, subscribe to newspapers, buy books in downtown bookstores. On the other hand, poverty, hunger and general deprivation were not absolute strangers to me. In college, I had lived in a succession of rooming houses strung along Dorchester Boulevard. I shared kitchens with drunks, hookers and dealers, and even some crazies. But poverty is different when you know you're moving through it; it can even be charming and

Page Image educational, remembered in humorous anecdotes later in life. Knowing or feeling the permanence of one's poverty exacerbates the deprivation; it galls and burns.

Concentrating on the game was difficult, partly due to the permanent fog in my brain, partly because the office, when it was open, was an exceedingly busy place. Latecomers looking to sign away their cheques, others to pry their two-dollar daily allotment out of the owner. He seemed to "trustee" money for those he claimed would drink it all up the first day if left to their own devices.

He was a good player, and used to functioning in a chaotic atmosphere. I held my own, however, and he was pleased enough with my performance to yell at Andy and order him down to McDonald's for three

coffees, double-double, "And don't forget the receipt!" He explained to me that at home he always drank his coffee black, but since cream and sugar were supplied free at the restaurant, he liked to load up.

He didn't ask me any questions, I didn't have to fill out forms. We hardly talked at all, there were so many interruptions. After he permitted me one victory out of three games, he clapped me on the shoulder and said he had to run, but that I was welcome to come down anytime he was in and have a game or two. "Nobody else in this crazy house knows how to play, and I miss it. Take care."

Not wanting to resume my theatre seat on the porch till I had sorted out some of the impressions I took away from meeting this fellow, I went to my room and thought for a while. He wasn't a two-headed monster;

Page Image he'd been polite and relatively gentle with me. And the days were so excruciatingly boring that playing chess was a welcome diversion. Nonetheless, I had no intention of "coming down anytime;" I'd wait to be invited.

6

"Pat. Pat, I have to talk to you. It's very important. Pat, are you awake? Please, I need to talk to you."

He kept rapping at the door, punctuating every word.

"Who is it?" I yelled into my pillow.

"Me, Don Dixon. Please, Pat, talk to me."

It must have been after midnight. I'd been asleep till he'd begun his assault on the door.

"Pat?"

"All right, Don. Go down and wait for me on the front porch. I'll be there in a few minutes."

I was swearing softly as I listened to his retreating footsteps. I'd met him only a few days ago. He'd come back to the house after a third failed attempt to live with his mother. The guys in the common room had groaned when he walked in. Gary hadn't minced his words: "Oh Christ, you back again?"

According to Delores, Don's mother was quite welloff, but too old and tired to handle her mildly retarded, schizophrenic son. She paid the owner extra rent to encourage him to take Don back after every crisis. His clothing was certainly expensive, but you had to look closely to tell; he was a very sloppy, careless young man. Page Image He was overweight, a chubby puppy eager to make friends, not understanding why people didn't like him. He hovered around the edges of the common room, smiling brightly, trying to start conversations and being regularly rebuffed. I'd felt sorry for him, seeing the hurt in his eyes, and he'd quickly picked up on my sympathy and attached himself to me.

Now he was waiting for me downstairs. I resolved as I dressed, despairing at the state of my clothing, to be very firm with him in discouraging his late-night interruptions. The days were quite long enough, more than I could handle; I didn't need any extensions.

King Street was very still as I stepped out onto the porch. The owner didn't waste money on external lights, and the nearest streetlight had been shattered again. The stores across the street were shut up and dark, looking like a set for a "B" horror movie.

"Okay, Mr. Dixon," I started off brusquely, "I hope this is really important."

I sat one stair up from him, intentionally distancing myself. He immediately relocated himself, crowding me, causing me some nervous concern.

"Pat, I had to talk to someone. Usually I like to talk to the owner, but he's not here. He listens to me, he takes care of me, he's my only friend. He lets me stay here, even if he does yell at me and call me names sometimes. I don't want to do anything to hurt him, make him mad. Sometimes I do things, I start feeling strange, I do stuff. Then everyone gets mad at me, they all want to send me away."

Page Image

"What is it you do, Don, that gets people angry with you?" I asked the question calmly enough, but it took some effort. After all, it was dark. There was no one around. I'd just woken up. And he was spooking me.

He didn't answer my question, which increased my uneasiness; my imagination was left to fill in the blanks. I tried to ignore my percolating fears, and said quietly, "Don. You woke me up. You said you wanted to talk. You said it was important. Well, here I am. You must have felt you could trust me, so why don't you?"

"I don't want to be locked up."

"I can't lock you up."

"I think maybe I should be locked up."

"Are you afraid? Do you think you might do something bad?" I felt his whole body nodding jerkily. Lovely.

"Okay, Don. What can I do or say that will make things easier for you, help you get through this?"

"Do you think I should be locked up?"

I wasn't sure if he wanted a yes or no from me, but a part of me felt he'd be reassured if I said yes. I didn't have enough sense of him to trust my instincts in this strange discussion, so I went with the therapeutic response every ex-patient is used to.

"What I think isn't important. You know yourself better than I ever will. Do you think you need to go to hospital?"

I felt him thinking. I knew it wasn't easy for him, I could feel him straining, trying to work out how he felt. It's easy to let your imagination run off at night. A

Page Image whole array of violent possibilities played out in my brain. Maybe he plays with knives, maybe he rapes, maybe he just likes to hurt people? He's stronger than I am. Would anyone hear me, would anyone come if I got into trouble? Can I control him? Will he listen to me?

I don't know how much time passed. The dark thickened, felt malignant.

"I think —" I almost left my skin at the sound of his voice "— I think I'll be all right. I can stay here, if you'll hold some things for me. The owner will be here in the morning, he can take me to the hospital. He can make them let me in. It's just tonight."

Oh, jeez. What was he going to give me. Pieces of human torso? The head of a cat? How crazy was this man? He moved his hands in the dark. I felt my pulse in my ears. He touched my knees. I froze. Then I felt things dropping into my lap ... normal things, everyday things, reasonable things. He was not Norman Bates. He was a confused, slightly retarded man of twentyeight, who was showering me with packets of matches, dozens of matches.

"Can you keep these away from me? Keep them away from me? Then I won't do anything bad. No one will have to shout at me. I won't be sent away with everybody hating me and not wanting me back. Will

you help me?"

I breathed more easily, relieved.

"Are you sure you'll be all right? I'm happy to hold on to these, but is that enough? Can you sleep, wait till morning?"

Page Image

"Now I can, yes. I feel better." He laughed, more easily, I could feel the change. He touched my face lightly with the tips of his fingers. "Thank you. It's nice to have another friend. I'm going to bed now. And I'll be all right. 'Cause of you. You have them, now I can sleep."

He left me sitting there, and he went over to 1245 where he shared a room on the third floor. I watched his disappearing form, uncertain. Should I do something? (What?) Should I call someone? (Who?) Was I handling this right, and why was I handling this at all?

A half-hour later, I was stretched out on my bed, still dressed. I was straining every sense, probing the three houses, determined to keep watch through the night, to have no harm come to the people in the houses.

The first siren had me running outside, not aware that I'd crashed down three flights of stairs, just running over to 1245. There Don stood talking to a police sergeant as firemen entered the house. I heard him say, "I was just coming out of the bathroom when I smelled the smoke. I went into my bedroom and saw someone had set fire to my clothes, and my mattress was burning, too. I ran downstairs and when I seen your car, I waved you down. Some of the guys here are pretty mean, it's a lousy thing to do, set fire to someone's bed."

From the fire escape, a fireman warned us to step back. A couple of them struggled with the mattress, finally getting it over the railing. Sparks flew with it, fireflies in the night, and rushed out in swarms as it struck the ground. Don turned, saw me and smiled. I was chilled.

Page Image

A number of things struck me at once. The smoke-detector was obviously not working. None of the tenants had woken up. They were still deep in their drugged sleep. None of them had heard or sensed anything. That was frightening, even more frightening than the young man who was so pleasantly smiling at me.

"Don, you didn't give me all your matches, did you?" I asked him, in front of the cop.

The sergeant looked at me, then at Don, then back at me as I continued.

"Did you really need to do this? Did you want to be locked up that badly? You risked everyone's life in there, Don." He looked at me, still smiling, warm and trusting. I talked to the policeman, feeling sad and bewildered and overwhelmed by this place, these people, and their strangeness.

The cop was gentle with Don as he led him to the car and helped him into the back seat. Don smiled happily, no malice, no fear. A sense of order, rightness came from him, much more jarring than accusations of betrayal. He waved goodbye to me when the patrol car pulled away, pleased to be going where he needed to be, pleased that they would have to open the door to the locked place and let him in.

1

Page Image

I knew how it felt to need asylum from life; I understood a little of Don's desperate longing for safety from himself and others. At times a hospital, in spite of all its terrors, is the only place left to run. Two days had passed since I'd left home for the hospital, carrying nothing that would give me away if he unexpectedly drove past me on his way home, early and angry. I felt pursued, sure he would grab me and hurt me just as I made the hospital doors. None of this happened, and I made it into the hospital, into the ward that would be my only home for the next five months. I had many of the same prejudices "normal" people carry about mental illness. I'd seen *Psycho* and all the television portrayals of the dangers and unpredictability of crazy people; I'd read *The Snake* Pit and thought I had an understanding of the consequences of

Page Image entering a mental hospital. It is an accurate indication of my desperation that, in spite of all I thought and felt, I still saw the hospital as a refuge from home.

I barely left my room, I spoke as little as I could get away with to my roommate, whom I kept expecting to change abruptly from a harmless-looking woman to a raving lunatic with an imagined grievance against me that she would correct with wild force.

I was impressed that there were no bars on the windows of the fourth-floor psychiatric ward, until I tried opening them and found they were designed to open only a scant few inches. The obvious reason sent cold chills down my back. The doors that couldn't be watched from the vantage point of the glassed-in nurses' station were wired with emergency alarms.

Nurses weren't in uniform, but it was obvious who were the staff and who were the patients. The staff seemed to dress as though they were going off to a fashion show right after work; they were made-up, perfumed, often high-heeled. When they walked, it was easy to hear the muted jangle of keys. Patients' rooms were in a semicircle ending on each side of the nurses' station, which in turn faced the dayroom/ dining room.

I was unable to relax. I kept waiting for the axe to fall, for him to track me down and drag me bodily out, back home. My nerves were stretched even further than they had been, my hands shook constantly, I couldn't sleep or eat. Even breathing, no longer a simple mechanical reflex, took exhausting physical concentration. No medications were offered or asked for; it seemed they

Page Image were still trying to assess me. My preliminary diagnosis was "adolescent turmoil." I had no idea what that meant, and it didn't really matter to me; I was simply desperate for asylum, for refuge, for sanctuary.

I was eighteen, legally free, legally independent, but without money, or job skills, or a place to go. I was bereft of any future, a simple fugitive from the nuclear family. I had left a note, not mentioning the hospital, uselessly requesting that no one try to locate me, promising to get in touch once I was settled elsewhere.

It would be difficult for an outsider to appreciate the enormity of my action. I had an acute awareness of the scene I'd left the others to deal with at home, although I tried, constantly, to block out that awareness. I was the first defector, the first to run outside, the first to crack the foundation and faÃ§ade of the "family" home, the first to "tell." My younger sister had run away a few times, staying with friends, but going to no outsider, enlisting no aid. When she returned, he beat her, shaved her head. My older sister once ran in hysterical panic to a neighbour, who called my parents and reported her "exaggerated stories;" she was brutally beaten upon her return. No one told. We gave up, almost without a fight. My youngest sister bitterly, vividly, recalls a time when he caught her walking with a black kid and started beating her right out on the street. A disgusted man yelled from his balcony that if he had to do that sort of thing, "at least have the decency to do it at home, not in front of everybody!"

He ruled us with absolute authority, never challenged,

Page Image never taken away. We came to see him as invulnerable, with ears and eyes everywhere, always ready to inflict his version of discipline, always more brutal than the time before, more imaginative, more sadistic.

On the afternoon of the third day, as I sat, knees up to my chest, on the hospital bed, Armageddon walked in unannounced. It was one of the many times in my life when I knew it was perfectly possible to die from fear. He sat down beside me on the bed while I flinched further into the headboard. I wouldn't look at him. His first words were in modulated tones, dripping with disappointment, hurt, kindliness, with undertones promising forgiveness.

"Oh, Pat, why did you do this to your family? You don't belong here, with all these crazy people. You don't need to hurt us like this. Your mother is very upset. She won't stop crying. Won't even talk to me unless you come home.... I'm sure you don't want to do this to us, to your mom, your sisters, your brother. Whatever it is, we can work it out, I promise."

A classic rabbit-snake confrontation; although this rabbit refused to look into his eyes, his voice was having the same mesmerizing effect. I was feeling guilt, cutting, acid-burning guilt. I was once again the bad child who didn't deserve to be trusted, hurting once again the long-suffering father who sought only peace.

I said nothing. I was frantic for escape, hoping a doctor or nurse would walk in and rescue me, wondering how long he would stick to persuasion before his temper took over.

Page Image

"You don't have any idea what they'll do to you here. Drugs, shock-treatment, operations on your brain. You don't want to be like these zombies, do you?"

Yes, I wanted to scream at him, anything, anything is better than going back with you.

"Bathroom," I mumbled, and ran; another singular act of courage that sure didn't look it. I'd never dared run from him before; the consequences were unthinkable. Into the hall, running, into the nurses' station where I collapsed against a wall, crouching low, hands clamped over my ears to block out his voice, still echoing in my brain. This seemed to cause a flurry of activity to which I paid no attention. Voices, first puzzled, then annoyed, rained down on me. Time passed somehow; I didn't move a muscle.

"Pat, he's gone now. I want you to return to your room."

Magic words. I looked up into a tight, unpleasant face.

"Come now, stop this ridiculous behaviour." She was tugging at my arm. I rose, shakily, and she escorted me back. I could, even through my turmoil, pick up her anger.

"How could you jeopardize the doctor's career like this? He tries to help you, and you lie to him."

Lie?

"He, we, could be sued. You had no business telling him you were eighteen."

Page Image

I found my voice, though it sounded weak to me. "I am eighteen."

"You're seventeen. You can't sign yourself in at seventeen."

"I'm eighteen!"

"Do you have proof?"

Of course I didn't. She glared at me, her judgment vindicated, and left me alone.

They're going to hand me over, they're going to make me go back, oh God, they believe him, they'll let him take me. Wild scenes played in my head: jumping out of the car while he was driving, running from the ward before he was notified ...

They gave me an injection some time during the night, and in the morning the psychiatrist came to talk to me. He had set up a meeting with my parents for that day. He had no questions about my age or whether I had lied, and seemed very annoyed when I told him what fears the nurse had provoked. He was a very persuasive man, and although I had no idea what he talked about with them, my parents did sign the papers before they left that day. I only had to spend two minutes in the office with them and the shrink, just long enough to hear my father's diagnosis.

"You know what, Pat?" he said, still playing the role of the reasonable father. "You've always been a tomboy, even in the way you dress. I think your problem is penis envy."

I never replied.

2

Page Image

I'd grown used to feeling from adults outside my home the same bruising judgments about who and what I was that I'd heard daily from my father. Not until late in high school did anyone in a position of authority ever lead me to believe I was any better than the slow, untrustworthy, ungrateful child I knew myself to be.

One day, in grade eleven, I was summoned to the vice-principal's office by the school secretary's voice, broken up and crackling over the intercom. I hadn't done anything I was aware of to warrant such a summons, but I immediately felt guilty and scared; the office had those connotations for every student. Although the principal had a soft reputation as a public-relations figurehead, the vice-principal was the object of fear and the target for maliciously descriptive nicknames.

I knocked on his closed door, heard a kind of grunt and walked in, trying to project an aura of confidence and curiosity. My stomach was fluttering, my palms felt a bit slippery, but since he made no move to shake my hand that seemed an irrelevant detail. I had never talked to him before but I was very aware of who he was.

At the end of the tenth grade, I had been surprised and gratified to be elected editor of the school paper for the upcoming academic year by its student staff. With a handful of others, I had worked over the summer to prepare an issue that could be printed by the school and distributed in late September. The vice-principal had

Page Image the copy we submitted in his hand. He looked even less happy than usual. It seemed as though he was having difficulty controlling his anger. I quickly reviewed the articles and poems in my head: surely there was nothing that could be considered controversial, nothing that could spark this kind of reaction.

He was abrupt, to the point.

"You will not be the editor of the school paper. I am quite aware of the kind of yellow journalism you would produce, and we won't have that here. I will inform the staff adviser to call new elections."

I was stunned. I had never expected this.

"I was elected."

"You can go now."

I stood very still, staring at him in confused anger.

"Can you tell me what you find objec—"

"I said go back to your class!"

It was the same as being at home: no explanations, no fairness, just a statement that I was not good enough, that I would mess things up. I reached for the paper and he exploded. He stormed over to his door and opened it so aggressively that it bounced off the office wall.

I took the hint and left. I was in turmoil.

I had gained some small notoriety in my last school from a weekly column I wrote for the local paper, *The Victory*. It was published with my own picture and byline and the embarrassing tide "Teen Talk." I hadn't been happy at the school, but neither had I been anonymous. For reasons I've never understood, my vulnerability tended to increase with the degree of invisibility I felt.

Page Image

The next year we moved to a more suburban community, and a new, bigger school, with five thousand students. I spent the first few nervous months surrounded by clouds of anxiety. Although I had no positive proof that other students were even aware of me, I couldn't shake the feeling that they were ridiculing me just out of my hearing.

My fortunes turned dramatically the day I was stopped in the hall by an English teacher. He'd heard about my writing from another teacher, who had enjoyed my essays and encouraged me to write for the school paper. I'd submitted two rather heavy pieces which he'd shared with this second teacher. I was startled to be singled out for praise and attention, and amazed when he asked *me* to help do a rewrite of *Bye Bye Birdy* for a school production he planned to put on.

I was so thrilled, I replayed the conversation in my head for days after. He'd looked at me with interest and respect; he'd asked for my help. This was quite at odds with how I was treated at home. In what seemed no time at all, I was accepted into a group of intelligent, creative kids who weren't ashamed to read, who had some awareness of world affairs, who were bright, attractive and funny. I found myself being invited into homes of teachers and homes of students, places where people seemed genuinely to like and support each other, where kids didn't run when their fathers reached for them, where the mothers didn't look ground-down, where the atmosphere was light, not oppressive.

What happened next is that the two pieces I submitted

Page Image for the paper were censored by the school administration. After a brief battle, the teacher/adviser resigned from the paper in protest. The principal spoke to me briefly in the hall, assuring me that he felt the articles were "university material and quality," but that high school students and their parents were too likely to misinterpret and complain about them. I'd been asked to read the pieces on a university radio station, so it wasn't that they were "tabloid material;" they dealt with racism, war, oppression in the world.

Now, as I retreated from the administration office, I wondered if this latest attack could be a belated backlash.

After my disastrous meeting with the vice-principal, I wandered around the now crowded and boisterous halls until I found Brian, the teacher/adviser who had resigned from the paper the year before. I was almost afraid to tell him what had just occurred, feeling he might blame me for messing up. Instead, he exploded, "Christ, that stupid bastard. Don't worry, Pat, leave it with me."

Although still shaken, I was relieved and happy that he had exploded not at me, but for me. These were the days when student politics was coming into its own, sparked by books such as *The Student as Nigger* and by "the war that wasn't" in Vietnam, by the desire of some educators and students to make the curriculum offered in schools more relevant and to end oppressive conformity, marked by both uniforms and uniform thinking. Days that saw the spawning of free, alternative schools,

Page Image where creativity was actively encouraged, not seen as a pathological development threatening to erode the status quo.

Over the next days and weeks, the situation with the paper escalated, with no compromise offered by the administration. A meeting was called of students involved in the production of the school paper and everyone resigned. There was no authorized paper that year. It was my first experience of group action and group loyalty, one I have never forgotten. The braver students joined me to produce an underground paper, which we clandestinely distributed in the corridors. No names were signed, but since the first issue contained the two censored pieces, the administration and department heads were left in no doubt as to who was responsible.

At the same time, I was one of a number of high school students being politicized by undergraduates from Sir George Williams University, now part of Concordia. As a result, I was subjected to what I now recognize as a campaign of harassment by the administration. I hated school uniforms, and wore one as infrequently as possible. Every day, the administration would call to my homeroom over the intercom, demanding to know whether Miss Capponi was in full uniform or not. My homeroom teacher held a vote every morning, and the students always declared unanimously that I was in uniform, no matter what I was wearing. It became a very strange game, taking on surrealistic overtones.

For some months, towards the end of the eleventh

Page Image grade, I had the feeling that I was walking a very thin tightrope between family and school. Nothing had changed in the cycle of frequent explosions and icy coexistence at home. I had a deep-seated fear of the school finally tiring of playing with me and notifying my parents that I was suspended. When confronted by furious department heads and conservative teachers — a situation that happened far too frequently, and at times, far too physically — I learned to say "sir" while I carefully and politely, and only verbally, fought back.

We brought out a second issue of our underground paper, and one of the English teachers took exception to a piece criticizing the present, rather restrictive, curriculum. He accosted me in the hall outside his office and dragged me by my arm through the stacks of books on shelves in his office. He read off titles in rapid fire, sarcastically demanding if I'd bothered to read each book. What he interpreted as smart-ass replies were in fact true; I had read the majority of them. I was by now a voracious reader, this being my major escape from the turmoil at home.

I was eighteen now, older than most of the students. I'd spent three years streamed into a vocational program (the "dumb" class, it was called) and in order to get back into academic I'd been required to do grades nine and ten over again. But my age was no protection against the threats of others or my own fears.

The Sir George undergraduates were organizing a city-wide school walkout to protest the slowness of change and the stubbornness of some of the administrators. I had

Page Image been asked to prepare the students at my school. I was still thinking it over, trying to

determine all the possible consequences, when I was once again called down to the vice-principal's office.

As with our first meeting, he wasted no time.

"Any school walkout would be viewed most seriously, Miss Capponi. Students participating would probably be suspended. As for yourself ... well ..." His voice took on a deceptively sympathetic tone, belied by his smug expression. "... I am aware that your father believes in old-world discipline. I would hate to have to call him and tell him you were in danger of being expelled. I would hate to think of the consequences to you."

My tightrope was on the verge of snapping.

I knew that my two sisters, both younger, were frequently sent to school with obvious bruises and abrasions from beatings at home. I knew, too, that a sympathetic guidance counsellor had tried to probe, but my sisters avoided him, aware of the consequences "telling" brought. No one had ever intervened, ever rescued us. Now this man, this man in authority over five thousand students each year, was using my father's violence to control and straitjacket me.

The events of this final year of high school represented my first rebellion against blind authority, my first time to fight back, my first time to gain some selfrespect. Now, if I did what I believed to be right, calling the students out, I would be in terrible danger at home. If I didn't call the strike, I would be acting in a cowardly way, giving in one more time. Instead of fighting back,

Page Image I'd be bowing my head, beaten again.

I stopped going to school, found myself pacing endlessly at home while both my parents were at work, crying frequently, desiring to run away from all that was destructive in my life. *My history of frequent hospitalizations was about to begin.*

3

At the house, cheque day had come and gone, but there were still dribs and drabs of wine and a few quarters for coffee. People sat around in the common room, watching the card players, listening to the occasional jibes and bad jokes, waiting for supper time.

The front door crashed open and Dennis, who called himself Elvis and most of the time believed he was, ran in, panting, sweating and panicked. He stood in front of our makeshift card table (a three-legged dining-room discard), his back to the open door, trembling and on the verge of hysteria.

"Pat, these kids ... I was singing on the corner, my corner, my corner, and they were all around me, calling me names, buggin' me and pulling on my clothes." Although Dennis was in his thirties, his mental age was about the same as that of the kids, and he often found himself the butt of people's sadistic tendencies.

He gulped in the stale air, bursting simultaneously into tears and hiccups. Behind him, where the bright sunshine stopped right at the front stoop as though Page Image barred from the house, a bunch of children came up to the doorway, peering into the gloomy corridor.

"I ran," he continued, "but they chased me, they threw stones, they hit me!"

A skinny boy in a torn T-shirt and jeans was shoved inside by the three others with him, all boys no more than ten years old. He whirled around to face the others, small fists clenched, angry, scared, caught out. Reassured that he hadn't been swallowed up, the other boys then slipped in beside him, whispering insults and curses at one another. The first boy swiped at his nose with the back of his hand, and, to regain his lost status, led them deeper into the house, one entity with eight legs. I watched them while Dennis, oblivious to the presence of his tormentors, continued to choke and sputter, trying to get through his story.

The children's faces were flushed, their eyes overbright. It was obvious they were wild with the thrill of hunting an adult — sure, he was a "crazy retard," but he was still a grown-up, and they had made the weird fat man run and thrash out and blubber like a baby.

Dennis, at first unable to hear anything but his own ragged breathing, finally looked over his shoulder, gasped and ran to the back of the table, grabbing onto my shoulder with one palsied hand. The room went dead. Nine tenants, and no one spoke, no one would look at the intruders. The cards lay forgotten on the table as the kids wandered around the room, snickering, elbowing each other.

I was struck by the same paralysis as everyone else, the

Page Image same fear. The only thing that brought me back to attention was the pain in my shoulder as Dennis hung on for dear life.

I shook my head to shake off the strange spell and stood up, advancing on the children, speaking as gruffly as I could manage.

"Get the hell out of here, and leave this man alone!"

Of course the kids ran, the first boy turning back briefly to swear at me before running to catch his friends. Mavis cleared her throat and picked up her cards. Alice struggled to her feet, announcing she was ready for a nap. Dennis let out a massive sigh.

"You know, they had me so scared, I couldn't breathe, and one of the stones got me on my back."

He held his hand against his chest to quell the panic. I could see he was working himself into a state, so I asked him to sing one of Elvis's songs. Dennis never refused to sing, no matter what the circumstances. He struck his Elvis pose, legs apart, knees bent in baggy pants, one clenched fist close to his mouth, his face scrunched up into what he felt was a romantic expression, and sang.

4

Mornings in the dining room were the least explosive of the three meals, and the most ugly. The dining room was supposed to be open from seven to nine, depending on how much Jack had had to drink the night before. Two large boxes of puffed wheat, three loaves of bread, a dripping, sticky jar of jam, Page Image another bowl of fly-specked sugar and a container of lumpy skim milk. A forty-cup percolator, sometimes plugged in and ready, other times just beginning to burble while a small crowd formed around it, empty cups out, waiting.

Because breakfast was spread out over two hours, the residents didn't all show up at once; tables held two or three people at most. Those who woke after seven-thirty took their time, knowing the coffee had already been drained dry.

The occupants of the dining room at breakfast were almost all male, driven out of their beds by the constant hunger pangs created and enhanced by anti-psychotic medications. The women would dribble in around lunch time, except for a few morning regulars. If there was absolutely no hope of getting coffee any other way, I would be there too. There was no conversation, no laughter, just a kind of shovelling back and not tasting.

Jack sat enthroned and alone at the table by the curtainless picture window. From there, he nursed his coffee and his bitterness, staring out the window, occasionally yelling back at someone not to *do* or *be* something. No one intruded at his table without an invitation, and most averted their eyes from him, not wanting to provoke a diatribe on the uselessness in this world.

I had yet to really meet Jack, having missed him the few mornings I joined the men at breakfast. He was

polite to me at the supper line-up, which in itself was

Page Image out of character, but there was no time to say more than "hello" and "thank you."

One day, a month or so after my arrival, I came in around 7:15, looked at the people crowded around the coffee pot and was just turning away, discouraged, when Jack yelled to me.

"Well, good morning to you, Pat! C'mon over and sit with me, I'll get you a coffee. What do you take?"

I sat down with a pleased "double-double," though that pleasure was short-lived as I watched him bully and elbow his way to the percolator. He came back and placed two cups on the table, cheerful for some reason.

"I keep meaning to talk to you, but you're in and out so fast ... every time I get around to looking for you, you're gone. Not that I blame you, who wants to sit and watch these animals?" I had a feeling that this was going to be a very expensive cup of coffee for my self-image and self-respect. He offered me a cigarette, which I accepted (in for a penny, in for a pound), while he continued.

"The owner asked me to keep an eye on you when you first came in, not that I needed telling. I knew right away you weren't one of these deadbeats any more than I am. You have an education, Haddie tells me. That's good, it should get you outta here." He always talked loudly, making no effort to spare anyone's feelings or sensitivities.

I was feeling more and more traitorous. The only thing, besides the coffee and cigarettes, that kept me there was a realization that Jack was definitely one of us,

Page Image very much part of the environment he railed against, no matter how much he protested his difference. This was his way of coping; I knew about the need to cope. It was almost acceptable, if it got him through.

"Barry, get the fuck away from the toaster! That little bastard, one day I'll just pick him up and heave him out the door! Listen, Pat, would you like me to fry you up some eggs? I keep my own stash, a little bacon, too."

I could just see myself trying to eat such a Sunday breakfast in front of the other tenants.

"No, thanks a lot, but I can't stand to look at food in the morning. I appreciate the offer, and I sure as hell appreciate the coffee."

He was up very quickly, gathering the cups and disappearing into the kitchen with a hollered "Just wait a second, I'll make us some more!"

Miss Pattison tiptoed in, gathering up crusts of bread and leftover soggy cereal, all in the same bowl. Jack came back from the kitchen, passed her, rolled his eyes and let out a long-suffering gush of air.

"Senile old bat!"

Miss Pattison hugged her treasure, glared at him and took herself off to feed the pigeons, cats or sparrows — or whoever was starved enough to eat the leftovers from this basket.

The coffee was a good, strong instant, likely from another stash. It tasted a lot more real than the watered-down stuff in the perc. I complimented him and he smiled, genuinely pleased. We sat in good silence, for me relieved silence, watching the thick rush-hour traffic

Page Image and the jammed streetcars — all leaving us behind, leaving me feeling cast off and useless, remembering when I too had somewhere to go, something to do.

When my mind returned to it, the room was almost empty. Ruth had come in and was making her way through the dining room, gathering up a spoon here, a bowl there, dragging out as long as possible her only activity — clean-up and dishwashing after every meal. Puffed wheat and crusts of toast crunched under her feet, remnants of the meal the experts call "the most important of the day."

As I thanked him again and rose to leave, Jack invited me to come back to his room and see him "any time."

"I usually have a few beer lying around somewhere, as long as I can keep Haddie away from them."

I shook his hand, this bulky bully of a man, and told him he would be seeing me. I was curious about him, what had caused him to be such a bastard, how he'd come to rule this pathetic kingdom, and why he was tolerated here.

It was clouding over as I stepped outside. The traffic was thinning out. Barely nine o'clock, the whole day ahead of me, and absolutely nothing to do. I stood there until the rain started, sending me back upstairs until lunch, when Gary, or Delores, or some of the others would be getting up and we'd play cards, or just be bored together.

My room was not a bad place in the daytime. I quite liked it. I was used to the bed, the garish colour of the walls, the subdued light. I was even getting used to the

Page Image others who shared the floor with me, their noises as identifiable as their voices, and all that coffee went to waste as I fell asleep to that particular music.

5

On my way downstairs to check on an ailing Gary, I overheard the sounds of prayer coming from Miss Pattison's room. Her door was wide open. The beds had been shoved together to make room for a small row of kitchen chairs lined up before a makeshift altar.

"Miss Pattison, Bertha and old Alice sat primly, hands folded in their laps, staring at their transfigured dresser. I stared too: it was draped with clean white sheets and topped with candles in wine bottles, chalices and prayer books that a thin young man in a priest's outfit was fussily arranging. I recognized immediately that this must be Phoney Father Francis, who I'd heard about but never met. Apparently he'd been travelling, courtesy of Miss Pattison's largesse. The outfit and other religious items were stolen during a break-and-enter on a church. He'd done time for the offence but had not surrendered the goods in question. I guess he felt he'd paid for them with his jail time.

He saw me gaping and came over, smiling toothily, one hand stretched out, palm downwards.

"Hello, I'm Father Francis, the house chaplain. Would you care to join us? The service is just starting."

An unctuous voice from one barely in his twenties. I Page Image suspected he was waiting for me to kiss the Crackerjack ring (with the garish red stone almost hidden in the circle of green eroding his skin). I grasped his hand and, with gentle pressure, turned it sideways for a more appropriate handshake. My voice was icy as I declined his offer.

I left and ducked into the bathroom, whose adjoining wall made eavesdropping easy. I grinned at his pious Latin, probably learned phonetically, and his equally pious, though not unpleasant, singing.

An insistent knock at the door cut short my run, so I continued down to Gary's room, wondering why Alice was letting herself be fooled by that character. Miss Pattison was stuck beyond redemption on the Father. Bertha, her self-effacing roommate, would go along simply in order not to offend anyone. But crusty old Alice was nobody's fool. (Later, it became obvious why Alice attended every service she could.

It seemed that "the Blood of the Lamb" was poured out very generously several times during the Phoney Father's performance — an immediate blessing of warmth and foggy delight.)

Gary was grouching and grumbling in his room; he'd been sick for the last few days, a touch of flu complicating his ever-present bronchitis. He was flat on his back, hardly able to make it to the bathroom. He had his filthy blanket tucked up to his chin. I touched his forehead and it was burning. He growled about not being able to get any sleep with all the half-wits banging up and down the stairs outside his room. I searched the

Page Image pharmaceutical cornucopia on top of his dresser, finally locating an encrusted thermometer and a half-bottle of rubbing alcohol that had miraculously escaped the attention of the hard-core drinkers in the house.

I scrubbed and sterilized the thermometer as best I could, not wanting to add to his problems with whatever microbes had been incubating on it for God knows how long. Against his protests, I popped it into his mouth.

"Gimme a cigarette first," he hollered, and it fell from his mouth to the blanket.

"Later," I promised, firmly reinserting it.

Antony Thompson wandered in and sat on Andy's empty, unmade bed. Nobody paid any real attention to Antony; he was the undisputed nuisance of the house. His head, as if it were too heavy for his neck, was pulled down almost to his right shoulder, enhancing his already strange appearance. He seemed, at the moment, resentful of the attention Gary was getting.

"I took my temperature this morning. I knew I was sick, and I was right. 114 degrees!" His lips crawled over his gums as he spoke. I had no patience for him.

"So," I said, slapping Gary's hands away from the thermometer, "how does it feel to be dead?"

"What, will it kill me?" He hyperventilated.

"Well, Antony, you sure as hell wouldn't be sitting here talking to us, not to mention thermometers don't even go that high."

"I have a special one," he countered, resentfully.

"Even so. It's not possible."

Page Image

He stood up, outraged, his mouth working, his hands shaking, his head almost straightening in his self-righteousness.

"Don't tell me what's possible! I was a male nurse for twenty years, I worked every ward, I went to university. Don't tell me I don't have 114 degrees...," he blustered.

The week before, he'd claimed to have spent his life as a chef in some of the world's best restaurants. He'd convinced Jack, who must have been drunk, to let him prepare a Chinese meal for everyone's supper. He'd fried and served the rice without ever bringing it near water.

"Antony, I think you and your killer temperature better go off to bed. Gary doesn't need all this noise."

"Right, bugger off, before I jump up and bitecha!" hollered Gary, popping the thermometer in and out before I could grab him. Antony sidled out, cursing us for being ignorant assholes who wouldn't know a

temperature if it killed us.

Gary was, in comparison to Antony, a mild 102 degrees. I lit the promised cigarette, watching nervously as every drag bent him into violent spasms.

"Gary, can you sit up?"

"I got no clothes on." He blushed.

"I've seen naked men once or twice in my life, Gary. Nothing you got's gonna come as any surprise. Besides, I want to rub some alcohol on your back and shoulders, and I can't see you lying on that!" I poked the protrusion his belly made under the blanket.

He laughed. "Don't say I didn't warn you!" He

Page Image rumbled like the earth before a quake, and rose in much the same fashion — slowly, steadily and just as unnaturally. He need not have worried; sitting up, his belly covered him to his knees.

In deference to his modesty, I helped him tuck the sheet around what he could. I warmed the alcohol in my palms before spreading it on his broad back. He yelped at first, then gave out little moans of pleasure as I massaged him. He then lay back, eyes closed, and let me do his chest. When I'd finished and tucked him back under his blanket, he asked me for another smoke. I checked my pockets and then the bed, unable to find my cigarettes. It took me a few seconds to notice that the frame and mattress were vibrating, and that Gary was a bright red, his chest and belly shaking soundlessly. I played along, and said quite sternly, "Okay, you turkey, hand them over!"

All the giggles he'd been holding back escaped from his mouth, and he held the pack up high in triumph.

I nursed him off and on for days, I suspect at least one or two longer than necessary. He kept hiding my smokes and I kept retrieving them, loving to hear his childlike laughter. He gloried in being taken care of, and I gloried in being able to do something real for someone in this house. Maybe, even in my excruciating, self-absorbed poverty, I could still find something to give, something to show I wasn't as useless as the world had labelled me.

6

Page Image

I had been troubled in my last year of college by my impending graduation and the void that promised to follow. Although I'd been accepted into Sir George Williams University, I knew it would be a very different experience than my three years at Dawson College (the first English CEGEP in Montreal). I had achieved a fair amount of success there — in grades, socially and as a student leader. I was a student rep in the English department for three years and was twice elected to the school's Academic Council. I'd been published in collections of poetry. I'd even, after completing my own acid experiences, run a drug crisis line one summer at the school. Caricatures of half a dozen school leaders, including myself, hung for a time in the school's board room, and I'd become used to the status of "big fish in a small pond."

Towards the beginning of my last semester, I met a young boy from Weredale, an institution for delinquent and troubled teens, when he tried to bum a cigarette from me on Dorchester Boulevard. In subsequent days and weeks, he introduced me to some of his friends, and in a short time I had an entourage of streetwise, punky-looking kids following me to school and home. I convinced the college administration, who were only too happy to assist me in involving myself in activities not related to school politics, to donate a few rooms for use as a clubhouse. The boys, now a dozen or so, chose to create an electronics room to work on their transistors and stereos, a newspaper room for the newsletter we

Page Image produced, called *Inside the Walls*, and a drop-in lounge. I advocated on their behalf when they ran into trouble with their institution's administrator, either for skipping school, petty theft or breaking one of the many rules in the place. These kids showed me there was something I could do with my life besides remaining a perpetual student, and that was what led me to apply for a job at Summerhill Homes, a group-home agency for teens.

Almost exactly the same time as I graduated from Dawson, I married a young man with whom I'd lived for approximately six months. I'd met him through my work at Weredale; he was one of a number of staff who quietly assisted my efforts to make life a little easier for the kids.

He was a nice enough guy, but I knew it was a mistake, even as I walked down the aisle. In the back of my head, I was prepared to commit for a year or two, but even that seemed like an awfully long time to be with any one person. Although I liked to believe then that I had a great deal of insight into the kinds of things that motivated me, I overlooked the common societal pressure on any single female, and my intense dislike of the term "old maid." It's my belief now that I got married just to be able to say that, damnit, I had been married.

After completing one year at Sir George, achieving academic honours, I applied for and got a job at a group-home agency that only hired couples. The marriage enabled me to work at the group home, and the group home returned the favour by keeping the marriage going four years longer than it would have otherwise.

Page Image

The kids, seven of them, ranging in age from thirteen to eighteen, taught a lot to their twenty-three-year-old group-home mother. They taught me that to show caring in large and small ways went a great distance to winning back horribly damaged children. I understood that damage: I remembered too well what I'd wished for and had never received. Reading stories to kids before bed, helping them with their homework, holding them when they cried, disciplining them when they screwed up, always loving and showing that love, went a long way towards healing me.

The very worst thing about the last useless year of my life, just before coming to the boarding house, was hearing all the mental health professionals telling me that I could no longer do that kind of work. I had to accept that it was too stressful, they said; I should submit myself to vocational rehabilitation. Something like furniture reupholstering was suggested. It was another nail in the coffin: more evidence that I was crazier than I thought, more evidence that I would never be able to reach out to another troubled person, another troubled life.

1

Page Image

At the house, we would sometimes discuss suicide and the myriad ways and means of accomplishing it. The most chilling stories would be told, with no perceptible pain to the teller, of slashed throats, subway jumps, drownings, hangings, overdoses, poisonings; scars would be displayed like mementoes, like family pictures, encouraging listeners to bring out their own in pleasant comparisons. What was never discussed, never mentioned, was the agony of failure, of waking up alive — how malignant and despicable that word could sound — in a hospital bed; how defeating and humiliating that all your courage and resolve could lead to a nurse shining a flashlight in your eyes throughout the long institutional nights. There was nothing unusual, then, in finding myself talking of suicide to a young man who

Page Image had come into the house only days ago. Tom looked very collegiate, very Presbyterian and very young to be out in the world. He had asked me, recognizing a fellow traveller, to join him in smoking some pot he had purchased. I led him outside to the back of the house where we leaned against the ramshackle storage shed. We stood close together, protecting the joint from any errant wind. It was a

chilly night, and there were no lights except the glowing end of our smoke.

"Have you ever tried to kill yourself?" he asked, in the tone of someone telling a ghost story.

"Of course, hasn't everyone?"

Tom looked pleased. "What way do you think is best?"

"For me, I would need to jump from a really high building, where there's no chance to change your mind, no going back, no last-minute rescues, no chance of survival."

He accepted the joint, breathed the acrid smoke deeply and let it stay in his lungs for long moments before passing it back to me.

"Tall buildings have their drawbacks," he warned. "I tried it once, a couple of years ago. I was living in a hotel, one of those by the week or month places. I was so depressed I couldn't even get out of bed, couldn't eat, couldn't care about anything, especially not myself. No job, a family that wouldn't talk to me 'cause I dropped out of school, no girlfriend, nothing. You know the feeling, you know how strong it gets."

He dug into his shirt pocket and produced a second

Page Image joint, which I lit for him, staying quiet.

"I thought, what the hell, I may as well jump, there's nothing going to change in my life. I snuck up to the roof and crept to the very edge. I just stood there, looking down, watching people pass by. I kept thinking how terrible, how disgusting I would look to them, all squashed and splattered around. I didn't want to look that way. I didn't want them to look at me that way and turn away disgusted and sickened. I was tired of all that."

His fingers trembled as I passed him the joint; I think his whole body was trembling. The night air was cool, but we were both experiencing a different kind of cold.

"I came back to my room and looked around. I couldn't do anything that would mean getting physical, like cutting my throat — too much pain for too long, too much guts and willpower needed for that. Then I thought, what about fire? All I'd have to do is sit there and wait for it to come to me. I spent the next few minutes barricading the door. I piled up the dresser, the frame of the bed, a garbage can, a suitcase. I thought I'd build a mountain that would hold me if I began to panic, tried to run out. I piled the burnable stuff in the centre of the room, cut open my mattress, tore up old newspapers.

"It was so final, so ceremonial lighting that fire.... I sat on my knees in front of it, trying to hypnotize myself with the flames, so it might hurt less when it got to me. But God, how it burned. It leapt at my face, my eyes,

Page Image my hair, it torched my lungs and I was screaming and flinging pieces of the mountain out of my way and running down a hall, running and screaming ..."

He laughed, embarrassed, probably glad of the darkness.

"I was arrested and charged with arson. The judge never believed me, and it probably wouldn't have mattered if he had. That night, it never occurred to me that I was in a building with other people, that there were dozens of rooms, dozens of floors, dozens of people. I ... I never felt the room was connected to anything, anyone. It was just me, the walls and the fire. I did three years, I got out a week ago."

He shook his head, as if to clear it, and swallowed the roach, aiming a playful punch a my shoulder.

"So stay away from suicide, kid, or you'll end up a hardened criminal like me," he told me as we headed back inside.

He was gone in another few days, no forwarding address. My memory of him still persists, but I don't spend time wondering how he's doing. I know, and I grieve for him.

2

Since I'd never responded to his invitation to drop in any time, the owner took to sending tenants upstairs to get me the moment he arrived. A few weeks of this, and I grew accustomed to spending my afternoons with him. It became obvious that he Page Image was more interested in conversation than in chess, and he had a lot to talk about. As a native of Pakistan, his life experience was very different from that of the average Westerner, and he had a depth of knowledge he was anxious to share about politics, Eastern religions and the checkered history of his own country. In many ways, he became a living book for me, so starved was I for anything intellectually stimulating or simply distracting.

Having me as a willing, even captive student did wonders for his damaged ego as well. He spoke wistfully of his childhood admiration for the teachers in his own country, and how he'd determined to become like them. That is, until he grew old enough to recognize how poor the teachers were, how shabby their dwellings.

"It was the CPAs who drove Cadillacs, who had the fancy clothing and big houses. I had no intention of staying poor." He trained as an accountant in England. Although his heart, he assured me, stayed with the gender profession, he burned with ambition to become a millionaire by his fortieth birthday.

"I would have made it, too, that million, except for the heart attack I suffered days after I arrived in Canada. The doctors told my wife I was going to die, and she listened to friends who warned her to invest our savings before my death froze our bank accounts and perhaps brought more taxes and scrutiny. In England, a boarding house is something very different from this kind of shit. When I saw what she'd bought, I

Page Image almost had another heart attack. It wasn't two months before we lost a tenant — she suicided in the bathtub upstairs. I knew then I'd been cursed, and I'm still carrying this place."

They'd started off with just 1241-1243. There was no room big enough for a dining room, and the little storeroom off Andy's room was the only kitchen. The tenants had to eat meals balanced on their knees as they sat on the stairs. A few years after his wife's initial purchase, he bought the corner house, which, he explained, was an intelligent investment, not the mistake his wife's investment had been.

Our long office conversations were adding considerably to my status in the house, and to the other tenants' expectations of me. He'd inadvertently encouraged this perception by involving me whenever we were interrupted by one of the regular requests for coffee, or money for cigarettes. He'd naturally expected me to back up his refusals, but my unwillingness to do so didn't stop him from asking my opinion. When he was outnumbered and forced to part with small amounts of "spare change," he'd show some exasperation with my soft-headedness and lecture me about his technique for dealing with bumming.

"The minute I walk in the house, I pull my pockets out of my pants, and ask everyone before they can hit me up if they can spare any money for me. They never give me any, but it usually stops them from asking, which is almost as good."

In some ways, he was as crazy as the rest of us. I had

Page Image to listen straight-faced to his belief in his vaunted psychic ability, which was how he justified leaving the house unsupervised as much as he did.

"I always know when something's wrong. It's like I hear a voice calling my name, over and over. I've gotten here in less than twenty minutes from my place, and sometimes tenants will say, 'How did you know? Who told you we needed you?' " I knew of enough times when his built-in radar had failed to work that I remained highly skeptical, but I kept it to myself.

3

Although none of the three front doors had a functioning lock, I was never very concerned about outside intruders. It seemed highly unlikely, judging from the attitude of those who hurried by, looking nervously at us sitting on the porch, that any stranger would risk breaking in.

My bedroom was the only door in the house with a lock. I had a hook-and-eye contraption that worked only when I was in the room. It provided no real protection, as Andy showed me, flicking his comb through the crack in the door. One good shove would have torn the screw out, anyway, but it felt better to secure it at night. I did worry about some of the men in the house breaking in while I slept, not all the time or very intently, but it would become a very real fear when I thought, sometimes late at night, that someone was standing outside my door.

Page Image

The owner, who always had the last and final word, refused to install locks or to repair those that had once been operative. He claimed that people would keep losing their keys and start breaking the doors down, and he would be left to fix the damage.

There was nothing tempting for anyone to steal, nothing a professional would get excited about and nothing to stir the blood of an amateur. The people inside stole from each other — pennies, cigarettes and papers, interesting pills, clothing, a portable radio that was already hot. We were so isolated and enclosed here that we never thought we could pique anyone's interest. There were times when I myself forgot there was another world out there that could be threatening to the weak and unprepared.

A scream in the night was not rare. Both male and female cries could be heard, crashing through sleep. The screamer would be someone in the throes of a nightmare, or someone who was simply no longer able to tolerate their fears and visions in silence. Some screams, I suspected, came from people who just had to hear themselves to know they were still alive. I had learned from many sleepless nights not to leap up at every cry, but to lie still and judge its nature, its urgency, how disturbed the atmosphere was.

Tonight's scream was different: not just one, but a series, escalating hysterically. My hands shook as I dressed quickly — jeans, shirt, my glasses from under the bed. The screams never stopped for breath. Across the hall, as I stood waiting for my eyes to grow

Page Image accustomed to the dark so I wouldn't break my neck on the staircase, the snoring from the men was weirdly uninterrupted and even. The screams were becoming an insistent, pathetic wail. Nobody was responding. I negotiated the steps quickly and carefully to the second-floor landing, where I found Mama and Theresa. They were holding on to each other, Theresa's face wet with tears, her mouth wide open and emitting a final, choking shriek.

The room next door, Miss Pattison's, and the one opposite, where Delores and the dishwasher slept, had their doors tightly closed. I felt that the women inside were lying rigid and terrified on their beds, waiting for the worst.

Andy was coming up from his floor as I walked towards the ladies. Theresa immediately grabbed me and blubbered, "Oh, Miss Pat, oh, he had a knife, a very big knife."

Mama was standing like a crumbling boulder in her full-length slip that doubled as a nightdress. She looked afraid and confused. Not speaking any English, she could not understand what was being said,

only that big trouble had certainly come. Theresa, who had enough Italian to talk to Mama, was Portuguese and spoke a good, though heavily accented English. She was a full-bodied, warm-blooded woman, at this moment in a thin, flowered nightgown that Andy was taking a great interest in. He slid over and put his arm around her protectively. He had told me before that they had had some "hot" fun summer weeks on the Exhibition grounds.

Page Image

At the moment, hot fun was the last thing on her mind. I got them herded back to the bedroom. Mama immediately stretched out on her bed, overcome with the unaccustomed excitement. I sat with Theresa on her bed, both of her hands squeezing mine.

"Okay, Theresa, take deep breaths now, slow and easy. You have time to tell me what happened, but first I want to get you calmed down."

There was an angry red mark on the right side of her neck that had bled a little and was now crusting over.

"I was *sooo* afraid. I thought this crazy man was going to kill me. His eyes! He must be on the drugs to look at me like that."

She gulped air and shakily continued.

"I was sleeping. I went to bed a little later than usual, so I was very tired, but Mama's snoring was loud. When I finally got to sleep I don't remember."

She glared at Mama, who was busy staring at the ceiling.

"Then I wake up, all of a sudden, and Miss Pat, there is the crazy man. He puts his hand over my mouth before I could scream and the other is holding the knife and hurting my neck."

She craned her head, stretching out her neck and jabbing her finger towards the mark I had already spotted.

"He says to me, don't be afraid, Joanie, it's me. He says don't scream and I won't hurt you. I just want to talk to you, he says. I want to tell him I don't know no

Page Image Joanie, I'm Theresa, but I can't talk through his hand. He keeps calling me Joanie, and then he moves his hand from my mouth, but not the one with the knife sticking out, and he tries to touch me — you know what I mean, Miss Pat.

Andy went out, saying he would bum a quarter and call the cops. I turned back to Theresa.

"All right, Theresa, then what happened?"

"He was touching me, too hard, and I forgot where the knife was. I wanted to wake Mama up but she just kept snoring. I wanted help so I screamed and screamed and screamed, and Mama sat up all at the same time, and he ran out of the room, knife and everything, so fast, but I couldn't stop because he might come back. Miss Pat, I was so scared."

"It's okay Theresa, he's gone now, there's nothing more to be afraid of. Can you tell me what he looked like?"

"Oh no, it was dark, Miss Pat. I saw his eyes, his crazy eyes and the knife. He was young though, I'm sure pretty young. Not someone I've seen before. Who is Joanie, Miss Pat?"

"I don't know, and I'm sure he doesn't either. Probably some jerk got too wired on drugs, like you said, and

didn't know what he was doing."

It was early morning, and the police were able to respond quickly, the rest of the city being relatively quiet and tame. Andy came up with a sergeant and two officers trailing him. They looked very strange in their uniforms, with guns bulging from their holsters, very

Page Image clean and well-fed and out of place in this room.

The sergeant listened to Theresa and sent his men off with Andy to check the house and basements. I found myself listening and seeing through his eyes and ears. Theresa's peculiar inflection and rolling eyes. Another huge lady lying in a dirty slip on the bed, almost catatonic except for one massive leg that jiggled compulsively and shook her whole body. The bare walls, the torn blankets, the lack of furniture and rugs, the old sheet nailed over the window. He was judging us, trying to understand where he was.

"Okay Miss," he said to Theresa as she wound down. "It's all over now, so you can relax and take it easy. He won't be back tonight."

He then turned and asked me to accompany him out into the hall.

"What kind of place is this?"

"A boarding house." It was all I wanted to say, all I wanted to give him.

"What kind of boarding house?" Trapped.

"Mostly for ex-psychiatric patients."

He nodded, confirming something to himself. His men were returning, having found nothing.

"Hmmm, well, I'm sure whoever it was is long gone. Your friend couldn't give much of a description. How long have you worked here?"

"I don't. I just live here."

His eyes showed surprise. I didn't fit his idea of a crazy person. He was becoming uncomfortable, not wanting to be too abrupt or too obviously

Page Image unconcerned, but also not wanting to waste any more time.

"We'll be going now. Keep your front door locked at night, it's a little safer. If he does come back, you just give us a call, and we'll be right here."

There was no point telling him there were no locks when he clearly felt there was no intruder. They left — polite, kind even. Andy and I went back into Theresa's room. She was still trembling. I didn't tell her her attacker would never be caught, never be looked for.

"Miss Pat, what if he comes back, there is no lock? How will I keep him out?"

Andy went out and came back with a chair, showing her how to jam it under the doorknob. I heard him offer to stay the rest of the night but left before I heard Theresa's answer. The sound of Mama's jiggling leg, now shaking the bedframe, followed me upstairs. It was dawn in the city, and I was relieved. It's always easier to sleep in the light.

4

Early one evening, Haddie came and ate her dessert in the dining room with me, kibbitzing with Gary and

mollifying Andy, who had just lost another insult contest with Jack. She leaned over and whispered, "You should come back to Jack's room around eight, we're buying a case of twenty-four."

I had not yet accepted any of Jack's invitations, uncertain about the price tag attached. But I was Page Image bored, and I actually half suspected she was asking for a wounded Jack, who probably couldn't understand my reluctance to visit.

"I'll be there, thanks for asking."

I suspected Haddie and Jack might be a team on cold nights; certainly they fought and grumbled at each other like an old, married couple. Sheer speculation, as they had never touched in my presence, or even been nice to each other.

Around eight, I made my way over to 1245, finding the usually locked dining-room door left open for me. I walked along the dingy corridor, greeting Ruth, who was finishing up the dishes, and ducked into Jack's castle. He had a single bed that was not in bad shape, compared to others in the house. Three or four dinin-groom chairs were arranged in a loose semicircle around the bed, and the room had a working dresser and a closet. He even had a window that opened, propped up now by a block of broken cement.

Jack was ensconced on a legless armchair, salvaged from someone's garbage. Red, always hovering in Jack's shadow, was in one chair, loudly finishing a Molson's. Haddie smiled lopsidedly from another. Jack, unwilling to attempt to rise from his throne, waved me grandly to a seat near him, commanding Red to reach under the bed and grab me a beer. Drinking was officially frowned upon in the house, and, depending on the owner's mood and the tenant's level of drunkenness, could result in confiscation or instant eviction. Jack, because of his usefulness, was likely immune to the latter.

Page Image

Haddie's eyes were already dreamy. Red, an alcoholic and street person, was always soggy with some sort of intoxicant. Jack did not permit Red to wander further than the beer store, because his frequent blackouts caused him to disappear for weeks at a time. Then he'd forget where he lived and all the chores his benefactor had oudined for him. His name had vanished from his memory years ago so that Red, his nickname, had become his sole identity. Though Jack would hotly deny it, Red was needed for all the little chores that the owner assigned and Jack — in spurts — carried out. Jack would direct Red from a chair a safe distance away, telling him where to put the plaster or the paint or the wiring. Red's tongue would flick over his lips, looking for moisture, as he clumsily rushed the job in order to win his pay-off booze.

Jack kept the opener in his shirt pocket — another exercise in power and control. Red, like an obedient child, held the beer in one shakily outstretched hand for Jack to open, then reluctantly handed it over to me and returned to his chair with a wrenching sigh. Jack waited roll he was seated, then, very likely to impress me with his largesse, said to him, "Red, why don't you get yourself one too?"

There was a blur of movement, a cautious pop of the top and an immediate gurgle in his throat before Red once again seated himself, this time with a gratified belch. The circle was now complete and settled in for some serious drinking, visibly relaxed, legs stretched out, bottles in hand.

Page Image

"So how you making out next door, Pat? Anyone bothering you? You just let me know, I can handle these bums."

He didn't pause long enough for an answer.

"I've seen 'em all here, not one of them's worth the money it takes to keep 'em alive. Bums and half-wits, that's what we got here, bums and half-wits."

"Now Jack, don't start," Haddie said, burping softly.

"Aw shut up and drink your beer. Haddie likes everyone, that's why she's still here. She don't know any better. Damned if I'm gonna fall into that. My brain still works, so do my eyes. I don't need this place, it needs me, and I won't let anyone forget that! The owner knows it too, the penny-pinching bastard."

"How long you been here?"

"Couple of years. I'll be moving out soon. This place is too much of a pigsty for me, even though Haddie wallows in it."

"You been saying that for years, Jack, and you aren't gone yet. Neither of us is going anywhere." Haddie finished off her beer, smiling tolerantly at him.

"The fuck I'm not, you sorry bitch. Although if I wasn't here to tell him how to run this place, he'd be in over his head. I kinda feel sorry for him, the bloody Paki."

"Sure, you tell him how to run it, and he'll run himself outta here like you ran yourself outta your bar!"

"That's different!" He increased his volume, so she'd know he was right. I wasn't worried; even the most aggressive insults were placidly accepted. I was sure

Page Image they'd had this same conversation a hundred times.

"Besides, I ran it well for years. Most successful bar in town. It was the wife that drove me to drink, then stole me blind."

"You had your own bar, Jack?" I asked, somewhat warily, never knowing what was a safe topic with the man.

"Yep, up in Lindsay. Beautiful place, country music on the machine, no rowdies. Made a lot of money for that bitch to steal. She bled me dry, then ran off with some fucker. Left me all the bills and no way to pay 'em. Bitches are all the same. No offence," he added, in an afterthought directed at me.

Haddie rose and groped under the bed, and, ignoring a hopeful Red, brought out three bottles for Jack to open.

"Red, it's your bedtime." Red recognized Jack was dismissing him. He bobbed his head, rubbed his hands and, keeping his eyes on the bottles, backed out of the room.

We, the in-crowd, settled back with our lukewarm brews; it was unwise to put them in the common fridge as they would surely disappear.

"Whatcha got by way of furniture in your room?"

"A bed, a dresser with one working drawer."

Jack belched unselfconsciously. "I'll get you a good dresser from one of the bums' rooms. Anything else you'd like?"

"A lamp would be nice, for reading, and maybe something to put it on."

Page Image

"I'll move 'em in for you tomorrow. I heard you been to college. Don't stop. Education's the only thing to get you outta here. I know, I got mine in the navy, the hard way."

There were footsteps along the hall. Three bottles disappeared behind chairs, three innocent faces looked expectantly at the open bedroom door. It was Pigpen, standing with one hand holding up his pants, the zipper gaping open on grey-black underwear, the other hand entangled in his matted curly hair. He might have just woken up, since he was without shirt or shoes, but no one could ever be quite sure with him; he might have just returned from a walk.

"Am I too late for supper?"

"Do up your zipper," commanded an exasperated Haddie, "and come and sit while I fry you some eggs."

The tension left his face, replaced by an ear-to-ear smile. We retrieved our stashed bottles. Haddie passed him her half-full beer and went into the kitchen to clatter pans. Jack was pleased to see him, which surprised me, as he seemed a fairly obvious target for all kinds of verbal abuse.

"Have you practised today?"

"Not yet. The door was locked ... or something."

Pigpen was somewhere between his early and late thirties and deserving of his nickname: his nose was always running, his hands looked like they were dipped unevenly in tar, what little clothing he had on was thoroughly stained.

"Have you heard him play?"

Page Image

"Play what?"

"Piano. The boy genius plays piano. We'll go down to the basement and he'll play for us, eh Pigpen?"

"You got beer and cigarettes, I'll play."

Jack launched into what was obviously a favourite topic. "Pigpen was what they call a child prodigy before he went nuts. His scrapbook's over in the office. He played Massey Hall, all kinds of places. His father bought a second-hand piano after I told him we'd get his boy back into shape. He has to practise every day, and when I think he's ready — and he's close — I'll start booking him into clubs and bars. We'll be on easy street, my man and me."

Pigpen was wrapped in his own fog, staring into his beer, giggling occasionally, pulling on his smoke so hard it was gone in a few drags.

"Your talent and my brains. I know the bar business, I've kept up my contacts. We three are the only people in here worth a damn."

Jack rose with some difficulty from the low chair, sat on his bed and pulled out the case, extracting four bottles in one large fist.

"Haddie," he yelled into the kitchen. "How much money you got?"

"About two dollars, some change," she called back.

"I got a buck and some," I offered, standing and reaching into my pocket as Jack went over to his dresser and picked up the change on top.

"Take back the empties," he calculated laboriously, "and we'll have enough for another twelve. I'll get

Page Image Red after we finish these."

After Pigpen had gobbled up the runny eggs and charred toast Haddie had prepared, and Red had been dispatched, Jack, the messy Boy Wonder and I went down to the basement.

Like everywhere else in the house, the lighting on the short, narrow, wooden staircase was so poor it was next to useless. The basement was little more than cement floors and walls, some doorless rooms holding piles of canned and packaged bulk food items, some of which had dribbled out to the floor and mixed with mouse poison and spring traps. One room held an old piano and bench and a ton of garbage. One naked bulb hung from a badly wired socket. Pigpen knocked the garbage around until he located buried music sheets. He tried to put them where he could read them, but they kept sticking to his fingers.

He forgot about the sheet music and just ran his fingers over the keys in rapid-fire sequence, playing snatches of classical, jazz, country and pop, switching from one to another in no connected fashion, never finishing a piece, but simply losing interest. He stopped as abruptly as he'd begun.

"Where's the beer?"

"Jesus H. Christ. Red only left five minutes ago! Here, stick this in your mouth."

Pigpen lit the cigarette and turning back to the keys played a quarter of something I didn't quite recognize, but played it well. In fact, most of what he played, the little of it I followed, seemed quite good.

Page Image

Ashes joined the other guck on the keys as he played for another few minutes, sometimes to Jack's verbal applause. It didn't seem to worry Jack that his star couldn't finish anything he started.

Haddie finally came down with the beer, but left her own bottle upstairs.

"I'm not drinking in this cold, dirty place."

Pigpen quickly left the piano and grabbed a beer. We finished off the case, Jack and I at one end of the piano, Pigpen sometimes teasing the keys, but mostly lost again. Jack talked at both of us about his big plans and the greatest obstacle he'd been able to identify thus far: where to get the money to rent a tux suitable for his meal ticket to debut in.

The piano sat silent as plans for the comeback got more and more grandiose, until the evening came to a natural end with the killing of the last beer.

Pigpen stood, scratched himself, promised he'd practise and went off to bed. Jack went up to his own room, head filled with bright lights, cigars and easy money. My head and stomach were queasy enough that I made my way to my favourite porch chair. I sat out till quite late, manic music in my brain playing havoc with an early hangover, until I decided to scrounge a sleeping pill from Gary and banish the echoes back to the cellar.

5

Page Image

Cathy was one of the long-term tenants regularly hired and fired by the owner. Her job, when she had it, was to collect all the sheets off every bed early Tuesday mornings and throw them into a heap at the bottom of the staircase. Andy or Little Pat or John would then bag them for the laundry truck. Once she'd earned enough for a few bottles of Canadian sherry, she'd get drunk and abusive and would be fired until the next week.

She hadn't been seen for a couple of days. People were keeping a respectful distance, certain that she was shacked up with one of her male visitors, drinking herself into oblivion. I fought the urge to check up on her, not wanting to subject myself to drunken abuse if she wasn't in the mood to be disturbed. I lost the fight, and with some reluctance climbed to the third floor of 1243.

I stood in front of her closed door in the darkened alcove, where a burnt-out light bulb had waited weeks to be replaced. I figured if I heard her moving around she must be all right, but no noises could be made out. I called softly, leaning against the door. It opened so quickly I thought I was about to be attacked, and I involuntarily stepped back, out of harm's way. She was drunk enough not to notice.

"Oh, good, it's you. I was about to come down and look for you. I'm having a problem with Neil."

She turned back inside and I followed. It was clear what the problem was: he had passed out, half on the bed, half on the floor.

Page Image

"Where do you want him?"

Looking around, there was not much place to put him; every inch of floor space was taken up with bulging garbage bags, collapsing boxes, broken toasters and hair-dryers. There was only one chair, suffocating under the weight of all her clothes.

"Or would you like me to try and get him up and out?"

"No, no. He's not a bad guy. If you could help me get most of him on the bed and turn him towards the wall, that would do it."

"You won't have much room to sleep" I cautioned, stating the obvious.

"Pat," she said wearily, "I've been in more crowded spaces. At least I may stay warm tonight."

Between us we pulled, pushed and shoved until at least a third of the bed was clear. He was tight against the wall, all of his limbs more or less in place. Cathy pointed to the chair at the foot of the bed.

"Just throw that junk on the floor and have a seat. Join an old lady in some beer."

"With pleasure." I half-bowed, smiling, and carefully piled the chair junk on top of the floor junk. "How you been doing, anyway? You been getting some food?"

"He brought some sandwich stuff. It was enough. Men. He eats, drinks, passes out. Some company. I don't know why I bother."

"Why do any of us? We're looking for something they can't give us."

Page Image

"You were married, weren't you, Pat? Did he beat you?"

"Hell no." I smiled, "I would have killed him. He wasn't a bad man, just very weak. Tied to his mother, you know the type."

"Do I! Any children?"

"No, for which I'll always be grateful. It would have been more difficult to leave, and there was no way I wanted to stay."

We drank the lukewarm beer in companionable silence. The room, with its lack of proper lighting, looked softer; all the junk seemed to blend together. The lamp was stuck in one of the corners, so I couldn't see Cathy very clearly.

"What about you, Cathy, did you ever want kids?"

Something in the air stiffened.

"Cathy, I'm sorry, I've said something I shouldn't have. Now you're upset."

In spite of the poor light, I could see she was crying, just sitting there holding her beer, tears streaming down her face. I went over to her and held her free hand, talking softly and, I hoped, comfortingly.

"Cathy, please tell me what's wrong."

The man on the bed gave one long snort, then settled into liquid snores.

"I've never told anyone. It still hurts me to think about it."

She sent me back to my chair, swiped at her eyes with her sleeve and opened a couple more beers. I waited for her to break the quiet.

Page Image

"I was fourteen. Fourteen and pregnant. Oh, I was such a stupid girl, I knew nothing except that going to bed with a boy felt warm and natural. I loved my parents, loved the house we lived in. Even school, hard for me, I could stand because of my friends. I was happy, you know?

"My mother found out pretty fast. She heard me puking in the mornings and put two and two together. She had always been my second-favourite parent. I loved her, but I really loved my dad. She didn't yell or anything, didn't call me names. She waited until he was at work, then sat me down in the kitchen and told me, didn't ask me, that I was pregnant. Pat, you should have seen our kitchen, so bright, so warm and cheerful, and here she was telling me I was pregnant and we had to hide this from my father or he'd throw me out, never speak to me again. I would lose everything, she said, unless I listened to her. She had a sister in another town, she said I had to go there, she would invent some story for my dad.

"I went a few days later, and stayed there till it was over. I carried that child, and I was so afraid of giving birth. I knew nothing except that there would be terrible pain, and blood. My aunt had been in touch with Children's Aid, and they arranged to pick up the baby right from the hospital.

"I was fourteen, how could I have lived? To be thrown out of my home, to be hated by my father terrified me. I signed what they gave me. And did it hurt, oh Christ, how it hurt, and there was lots of blood,

Page Image and they never let me see the baby, they never let me hold it. They said, 'You had a boy,' but there was nothing except the pain all over and no one to hold."

I thought she had finished, but I stayed still in the wake of such terrible remembering. When I thought it was time to try to say something, anything, she continued in a low, dead voice.

"About five years later, my father and I were talking in the kitchen. I had a job, my own place, my own life. I'll never know how he found out, or why he decided to tell me he knew. He was sobbing and holding my hand and asking me why I hadn't come to him, trusted him. He said they would have raised the boy as their own, he could have been a little brother to me."

We drank the rest of the night while the body on the bed snored on, not knowing or caring. And we talked of little things, of old jobs and characters and places, until the pain was lessened and she lay down to sleep

in her crowded place. I turned off the little lamp and closed the door softly behind me.

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dead? I thought he was crucified or something?"

As a Muslim, the owner prayed the obligatory five times a day in one of the cleaner basement rooms he reserved specifically for that purpose. Haddie, who sometimes witnessed this, regarded it with the same amused tolerance she kept for his accent and the "pyjamas" he'd sometimes appear in. If someone came looking for him during prayer time, she would roll her eyes, giggle and tell whoever it was, "Sorry, you'll have to wait, he's down in the basement fracturing his skull."

He brought me the books he'd promised me, one at a time. I started with a biography of the Prophet Mohammed and moved on to the lives of the caliphs who followed him. After each book was done, we'd discuss the contents, and he never failed to answer the questions I'd raise. Eventually, he brought me a translation of the Islamic Holy Book, the Quran. I liked what I felt was the haunting poetry of the Quran, and one night, as I read, I came across a sura that touched me so deeply, moved me so profoundly, it was as though God had whispered in my ear. My life didn't change, the circumstances that plagued me — poverty, exile from the real world, continuous fears about what lay ahead — didn't change. I wasn't instantly, miraculously cured of the blackness that was rooted in my soul, but I was comforted.

I, who felt and believed that I was beyond even the capability of God to love and forgive, who feared daily retribution of the meanest, vilest kind, cried for the

Page Image first time since I'd come to this house, not bitterly, not grudging the tears.

By the morning hours,
And by the night when it is stillest
The Lord hath not forsaken thee
nor doth He hate thee
And verily the latter portion
will be better for thee than the former
And verily thy Lord will give unto
thee so that thou will be content
Did He not find thee an Orphan
and protect thee?
Did He not find thee wandering
and direct thee?
Did He not find thee destitute
and enrich thee?
Therefore the orphan oppress not,
Therefore the beggar drive not away,
Therefore of the bounty of thy Lord
be thy discourse.

(Sura 93)

That verse freed me. I was not an outcast, not hated by a God who could love and forgive everyone but me. In time, I could see my being in this house as an act of man, not an act of God. I also began to believe that there might be another reason for my being directed here; I was not here to die, but perhaps to do something about the place and the people. I began to feel I'd been given back purpose.

2

Page Image

Once a month, Dennis, our resident Elvis, would race down to the hospital "money" office to pick up and quickly run through the hundred-dollar difference between his rent and his disability cheque. Some of the residents had this left-over money mailed directly to the hospital. This arrangement obviously made the owner nervous, and he would caution Dennis to return directly home and hand over for safekeeping enough to keep himself in cigarettes and coffee for four weeks. Dennis without nicotine underwent a troll-like personality change, becoming sulky and mean.

Before the advent of increased security and the wholesale distribution of trespass notices, almost anything that might distract a young fellow with money could be purchased in the hospital mall. A wide variety of prescription and street drugs, clothing for those confined to pyjamas, food, liquor, watches, radios were all offered none too subtly for cash or trade value. There was also a new wrinkle which Dennis happily tripped over.

He came home with only twenty-five dollars in his pocket and a grin wider than King Street. The owner rolled his eyes in frustration, yelled at him about gullibility and waste and the coming hungry days. But nothing would dim that glow Dennis was feeling. Dennis wasn't one to keep secrets, so after he'd with-stood the lecture, he hopped a bit from one leg to another, a giggle burbling out of his throat, hissing through his rotted teeth.

Page Image

"Guess what I did?"

The owner was too disgusted to provide an audience, but Gary, Delores and I were curious enough to allow him to regale us with lurid descriptions of how he'd spent his morning. Dennis was not a man who got much loving; women tended to shun and deride him. But though his mind might have been stuck in childhood, his body was subject to the same urges all of us felt, or dimly remembered from pre-medicinal days.

"So you want to know what I done?" he teased, as we sat around the common room.

"Get it over with, Dennis," ordered Gary, adding, "How do you keep a Newfie in suspense?"

"Huh?" from a confused Dennis.

Delores swatted at Gary and picked up her knitting while Dennis stood in the spotlight, hands plunged deep into his pockets, barely able to stay in place.

"I went to the hospital, lined up, got my money. I was gonna come right back, like I was told, but first I wanted a coffee and a chocolate bar. There were lots of people in the mall, and some really sexy women."

"Oh no, Dennis," I groaned, already anticipating his story.

"Ya!" he laughed out. "So, I'm having my coffee, and one of the sexy girls comes right up to me. She asked me how much money I had, she probably seen me in line ..."

"She seen you coming, all right," corrected Gary.

The place where inand out-patients collected their money was almost at the very entrance of the mall. Those who had something to sell would wait there like

Page Image hucksters at a carnivorous carnival, eagerly waiting for the flush crazies to wander on by.

"I lied, said seventy-five dollars. She leaned over, touched my you-know-what, and said for seventy-five dollars she could show me the time of my life." He tried to laugh and cough at the same time, bending over to catch his breath.

"Oh, Jesus, Dennis."

"Wait, Pat, it gets better."

"Don't stop now," prodded Gary unnecessarily. "Get to the good part!"

"Well, I thought for a minute. I'd still have enough for a couple of tins of tobacco, a Big Mac, large fries and a Coke, so I said sure. She took me to the small bathroom off the mall, hardly anyone ever uses it. We went into one the stalls, and she did it to me!" His legs were jumping, his face ecstatic. "Oh boy, oh boy ..."

Gary growled. "What did it take, three seconds?"

Dennis just giggled.

"Right there? Right in the hospital?" asked an incredulous Delores.

"Damn right," gushed Dennis. "I can't wait till next month!"

3

In spite of his "psychic crisis management" technique, the owner confessed he slept easier knowing I was in the house. He didn't ask how well *I* was sleeping. I was now being requested by Page Image individual tenants to find, fix or intervene in one thing or another at all hours of the day and night. It wasn't much of a surprise, then, when the owner suggested formalizing my status in the house.

"You know I'm under great financial strain, and this house takes every cent. Not a day goes by but the bank manager's hounding me about my overdraft —"

To forestall further accounts of his acute poverty and looming bankruptcy, I put up my hands to concede, for the moment, his precarious position.

"I could afford to keep you in cigarettes, give you a little spending money now and then. You know I'd love to pay you a real salary. You deserve it. Hell, I'd love to pay myself."

The sun glancing off his Caddy, parked outside, momentarily blinded me.

"And I can't even do that. Nobody appreciates what a black hole this place is, how much time and money gets swallowed up."

I tried a sympathetic nod.

"You wouldn't be doing much more than you're doing now. In fact, I'd like you to do less. Sit in the office during business hours if I'm not here, check that lunch and supper are under way — that kind of thing. Accept any referrals from the hospital, I don't care who it is. If I don't make a bigger deposit this month, I'll never pay the bills."

I would've taken the job on for nothing. It was helping me regain skills and abilities I'd thought were lost forever.

4

Page Image

Mario wasn't often home; I suspected he preferred any place to here. Always polite, neatly dressed, hair kept short, he stood out and apart from the rest of us. He was never seen in the common room and it was obvious from the pained expression on his face that he hated the foul circus of the dining room as much as I did. Small in stature, he was in his early forties and had a strong, intelligent face. I was one of the few people in the house he talked to, probably because of my very-Italian last name. He had, I learned, immigrated to Canada fifteen years ago, and had found himself in increasingly unpleasant situations over which he had little control.

In Italy, as he told me, many young men found the adventure of immigration to this country highly appealing. Rumours and pseudo-facts abounded: there were thousands of jobs going begging, it was easy to carve out a successful life. Everyone knew someone who had made it big. Mario got caught up in the promises. He had little English, but was assured by friends and officials that that would be no obstacle. As Mario put it to me, "Nobody believed the streets were paved with gold, but we did believe that hard work would be recognized and rewarded." He talked it over with his widowed mother and two older brothers and decided to go. A few months later, working with other recent immigrants on a road crew, his English still halting and heavily accented, he began to sense the awful mistake he'd made.

Page Image

Long hours at below minimum wage, no paid overtime, the disdain of the foremen towards the "wops" on their crews, no sick pay, no unions. He tried to speak to the others working with him, but his dissatisfaction branded him a troublemaker, and bosses get rid of troublemakers. The other workers avoided him, concentrating on their work, on supporting their large families and on working for a better future only their children would see.

Mario had no family here to comfort him after a brutal ten-hour day, no friends to be with. The small room he'd rented became his prison. For a few years, he wrote cheerful letters home, letters filled with false hopes and imagined victories. Then, unable to bear the deception, he simply stopped writing.

It wasn't long before his isolation, his moving from job to job, room to room, got to him. He started hearing voices, which, initially at least, brought some comfort. Someone knew he was alive, of value. The voices were seductive at first, then gradually grew more demanding, more frightening, until one night he woke up in a provincial psychiatric hospital, branded a crazy man. Many admissions, many different pills and treatments later, they put him on a pension, told him he was permanently disabled, permanently unable to work. Then they sent him to this boarding house.

"If you had a chance," I asked him one day, as we sat side by side on the front steps, "what would you most like to do?"

Mario didn't have to consider that question for very long.

Page Image

"I do have an idea. You know how many of us go hungry after the cheques are gone? Some people can stand on the street corners, beg for change. I'd rather cut my throat than ask anyone for anything. It's a terrible thing, having to chose between your self-respect and starving. It wouldn't take a lot, all you would need is a small space, a few hundred to start. Not a fancy restaurant, but not a soup-kitchen, either. Could serve healthy sandwiches, keep a big pot of spaghetti or chili on the stove, some thick, homemade soup

with leftover meat, potatoes, vegetables. Lots of coffee, too. You know how quick the money goes, but if people knew there was a place they could go as soon as they got it, put down five bucks and be able to get coffee or hot soup and sandwiches all month! Wouldn't you join up?"

Remembering my own hungry times, my own refusal to panhandle when the money ran out, I was quick to agree.

"People, regular people, we could charge full price," he continued. "Others who have nothing could peel potatoes, wash windows, straighten up, anything so they don't feel it's charity. Begging, charity, can destroy a man faster than anything else."

"It's a damn good idea," I said, already working on how we could bring it about.

"No chance though," he added, looking down at his empty hands. "I do have lots of ideas, but that's all they'll ever be."

He had good reason to feel bitter, but he still

Page Image dreamed of new opportunities, new possibilities, of being able to give — anything that might raise him high enough that he could take a plane home before his mother died. But he was right, he had been discarded with the rest of us. And things were going to get worse.

Weeks later I was lying down in my room when I heard a great commotion coming from across the hall. The owner was once again on a tirade, yelling obscenities, cursing everyone in the building. I opened my door and saw him in Mario's room, waving his arms in agitation, fists clenched.

"Pigs, dogs, lunatics! Everywhere I turn, some asshole is wrecking the place!" He heard or sensed me, and gestured for me to come and see. "You like these people so much, you think I'm such a bastard to them, come and see what this maniac did!"

With some trepidation, I went into Mario's room and grimaced. The room — with four cots and plaster falling in chunks from the ceiling — had one advantage, a sink. It served mostly as a urinal for the men, but now it was deliberately blocked with underwear and the taps were left fully on. Water was cascading down and Mario was just lying back, arms behind his head, staring blankly at the flow.

"I'm sitting in my office, and Theresa comes and tells me there's water dripping from her ceiling! Jesus Christ, I'm tired of these stupid bastards!"

He was fishing in the sink, having wrenched off the taps, an expression of absolute disgust on his face. He

Page Image flung the sopping underwear on the floor and turned on Mario in a real rage.

"You crazy son of bitch, why did you do this?! Answer me!"

Mario apparently did not appreciate the owner's abuse. His face got grim and tight, and his words squeezed from the line his lips made.

"You shut your mouth! Get out of my room!"

"Don't you tell *me* to get out, you bastard, this is my house! You're the one who's leaving. Right now."

Things were escalating, and I was getting quite nervous. The owner was a little taller than Mario, and a little skinnier, but not by much. He shoved at Mario's outstretched legs, trying to get him up. I sat down abruptly on an unmade cot, my knees feeling shaky.

"Don't touch me, you son of a bitch bastard, you touch me I'll kill you!"

The owner's eyes narrowed to slits behind his glasses. He was close to losing any control he still had. He threw me his keys.

"Go down and call the police from my office, Pat."

I was afraid to leave, afraid to stay, curiously afraid for both of these men. He spoke to me again, in a parody of assurance.

"It's all right, don't worry. Go make the call."

Given no choice, I clattered down the three flights of stairs, made the call and raced back up, feeling my presence somehow might prevent disaster. Obviously, I was too late. They were going at it in the middle of the room. Mario landed a solid blow on the owner's

Page Image forehead, stunned him and sent his glasses flying. He pressed his advantage, kicked the owner in the groin and threw him on the bed, where the two continued to push and pull at each other.

"Mario! Stop it, Mario!" I stood behind him, grabbing unsuccessfully at his arms. "Mario, don't do this. It's gone far enough!"

Mario got in another punch, then pulled himself off the bed, standing bloodied and breathless.

"You tell him! Tell him he's got no right to call me names, he's got no right to come in my room and push me around!"

I led Mario to another cot and sat him down. The owner was breathing asthmatically, a large welt already rising on his forehead. I left Mario for a minute and fished the owner's glasses from the corner where they'd fallen, still intact, and took them to him.

"Are you all right?"

"I've had worse. Don't calm him down, the cops won't take him if he's too calm."

"They're on their way."

I gave him back his keys, wondering if there was time to salvage the situation before the police arrived. Footsteps on the stairs erased that possibility. After searching his pockets, the cops put Mario in handcuffs and said they were taking him down to Queen Street. The owner followed them down, yelling after them.

"The crazy son of a bitch tried to kill me, just jumped me and kicked and punched! You tell the hospital he's violent, he's dangerous and he's going to kill someone!"

Page Image

They took him away, hands cuffed behind his back, terribly silent. He stood tall though, knowing the cards were stacked against him, knowing it might mean a trip to Penetang, a private, institutional hell for the criminally insane, knowing it might be years before he got out again. He never uttered a word of protest. They piled Mario, his ideas, his bitterness, his failures into the back of the squad car. Siren going, they took him off into the night. He never came back.

5

My arrangement with the owner provided some necessary structure to my days and helped distinguish one day from another. I no longer suffered from nicotineand caffeine-withdrawal. Even more important, the office itself was the one place in the boarding house that got a huge amount of natural light, thanks to the curtainless bay windows facing out onto the porch and the street.

I took a more global approach to the job than the owner had outlined, continuing my efforts to keep an eye out for the tenants and trying to anticipate problems before they blew up. There were unpleasant tasks as well. When a new tenant came to live with us, I knew too well what they were feeling and thinking as I showed them around, as they looked at whatever bed they were to fill. Still, from this new focal point I got to talk to tenants I hadn't had the opportunity to meet before, the invisible ones, who spent most of their time Page Image in bed, wiped out by medication, overwhelmed by the nothingness that marked their time here.

6

"My name is John Mettle. I'm forty-two years old. Six foot, two inches tall. My parents are dead. I have one cousin. I went to Elmcrest Elementary. I failed grade seven. I went to Walker Junior High. Got kicked out. Went to university. Didn't like it. I've had lots of jobs. Dishwasher. Busboy. Waiter. Construction. Cab driver. Went in the army. Went overseas. Couldn't stay. I had two girlfriends. Mary Ann Jamieson. In elementary school. Sonja Feldman. In the army. She wanted to get married. I said I was too young. Man's got to look around. I've been in Lakeshore Psychiatric, Whitby Psychiatric, Queen Street Psychiatric. I've had forty shock treatments. Lots of pills. I'm forty-two. Do you think it's time to settle down? Stop fooling around? I'm a man now. Not a kid anymore. It's time to take responsibility. Have a wife. Kids. Get a good job. Settle down. Raise a family."

All this in one rush of breath, one hand ticking off the points on the fingers of the other.

"Morning, John. How you doing today?"

"Fine." Broad grin. "You know anyone who wants a good-looking, strong man to marry?"

"Not so far this morning, my friend."

"Too bad. It's time, eh?"

Page Image

"Certainly is, you turkey. Had your breakfast?"

"Got up too late." He slams his flat stomach with one curled fist. "Can't get too fat when you're ready to marry. Right? Who wants a fat man? Right?"

"Right!"

"Do you think I'm handsome?"

"No question. You're great."

Loud laugh.

All this was formula. John had only one conversation, this one, and he'd go through it every time we met — actually, any time he met anyone he knew and liked. It was always important to listen as if hearing him for the first time, as if everything was new and interesting, and not to interrupt. He was supposed to be dangerous; the hospital kept him on a phenomenal amount of anti-psychotics. He slept almost all the time, rising only for meals and the occasional run to the beer store for other tenants.

He really wasn't bad-looking, with his country boy face, his wide grin and the long, straight brown hair he kept raking back over his forehead. His face was blemished with a raw-looking scar that covered most of his cheekbone.

I asked him one day, when he'd finished running through his conversation, how he'd got that mark. He

didn't hesitate to tell me, roaring out his laugh again.

"You won't believe it! It was the cops! You know, I'm a very dangerous fellow, everyone tells me. Cops are scared of me. Lots of cops. Couple of years ago I was walking the streets. It was dark. I was hungry.

Page Image

Didn't have a place to live. Didn't have any money. Any job. Cop car pulls up. Not looking for me. I put my hands like this." He pantomimed a Rambo-like posture, as though holding a machine gun. "They're getting out of their car. I point at them, I spray them, rat-a-tat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat." He was flushed with enthusiasm, spraying me, too, through his rotting teeth.

"Rat-a-tat-tat! Didn't have any gun. Not since the army. They go mad. Jesus. They got mad. Called other cops. 'Bout five of them come at me. I know cops. Don't like them. So I tried to run. They caught me. Busted me in the face, broke my nose. Two ribs. Resisting arrest. Boots and sticks and fists. My nose used to be handsome too. Threw me in a car. Charged me. Went to Penetang." He laughed. "Rat-a-tat-tat. Don't like cops, though. Wouldn't let them do that again. But they're scared now. I'm a dangerous fellow!"

"You sure are John, a dangerous pussycat."

"Well, you can't be mean if you want a wife, right? Who's gonna want to marry a mean man? I wouldn't want to marry a mean person. And I'm forty-two now."

"You'll find someone, John."

"You bet! My father always told me. Comes a time a guy's got to settle down. A girl will be waiting for you."

"You wouldn't pretend to shoot at cops again, would you, John? Some of them are pretty uptight, especially at night when they can't really see. You might get hurt worse."

Page Image

He offered a broad grin. "Don't worry. I'm very strong. Very strong. They won't do that again."

"I hope not. I like your face the way it is."

"You do? You DO?! Say, you wouldn't be looking for a husband, would you?"

"Not right at this moment, John, but you'll be the first to know when I'm in the market."

"Well, you know me. I'm John Mettle. I'm forty-two years old. Six feet, two inches tall."

He was off again. I settled back, lit a cigarette and waited for him to wind down.

7

I came in through the back entrance to the kitchen close to ten one night, hoping to scrounge a cup of tea if Jack was still awake. His door was closed, but I boiled the water anyway and rifled the cupboard for the "200 tea bags for 99 cents" that the owner considered good enough for the tenants. The bags always broke in the big pot, creating a soggy mush that came slopping out, plopping into your cup.

I went into the dining room for some sugar and saw Alice sitting in the dark, an island of tranquillity in the middle of the room. She was drinking from a cup, but I rightly suspected it wasn't tea.

"Hello, Alice, would you like some company?"

She was in a mellow frame of mind and welcomed me to her table.

Page Image

"Why, company would be very nice, Pat. We could have a little party, just the two of us. Bring another cup, dear."

The room was much softer in the dark, and the corner streetlight blunted the darkness, revealing the gentle rainfall that had begun moments before. Without asking if I wanted any, she poured a healthy dollop of sherry in both our cups.

"It's so nice here tonight," she sighed, "so quiet and peaceful, just sitting here with your memories, sipping wine, listening to the rain. We do have good times, don't we?"

"Not enough of them, Alice, but that makes them all the more precious when they do come."

"There used to be so many good times, when I was your age." She ran her finger slowly round and round her cup, as though it were a fine-stemmed wine glass rather than a chipped and stained dining-room survivor, as though she were trying to recapture an echo of times past.

"The girls in the office and I would go out to lunch almost every day, dressed to kill. Chatter away about nonsense, flirt with the waiters and men at other tables, drink a few gin-and-tonics, we were just the cat's meow. My, we had fun, we knew how to have fun."

"Where did you work?"

"It was a big important law firm. The men were all very busy, very proud, always rushing around. And I was a very good secretary, very efficient, and quite well-liked, if I do say so."

Page Image

My eyes dropped to the "V" of her blouse where there were always a half-dozen cheap ballpoint pens dribbling stains of ink — certainly a fragile link to her past.

"What happened, Alice?" I asked, before I could kick myself into silence. She sighed, deep and regretful.

"I'm not really sure. The other girls, for a while, would drink as much as me. We'd go out, some of us, after work, dancing in the clubs, meeting some fellows with good jobs. They'd be falling all over themselves to get us on the floor. The parties we had! I didn't think I was drinking more than anyone else, but I guess I must have been.

"It got harder and harder to get out of bed on time, I stayed out so late. I had to go to every party, I couldn't get enough of the excitement, the fun. I missed a number of days, calling in sick, sometimes not calling at all. They kept me on for a while, because I was very popular, but finally they let me go. I must have drunk even more then. I started waking up not knowing where I'd been or what I'd done. I know now they were blackouts. Someone, I suppose either my landlady or one of my friends, called the police on me one day, and I woke up in hospital."

She took a delicate sip of wine. When I drank, I had to do it in quick gulps so that I wouldn't notice the thick, syrupy taste.

"It was terrible, like a nightmare. They kept telling me I was sick, that I needed to be there. They wouldn't let me go. My father came a few times. He almost

Page Image didn't recognize me. He believed what they said, he wouldn't try to get me out. He brought me a few things from the apartment — my family pictures, some jewellery, clothes that they took away and

locked up. They knew if I got my hands on them I'd be gone so fast and far they'd never get me again."

The mice had grown used to our quiet presence and had started to chase each other along the walls and through the loaves of bread stacked on one of the tables. The rustling and patter were as melodious as the soft rain, and as natural.

"After a while, he stopped coming. I never saw him again, or any of my friends."

"How long did they keep you there, Alice?"

Bewildered and suddenly frightened, she put her hand over mine, squeezing tight, and said hoarsely, "Seventeen years."

We both let that hang in the air between us for a while; it was so raw and real, you couldn't back away from it. She poured more sherry, with considerable grace, returning the bottle to its hiding place in one of her bags, under old newspaper crossword puzzles and "Find a Word" magazines.

"Were you able to get out at all?"

"Sometimes. But at least I knew we were close to downtown, to the restaurants and bars, the lunch-hour parades, the people holding hands, laughing and happy after late-night shows. I would daydream I was there with them, walking with my beau."

The rain was falling harder, and in the distance a

Page Image faint roll of thunder gathered force.

"One night, oh, some years after they first got me, they came into my room and told me to start getting my things together, 'cause the next day they were going to transfer me to a new program. They said I would love it, it was far out of the city, on a farm with real animals. Pat, I was horrified! It was as though they'd told me they were going to kill me in the morning. To be so far away from everything I loved and cared about, stuck in the middle of nowhere, nothing to see, nothing to dream about!" She shuddered, the pain still fresh.

"I'd always been very good, very polite. I was a bit afraid, you see. I went to bed when they said to, got up when they said it was time to, took the pills they gave me. But not this time! I really went crazy on them. I tore up my bed, I threw things, I pulled out my hair. Of course, it was no use. They came at me from all directions, grabbed me, hurt me. And they got me back. Before I was taken in the morning, the nurse called me into her office. She had my pictures, the ones my father had brought, spread out on her desk. All I had left of me. She told me I had better not cause any problems on the trip up. After that, I could go to hell as far as she was concerned, I'd be their problem. But I was to behave. As she was telling me this, she picked up the scissors from her desk. And she cut them up, all of them."

Her tears were falling freely, and she took no notice of them.

Page Image

"Six months they buried me up there," she continued. "But I kept running away so they couldn't keep me. There were no gates, no walls, no locks. They had to send me back to the hospital. You want to know something funny? It was as though they were telling me I could go home. I was so happy! I stayed happy for months, just being back in my city."

We finished our wine, and I took the cups into the kitchen and rinsed them out. I helped Alice collect her bags and saw her safely upstairs. Then I went back into the dining room and went over to our table, finally sitting in the chair she had just left. I closed my mind and watched the rain and the two purple rings of

sherry staining the splintered wooden table.

1

Page Image

Sheets were piling up outside the office. Linen day. Strange word to describe the growing pile of grey and yellow sheets humped in the corner. One sheet, one pillowcase, one towel per person had to be accounted for, then bagged for a tradein with the company that had the contract. I tended to avoid getting too close to that pile, for fear of picking up more than sheets. I was in the office with the door closed, hoping the exchange would be accomplished without incident: no shortages, no refusals to get out of bed, no suggestions as to what Cathy, our launderer, could do with the sheets. There was a tentative knock on the door, causing my heart to sink. I hadn't even had coffee yet. I called out to Cathy to come in, wiping the dismay from my face, and was surprised as a line of unfamiliar people paraded through

Page Image the door. They regrouped in single file in front of my desk, each facing forward. One of them, an older man, carried flowers and a brown bag, which he thrust at me awkwardly.

"Good morning, Missus. How are you today?"

Taken aback, I replied automatically, "Fine, thank you, yourself?"

He was still holding out the two items. "These are for you, Missus, in appreciation." I took them, not sure why they were being presented.

"Forgive me. Let me introduce everybody." He started in the middle of the file and indicated an elderly and obviously anxious couple.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. di Genova, Vincenzo's parents. On the end is Ralph, Vincenzo's cousin, and Anita, his sister. This man is Antony Capito, the family adviser, and I am George, a family friend. Please understand, the di Genovas speak only Italian, very little English. They have asked me to translate for them."

I shook hands with everyone as pleasantly as possible, conscious of my jeans and the chaos in and outside the office. The translator continued.

"We have a small problem, to do with Vincenzo. His mother is not well, a nervous woman, and his father is old and also not too well. They cannot take much more strain. They love their boy, but he is very difficult. Having him here has helped, we very much appreciate your care for him."

"Well, he is a nice boy, shy, but he'll get used to everybody soon ..."

Page Image

I trailed off. There wasn't a lot to say about Vincenzo, a flabby, weak-chinned, thirty-year-old mama's boy with an unpleasant whine and a prodigious appetite.

"Yes, we are sure of that. He likes you very much."

I tried not to look too dubious at that remark.

"But you see, he comes home a lot. His parents love him very much — they would do anything for him — but he is frightening them. The mother cannot watch television, he shouts at her, makes her turn it off. He says the television is speaking against him. He won't permit them to answer the phone when it rings, won't let them have friends over. It is very difficult. They are simple people, they don't know what to do. His mother cries all the time."

"I'm sorry that he's been causing all these problems, I had no idea. But you have to understand, this is not a hospital or a jail. Vincenzo is free to come and go."

"Oh, yes," conceded the translator, "we understand that. But his father says Vincenzo will listen to you, he likes you so much. He respects you. If you were to say to him, Vincenzo, you can only go home Saturday after breakfast, and you must be back Sunday after lunch, he would do as you tell him. His parents and all of us beg for your intervention. Please, can you do this small thing?"

If Vincenzo was going to listen, it would only be because he didn't know I had no right to make those kinds of rules. I looked at his parents; they were both holding their breath (or so it appeared), waiting to see

Page Image if they could get any help from the weird lady. They were old and vulnerable to bullying, unlikely to call the police to have their son removed when he got out of hand. Morally, ethically, it stank. But what was the alternative for them?

Sensing my hesitation, the translator continued his sales pitch.

"You see, on weekends we can all be there, to help. On weekdays, everybody is busy, we have no time to help. No one can be with them. The mother has a bad heart, her doctor is concerned ..."

That did it. Tipped the balance in favour of fascism. "Please tell the parents I will talk to their son. He may not listen ..,"

He was already translating — just the first part, I suspected, as all the anxious looks dissolved into smiles and laughter, everyone shaking hands. I told myself there was no real harm done. He wouldn't listen anyway, though he was unworldly enough not to know what his rights were....

When I finished being embraced by every member of the family, I noticed that the translator had disappeared. I groaned, suspecting he'd gone in search of the errant son. Minutes passed slowly as the family continued to beam at me.

Cathy burst in, face flushed with anger. Oh no, the sheets, I remembered with some pain. All the bodies hanging out in the office were enough to intimidate her in a way I never could, and she left, muttering apologies for interrupting. Well, I owed them for that, at least.

Page Image

It was awkward, standing there smiling and nodding in lieu of conversation. I bent over the flowers, inhaling loudly, to demonstrate my pleasure with their gift.

After this long, uncomfortable wait, the translator returned, herding Vincenzo ahead of him. God knows what he had told the terrified tenant; he looked like he was up for execution. The translator had been haranguing him in Italian, but switched to English as he got within hearing distance of me. He waggled his finger in Vincenzo's face, warning, "The nice lady is very upset with you. You have broken the rules, and that's very bad!"

I took my cue, trying to look stern and annoyed. "Vincenzo, you must listen to me carefully."

He bobbed his head up and down, though his eyes remained fixed on my chest. This was a lot to take before coffee.

"We have rules here. Important rules. You can't just leave any time you feel like it. You have to stay here, everyday. You can go for walks in the neighbourhood, but you can't go home. Do you understand?"

The bobbing started again, emphatically.

Feeling a little guilty, I continued gravely, "If you listen, and only if you listen, you can go home on Saturdays after breakfast, and after you see me. If you've behaved like a good fellow, then you go. But you must be back in the office at the very latest by four o'clock Sunday. Do you understand?"

The more he stared at my chest, mouth open, his tongue moistening his lips, the less guilty I felt.

Page Image

"Do you understand?"

His eyes snapped up to my face, and he jerked his head up and down.

"Right," I said, with (I hoped) great finality. "That's all. You can take your family up to your room and say goodbye."

He turned to leave, obviously glad to get out with his skin attached. I sadistically threw him a pop quiz. "When do you come to ask if you can go home?"

He turned, flushed, guilty-looking. "Saturday, after breakfast." More a mumble than a coherent answer.

"Good. Okay, that's all."

The translator winked at me, the mother wrung my hand once again, the father pumped my arm, then everybody trooped out, single file, behind Vincenzo. I closed the door firmly behind them. The brown bag held a bottle of homemade wine — a perfect way to mollify Cathy and keep her off my back till I could send John down to McDonald's for coffee. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad day, after all.

2

The closet-sized basement room lets no light in. A blackness, thick, comforting, allowing no vague outlines, no gradual seeing. I am crouched, back against the door, my legs gripped tight to the curve of my body. I let the dark blind me, breathing it into every pore, deep into the recesses of my mind, erasing, erasing.

Page Image

My head is big enough to fill this entire room; my thoughts escape through gaping fissures in my skull, pushing against the ceiling, trying to tear it down. In/ out, in/out, in/out, eyes wide, still seeing sharp against the night red dripping, spilled paint vandalizing the walls

in/out
mattress drenched in blood
red silk sheets
cool, wet, warm
soul seduction
drip, drip, the colour runs
in/out shuddering, life returns
shimmers and is gone
blood on my arms
soaking his shirt
pouring over the belt tied tight
to stem the flow
pumping over, filling the cracks
dyeing it, staining it
my mouth over his

cursing with breath
forcing life down his throat
swallowing his blood
watching him gag
rattle
and
escape
pushed aside
metal boxes flung open

Page Image their life device
laid against his chest
they torture him
in rage
one last shock treatment
one last painful current
no light
no life
drowned with the lice
the bedbugs
the dreams
his name was Victor.

He picked up a few bucks here and there, fixing portable radios, the toaster in the dining room that always charred the bread and some of the appliances Cathy hoarded like jewellery in the chaos of her room.

In his last life, he'd been an electrician working for a large Maritime company, before the seizures came and grabbed him and shook him till his bones rattled and snapped. No medication would hold them off, no operation existed to carve them out of his brain. He lost his job; they were nice, concerned for his safety if he flopped into the dangerous machinery. No union, no pension, no other job offered. Damaged goods. His wife thought so, too, leaving and taking the kids with her. He was sucked into a downward spiral, moving from house to apartment, from UIC to welfare, from apartment to endless rooms, until, in a burst of desperate renewal, he left the East for the big city, with its pages and pages of want ads, with its promise of

Page Image making it again. Losing each new job with each new seizure. Pushed out and away, further and further from life, into the last whirl of the spiral, a place he'd never looked to find, never thought he'd call home.

Forty-one years old. The Maritime swagger still in his hips, in the lilt of his voice, but fading. He couldn't swallow what had been dealt him: it was a fist rammed down his throat.

Sometimes, when he had ten dollars burning a hole in his pocket, he would drag out some of the clothes from the old days and spend hours bathing, shaving, dousing himself with splashes of cologne, disguising himself, masquerading as an ordinary working man on the big Saturday Night Track, nails cut and clean, hair flattened back, civilized, tamed.

So angry when he returned, the stink of Aqua Velva having failed again to mask the stench of poverty, the stench of his raw hunger. He would rail at me, at all the women he hated and needed, all the women who despised him, who wouldn't let their eyes rest on him. Women who wouldn't take him home to their beds and fresh sheets, who saw only his naked need and turned their backs, waiting for men with heavy wallets, men who had Monday mornings to think about, to prepare for.

I could have taken him into me, calmed him with lovemaking, but charity and pity have their own

unmistakable stink, and I would not do that to him. Instead, I stood silent, a peculiar form of love, letting him rage. It ended always when his body jerked rigid, his mouth

Page Image working but no sounds, his eyes disappearing, drowned in white orbs, as he crumpled to the floor.

The owner and I, having dispensed with hours of religious debate, were now locked into a tired and familiar argument.

"They would work if they had to survive. If not working meant not eating. You'd see all the craziness go, driven out by hunger, by the need to survive. The mistake is in supporting them, coddling them, giving them everything they need."

"Jesus, they have nothing now!"

"They have food and shelter, that is everything."

"Listen, my friend, if you closed this place tomorrow, threw them out on the streets and said 'Work! Survive!' they would die, their bodies would pile into mountains while you waited for the first one to lose his craziness and make it."

"You are too soft, Pat. This whole country is too soft. You people have never felt that animal within all of us that will do anything to live. I've felt it, and I know how strong it is."

We were leaving the office to go to the corner house when we heard an awful sound. Neither of us moved. A moment later it came again, from the basement. I ran downstairs and came up against Victor's door, which seemed jammed shut, refusing my efforts to push it open. I heard the owner on the stairs as I backed up and kicked hard by the door handle, or where the handle would have been if it hadn't broken off months ago. The door flung open and I stepped in, immediately turning

Page Image away, out of the room, holding the door closed behind me.

I looked up at the owner's nervous face, his body bent over the staircase.

"Ambulance."

He dashed upstairs. I was panting like an animal, not able to catch any air. I could not go back in that room. I would not go back.

Something turned me, against my will, walked me through the open door, forced my legs to move one rigid step at a time towards the bare mattress, the red, bloodied, drenched mattress where Victor lay crying, one hand twitching helplessly near the fallen Exacto knife, the other arm limp, useless, drained from the deep slash through vein and muscle.

Something undid my belt, pulled it through its loops, wrapped it tighter and tighter around his arm, trying to cut off the flow that still pumped from him, onto the leather, into the creases. He was trying to talk. I leaned my head towards his mouth.

"Meant to do my throat next. Hands won't work. Won't reach."

Almost as much tears as blood. They seemed to burn his face. He made as though to rise. With one hand lightly on his chest I said, "Vic, don't move. An ambulance is coming, you'll be all right."

"Have to piss."

"Just let go here, what the hell does it matter?"

So many tears. I felt the warm urine stream down his pants, mingle with the blood.

Page Image

His hand went into violent spasms, almost making fist enough to grasp the blade, but then there were no more tears, there was no more movement.

"Victor!"

I pried open his mouth, listened for breathing.

Nothing. I crouched over him, knees soaking in pools of warmth, exhaling everything into his dead lungs, listening, exhaling, listening. They were in the room before I heard them, one of them motioning me to continue as he felt for a pulse then started pounding on the sunken, pale chest. The other banged open the metal box and brought out paddles. Once, twice, three times.

Nothing.

They stood there, those three, the owner and the attendants, judging the body and the blood. Survivors.

I didn't belong with them. I slipped out of the room, unnoticed. Close by was a small, closet-sized room, always dark as midnight, and in there I went, in there I belonged, closing the door behind me, sliding to a crouch at its base, shutting out, blocking out, blinding myself in the comfort of deepest night.

3

Someone was always scratching in the house. The cloth couches and old mattresses made ideal transfer points for the lice that seemed to breed and thrive like super-rabbits. They could also jump from person to person, burrowing immediately into the Page Image warmest, moistest spots, the choice locations. Of course, there's scratching and there's scratching, depending, for those in the know, on where and how frequently an individual scratched, and how startled his eyes looked just before his hand darted down to bring relief.

As long as only a few people had them, the owner would turn a blind eye; but generally, after a few weeks of one infected person sitting around, it became everybody's problem. The hospital would finally notice, and the owner would be commanded to get the situation under control. This was made almost impossible by his reluctance to spend money laundering the blankets, spraying the cloth furniture and improving the bathing areas. If the drugstore had not been able to put Kwellada on people's drug cards, we would have likely been overrun.

Another problem involved a small group who were averse to washing under any circumstances, including Andy. He would do the old kid's trick of running the water, splashing it around the tub with one careful finger and coming out of the bathroom essentially untouched. Andy was quite sensitive about any suggestions he was faking it, so I never spoke to him about it. Now I was enlisted, for the first time, in a campaign against infestation. The owner handed me a newly acquired drain plug, making me promise to return it to him after I'd finished with my charges. I was to take Alice, Mama and Gary.

The owner was screaming at Andy. He questioned the man's claim to cleanliness, his ancestry, his ability to

Page Image walk upright and his estimated life span if he kept arguing, all of which convinced a thoroughly intimidated young man to actually get in the tub.

Mama's immense size made the bathtub out of the question; even if I had managed to get her in the tub without breaking either of our limbs, there was a good chance she'd become stuck between the porcelain

walls. There was one working shower in the house, a juryrigged device in the basement of 1241. I bribed a headachy Theresa with the promise of a Coke into translating the plan to Mama. Theresa's voice got louder to drown out Mama's protests, and I think she threw in a few gratuitous threats. Mama finally sat up, glared at me and slowly rose. She was wearing a bra under a full slip, and her ever-present rosary beads, and in this outfit, oblivious to the stares of other tenants, she followed me down to the basement, hitting each step with such force I felt the house shake.

I was very conscious of the indignity I had forced on her, the fact that she was a grandmother and that none of this was her fault. I tried keeping a sympathetic, understanding expression plastered on my face every time I turned my head to her. It didn't seem to help. The shower stall was grungy, the floor cement and cold, the drain filled with guck. I pantomimed taking my clothes off as I ran the tepid water. She majestically ignored me and stepped fully dressed under the dribbling shower-head. I handed her the shampoo, which she also refused with an imperious glare. I stepped out of the bathroom, letting my back rest against the

Page Image doorjamb where she could see me; no woman in the house wanted to be alone in such a vulnerable situation. I decided not to push the shampoo, hoping if I kept her under long enough the little buggers might just drown. She stepped out a few times, but I sadly pointed her back in until a full ten minutes had passed. She stood under the shower looking grim, her eyes closed, her arms unmoving by her sides.

I was feeling as bad as she was by this point, and was quite relieved when enough time had elapsed that I could reach in and turn off the flow. I handed her a towel, which looked really inadequate for her body. She ignored it anyway, and me, and, still dressed and dripping wet, thundered, one soggy footfall after another, up three flights of stairs to her room. I followed behind.

Opening the door to her room, we were hit with wafts of Raid that Cathy had sprayed on the bare mattresses. Theresa was out, and Mama lay down on her bed, in spite of the lung-burning odour, and absolutely refused to respond to my efforts to point her out of the room. In despair, I flung open the one window in the room and left. My first campaign was off to a shaky start.

I passed Cathy, burdened down with dirty sheets, on the stairs, and she informed me that Alice was ready and waiting. The bathroom on the second floor of 1245, where Alice stayed, was one of the worst in the house. One closet-sized room held only a toilet, and the tub room had a perpetually broken window and the door hung loosely from its hinges. It was always the coldest

Page Image place in the house, no matter what the temperature was outside.

I liked Alice a lot, and was dispirited by this whole process; I hoped I would not offend her as I had Mama. I knocked lightly at her door and got a quavering "Come in" as a response. Alice was standing alone between the two beds, her arms folded across her sagging breasts, dressed, like Mama, in a full slip. Years ago it might have been white; now it was a greyish yellow. Black spots seemed to be racing over the silky surface in the area of her breasts and groin. As I came closer, it was clear that the lice were having a heyday on her body.

I gave nothing away in my expression, smiling and saying, "Just hang on a second, Alice, and I'll run the water for you."

"Thank you, dear. You're very kind." Her eyes looked humiliated, her whole demeanour pleading.

I went into the tub room, put in the borrowed plug and started the weak, unhealthy-looking flow of water. At the rate it was coming out, it would take hours to fill, but I didn't want to leave Alice in her room, breathing in Raid, so I brought her in. She started shivering violently the moment we were inside, so we began right away. She struggled out of her slip, which she handed to me, and which, to my credit, I took and hung on the doorknob, saying, "I'll give it a wash for you when we've finished, Alice."

"It'll be nice to have a bath. You see, it's usually so cold in here and the door ..."

Page Image

"I know. It wouldn't kill him to fix it, and put in a new pane of glass."

The water was now reaching her straggly pubic hair and lapping around her mottled thighs.

"Will you do my hair for me, dearie? I'll manage the rest if you'll just keep me company. It's always nice to have company."

There were, of course, no facecloths or soap. I wet her hair with dripping handfuls of water, adding careful thimblefuls of the shampoo, terrified I'd get the evil-smelling stuff in her eyes.

"When I had my own place, I would take baths with thousands and thousands of bubbles and sweet-smelling oils. I had big wrap-around towels, and Pat, you should have seen my nightgown!"

"You must have been something, Alice, 'cause you're still one hell of a lady."

"Oh, aren't you nice! Now, I'll do the rest, love."

In a few minutes we were done, and I handed her a towel to cover as much of herself as she could manage. Cathy had anticipated the problem of clean clothes and had donated one of her housedresses to Alice. It was hanging over the door. I left Alice to dress and went back to tackle the slip. I kicked it off the doorknob onto my foot, and from my foot to the tub, manoeuvring it under the tap and pouring copious amounts of Kwellada direcdy onto it. I was either imagining or feeling distinct bites at various places on my body — I was almost phobic about bugs at the best of times, "which this was not — but I gritted my teeth

Page Image and rubbed the material together under the water, hopefully ridding it of all those parasites. I finally wrung it dry and took it back to hang from the door in Alice's room. She was sitting on her mattress, looking drowned in Cathy's dress. Being tired now, she was not interested in coming downstairs, so I helped her open her window, wishing I had enough to buy her a bottle.

I determined to leave Gary to his own devices, as the bites were feeling more frequent and ominous, and took myself down to 1241, picking up another resident on the way to stand guard for me.

I easily used half a bottle of shampoo, successfully ridding myself of carnivores, but nothing could easily erase the vision of Alice, crawling with lice, or Mama, eyes clenched shut under one more indignity, one more reminder of who we were, and what we had lost.

4

Weeks of bad weather, heralding the onslaught of winter, were taking their toll on each of the residents. Even those who rarely went out on the sunniest days stared out whatever window they were near, bleak and forlorn. I, too, felt a clawing and crawling very near the surface of my body, as though something in me was frantic for light and air.

The house was almost as cold and damp as the outside. It was too early for the city to force the owner to turn on the heat, too cold for the threadbare blanket each of us was allocated. My mood was increasingly Page Image dark. I was reluctant to stay alone in my room, so I sought company in the common room.

Not even the reliable Delores was herself. For weeks now, she had been pulling away, unable to concentrate on the card games, unable to win. She would speak only when spoken to, and then only briefly. She had had a falling out with her brother, Ted, and he didn't come any more with cigarettes, or to take her to bingo or a restaurant. Her status in the house, her life, depended on him. He was what made

her different from the others: someone cared about her, visited, even sat with the boys and played cards or lent them small amounts of money. Her only topics of conversation — Ted, bingo, and Favourite Foods I Have Eaten — no longer rang true to her, so she cut them off completely. She sat for hours, motionless, watching her hands lying still in her lap. The day she refused Gary's offer of free coffee, he made a quick, cruel and accurate diagnosis.

"Oh, oh, stand back, Delores is off again!"

I couldn't imagine Delores, with her careful dressing and styled hair, her accountant's care for pennies and figures, her knitting-circle gossip, becoming weird and demented like some of the others here. It would be absolutely out of character and too spooky to think about.

She went from sitting to pacing the halls after dark, as though she were trying to find someone. She didn't seem conscious of any deterioration, and none of us pointed it out to her. There was an inevitability about our kind of illness, a knowledge that lurking over the

Page Image next hill was our private monster, which would grab us, shake us up and eventually deposit us in a hospital bed, doped to the gills with anti-psychotic medication, not remembering much of anything and not caring that we couldn't. We knew better than to shake her by the shoulders, demand that she snap out of it, stop feeling sorry for herself, pull herself up by her own bootstraps or whatever they were saying in psychiatry these days.

On this bleak, grey day, she was in her usual seat. Gary was sleeping away the evening; Andy was away visiting his father. Andy's roommate, Old Bob, unable to sleep, was pacing with his smelly pipe, wrapped in dark clouds. I had a sense that this endless day could only get worse, but I still didn't dare retreat to my room. I heard Delores's voice; she hadn't spoken for so long it startled me, and when I looked around I was more startled to see she was no longer in her chair.

"Ted! Ted!"

Oh good, was my first thought. He's come back, and she'll get back to normal. But her insistent call came again.

"Ted! Stop playing games! I hear you! Ted!"

I followed her voice into the hall, where I could see her peering down into the basement.

"Ted! I'll tell Mother if you don't get up here right now!"

Something was splashing on my head as I stood there, not sure what my reaction to Delores was. It splashed again, this time getting my glasses wet. It took

Page Image me a minute to realize that it wasn't just the rain finally come to stay but the second-floor bathroom overflowing. That would be easier to deal with than figuring out what to do with Delores. I went upstairs, but the door was closed. I knocked several times — no response — so I turned the knob and opened it myself.

The new tenant, a young Vietnamese with no English, was sitting dressed on the side of the tub, watching, fascinated, as the water lapped over the edge, around his small bum, down his legs and finally joined the pools on the floor. There were no such things as extra towels, sheets or toilet paper to soak up the stuflf, and the mops were all locked up in the corner house, so there was nothing to do but listen to the tiles lift, stand him up, point him in the direction of his room, turn off the taps, unplug the underwear from the drain and watch the water start to go down.

Pigpen came in, apparendy not seeing me, though in the small room I was hard to miss. He shook Ajax

into one palm and ducked his hand for a few seconds under the tap. He then tried to lather the paste onto his face and finally scraped it off with an old disposable razor. His socks were soaked, but he paid no attention to that, either. I left, heading back downstairs with a growing sense of awe at how much madness there was in this place.

"Ted! You come up for supper right now! You're making me sick with all this fooling around. Come up here or you'll get what you deserve!"

As I reached the hall, the smoke-detector went off. I

Page Image saw Old Bob coming away from it looking guilty. He liked to stand right under it to light his pipe, never remembering the screech of the alarm. It was a temporary annoyance no one paid much attention to.

I went over to Delores, figuring I could not leave her there all night.

"Delores, would you like me to go down and check around, see if he's there?"

She slammed the basement door, putting her bulk between me and it.

"I know he's down there. Leave me alone. I'll get him up!"

"Right," I said, backing away from the violence in her eyes. My room wasn't all that bad a place. I left Delores and Ted fighting and went off to bed.

5

Winter was creeping into the house — through every cracked window, through the rotting bricks and absent insulation, through the front doors that never closed properly. Few of the ancient radiators in the rooms coughed up heat; mostly they clanged and banged energetically but stayed icy cold to the touch. There were no extra blankets allocated, no warm clothing, no layers of socks to keep us from feeling numb inside and out. The porch was abandoned. Morning coffee disappeared twice as fast as usual. And depression settled everywhere, finding many hosts. The owner made complaining noises about the Page Image price of oil, the inability of the tenants to properly bleed their rads, every open window or door a rationale for turning down what heat there was. "I'm not paying hundreds of dollars so some bastard can heat the outside!"

A few rooms, especially those on the first floor, seemed to capture all the heat and became unbearably hot, while the second and third floors left people with blue nails and white skin. The owner, with his firstfloor office, said, "People are complaining about how hot it is, and you want me to turn up the thermostat?" Coming from his home, better fed and better dressed, he wandered around in his shirtsleeves complaining he was sweating from the heat.

None of us knew about the city by-law demanding a minimum of 72 degrees; inspectors were a rarity here. Snow drifting down from the sky was no occasion for joy; it sealed us inside as it piled up, making the trek to the dining room wet, slippery and unpleasant.

It was no one's favourite time.

Alice, forced like Dennis to go down to the hospital to collect her ration of pin money, would wrap a towel around her head, tucking the ends inside the neck of her dress. Her coat had no buttons left, so she tied it with an old, cracked belt from which the buckle had long ago disappeared. She had no boots, so her feet were always soaked by the time she made it back. At least when she left the hospital she could afford to take a streetcar back, so there was only one-way misery. Nobody at that institution seemed to notice or care

Page Image about her inadequate clothing.

Miss Pattison wore her coat constantly from October to April, held together with two buttons and a variety of safety pins. She at least had black rubber rain boots to wear as she picked her way through snowdrifts to her diminishing flock of birds. In his shirtsleeves, Barry went home to his ageing mother and stepfather, banging on the door until they promised to buy him a down-filled jacket. It was stolen a week after he received it. Red never noticed the change in temperature, naturally insulated against the cold with his ninety-proof blood. I had no boots or gloves, but I did have a warm jacket I took to sleeping in.

We grew used to the cold as the weeks passed, making do, always making do. The owner eventually had to turn the heat up or risk losing a few of the old people to the morgue. He even sent Red and Jack around to each of the rooms to properly bleed the rads, and had someone in to fix those that had given up the ghost. Mine went from cold to warm to almost hot. I covered my cracked windows with green garbage bags filched from the storage room, attached with wide strips of adhesive tape that Jack lent me.

I stuffed newspapers under my door at night to keep out the draft from the hall.

The common room, in spite of its larger windows and proximity to the front door of 1243, was fairly warm, perhaps because of all the bodies huddled there. It seemed too cold in the house for the lice to survive, which meant the cloth couches could be used without

Page Image too much worry. That was the only perceptible benefit of winter.

People slept more than usual, dreading the cold floors, freezing toilet seats and, worse, the trek to the dining room. Depression was everywhere, and you could tell from people's faces that a number wondered whether they would survive the season, especially with the mockery of Christmas lurking around the corner.

Gary spent almost a week silent and brooding in his bed after receiving a card from his mother, who was in Florida with her latest lover; a cheque for five dollars was tucked inside and a "Love, Mother" scrawled hastily on the bottom. Dennis's mother called, for the first time since last December, saying she was coming for a visit. For two days his homely face was radiant; he told everyone in a voice wrapped in pleasure that his mother was coming to see him. I missed the event, but the owner told me she dropped into the office, asked that her son be brought to her, gave him a reluctant peck on the cheek and a hat-and-scarf set and was gone within ten minutes of her arrival. Other obligations. Dennis, like Gary, took to his bed, crying out his own misery.

The owner rented a working television to try to cut through the pervasive gloom. He hadn't replaced the one with the kicked-in screen for over six months, punishing all the tenants for the actions of one psychotic woman who had been evicted within two minutes of her tantrum. Somehow, seeing those ersatz families gathered around glowing fireplaces, singing carols and

Page Image feasting, did nothing to decrease our sense of abandonment and loss. We left the TV on, even so, night and day, always trying to get some warmth, some laughter, from the black-and-white flickering images. There was no talk of how we were feeling; no one gave voice to the emotions pervading the house.

It was a dirty secret no one mentioned.

6

November. Cold and wet. It was hard being constantly enclosed in the building, locked in by the weather. Harder still to think of spending Christmas here.

There were some good things, though. The morning before, Andy had taken my jeans and a pair of his

that no longer fit over to the laundromat with some change earned from the owner. He washed and dried them while I waited under the covers in my bed. When he had finished, he presented the two pairs to me with a rare, honest smile. There were few things I would have appreciated more than this, and I did not hesitate to let him know how pleased and happy he'd made me. Those filthy jeans had become my private nightmare, and having only one pair left me in fear of a broken zipper or a tear where it counted. I felt like a child putting on freshly laundered pyjamas, cared for, loved.

It was two weeks past cheque day, and just about everyone was broke. Even this, however, failed to jar me from my new sense of well-being. Phoney Father Page Image Francis was in the common room when Andy and I came in. I always had mixed reactions to him; he could be charming, but he couldn't be trusted. We were the only ones in the room, besides Alice, who was nodding to the soft snores escaping from her lips.

"You know what we need?" asked the Phoney Father.

"Lot more'n what we got," Andy shot back.

"Exactly! We need a party!" He raced upstairs.

"He's all talk and 99 percent bullshit." Andy yawned. "You want to play two-handed?"

We played a few lazy games until we were interrupted by the Father's entrance.

"Good news, children," he intoned. "I have discovered through careful research that today is a very holy day — the Feast of St. Alphonse. Services and sacrifices are required." He winked at me, adding, "I've already informed Miss Pattison, who seems flush and in need of a good penance." He rubbed his palms together. "Definitely party time!"

I laughed at his outrageous use of the saints while Andy rolled his eyes. The Phoney Father went over and peered down at Alice.

"Alice, Alice."

She woke with a start, ready to snap at whoever had disturbed her, until she saw who it was.

"Oh, hello Father."

"We will be having services tonight, and I have a lot to prepare. Would you mind going to buy the sacramental wine for us?"

Alice bobbed her head and smiled broadly as she

Page Image gathered her bags together and almost ran out of the room.

"Francis," I cautioned, "if she comes back, you'll have performed your first miracle."

"Oh ye of little faith," he started, then more mattero-f-factly, "She'll be back. She's gone for me before. Besides, she's a believer."

"Sure, she'll be back. In a day or two." Andy snickered to himself. Francis allowed him an exasperated look, then leaned towards me.

"Trust your Father. We are going to howl tonight."

He was gone again, upstairs, to "prepare the way." It seemed a good night to celebrate, however morally questionable, since weeks of worry over clean jeans had been so painlessly solved. The relief I was

feeling was way out of proportion, I recognized, but so rare it felt like a real treat.

Both Andy and I gave up the card game and went to our rooms, sleeping through supper. I reappeared around nine. Only Andy, Delores and Gary were in the common room.

"You see?" said an obviously disappointed Andy. "I told you he was full of shit."

"Priest, my ass," Gary rumbled, though he never seemed quite certain the Father was a total fraud.

"C'mon, we might as well play. Gary already owes me $4.80."

"Delores, you know what you can do with that $4.80?" Gary walked heavily to the table, plopping down like a bloated rag-doll.

Page Image

The game was played with little talking and very few jokes. The night got deeper, framed by the one window. An hour or two passed in this fashion. Andy kept looking up at every sound, obviously wanting to believe. We were packing it in when the door opened, and there stood our errant priest.

"Hello, my little flock, it's Father Christmas!"

He was weighed down, like his namesake, with all kinds and shapes of bags and boxes.

"Sorry I'm so late, but it's your fault. You guys jinxed me. Alice never showed up. I looked everywhere — her room, checked with Haddie and Jack, I even looked in the basement. No one's seen her."

He drew himself up sternly and spoke with great dignity and hurt reflection. "I may be forced to excommunicate her."

He pulled the bags away from Andy's clumsy efforts to tell what was inside and started pulling out the contents, item by item. When the last bag was empty, we stared, open-mouthed, at the feast spread before us.

Rye bread.

All kinds of cold cuts, except, of course, bologna and macaroni loaf.

Soft cheese.

A whole cherry cheesecake.

Brownies.

Two bottles of wine, one of tequila, several bottles of Coke.

A carton of tailormades, which the Father handed out judiciously.

Page Image

He'd even thought to get fancy mustard.

Even though we were all blown away, no one thought to say grace. Francis limited himself to pulling on the fancy tequila bottle and then, holding it high in a mock salute, sang out "Bless you, Winnifred Constance Pattison!"

Gary grunted an "Amen" and we dived on the pile.

It seemed that we ate, drank and smoked for hours, at first hardly speaking to each other. None of us had seen a spread like this for a long, long time, if ever. When even Gary and Delores were full, I asked Francis to sing some of the songs I most liked to hear in his earnest, thin soprano. He went through "Amazing Grace," "One Tin Soldier" and my very favourite, "Lord of the Dance." Delores and I joined in the choruses. The room felt warm and intimate, as though we had a real fireplace instead of a cold radiator.

Delores fell asleep on the couch. Gary, belching happily, trundled off to bed, taking Andy with him.

The Phoney Father and I sat amid the wreckage of the evening, quiet and content. There was nothing of the con man in the sleepy young fellow's eyes; he was just a happy kid who'd been able to pull off the impossible for his friends. I hugged him and went off to bed, certain that there would be no problem in falling asleep tonight. Tomorrow, the magic would be gone; dreary months lay ahead, threatening, inescapable. Christmas in November. One of the best of my life.

I wondered if the warmth of that night would shelter me from the gloom of December.

7

Page Image

A snaking line had already formed to the left of Santa's chair. My mother walked us to the end of the line, cautioning us to look out for each other and to be patient, Santa would arrive at any moment. We watched her walk away; she looked beautiful in the party dress she always wore on special occasions, and there was no mark showing on her face. I'd worried about that.

There was nothing much to look forward to during our childhood, but each year at our father's work there was a huge Christmas party where gifts were given out and music played.

We could never just go anywhere, not without explosions first. Today it was socks, something about him not being able to find his black socks. He'd shouted and banged things around, frightening us into believing he wouldn't take us. Finally, though, he'd ordered us all into the car. The four of us girls were crammed into the back seat, not arguing this time about who'd get to sit by the window, and my brother was stuck between our parents up front. We hadn't travelled very far before he started again.

"I'm going to be late, of course. I can't expect, like any reasonable person, that things will be where I leave them. That would be too much to hope for!"

Our mother spoke tightly, against our mute pleas.

"You'll be on time to play bigshot." She laughed, an ugly sound thick with bitterness. "You can explain to them that your wife is too stupid and too slow to

Page Image dress five kids and a grown man."

He backhanded her, without taking his eyes from the road. Just one hand left the steering wheel, a sharp crack, a quick intake of breath, then, "You always have to upset me, push me too far. Whenever we go anywhere, you have to start a fight. Well, I've had it!"

And that was all, until we pulled into the parking lot. He'd given us all a lecture about our behaviour; we didn't need to be told the consequences of not listening. Some men came and took away our dad, teasing him about being late, and we could finally relax a little.

Sleighbells started jingling and a booming laugh rang out, bouncing off the walls of the aircraft factory, The line surged forward; Santa had arrived. And there he was! We all caught sight of him at once, all of us

jumping up and down in excitement. He was resplendent in his red suit, his white hair and beard curling everywhere, his hat tilted just so, his huge tummy spilling over his shiny black belt.

It seemed to take forever for the line to move up. A picture had to be taken of each child on Santa's lap before Santa's elves helped the child down and handed him or her a present. Finally, the last child between the five of us and Santa was led away. Our brother toddled towards the stairs leading to the throne, but suddenly, inexplicably, all five of us were asked to go up at the same time. The elves piled us onto Santa's lap while lights flashed and popped. Santa didn't seem to be surprised. His arms went out and encompassed us all. But instead of Santa asking us what we wanted — and we'd

Page Image had our lists memorized for weeks — we heard a familiar and chilling voice come from those oh-so-red lips.

"When you're given your presents, say thank you. Try not to act like animals for once in your lives."

My brother went white. My oldest sister managed a "Yes, Daddy" for us all. We didn't wait for the giggling assistants to help us off his lap. We slid down, smiles like his frozen on our faces, knowing we'd better keep smiling or get killed.

We took the presents we were handed, mumbling thanks, and escaped to one corner of the building. The gifts had lost their allure. We couldn't keep our eyes off the throne where our father sat. It was so strange watching him hug the children placed on his knees. We watched as babies played fearlessly with his nose, his beard, and grabbed at his hat. We heard again that booming laugh. One of my sisters whispered to us, "They only picked him 'cause he wouldn't need a pillow." I giggled nervously, still drawn to the strange scene at the throne. Adults were walking around with trays of cookies and cakes and soft drinks. We were careful to take just one each of whatever was offered.

My father's friends played a trick on him, hiding his suit and coat so he'd have to drive home in the costume. The white hair and beard were gone, but he kept the hat on, since one of the women had said it looked "too precious." He threw the presents into the trunk. He didn't say anything about our behaviour, so it must have been all right. Sometimes it was hard to

Page Image tell. It was already starting to get dark, and as the car pulled out of the parking lot, I wondered if we would make it back home before the fight started again. I knew one was coming. It always did.

"So," said my mother, with a sharp edge to her voice, "did you tell them you were held up 'cause you had to beat your wife?"

"Shut your mouth."

"No." She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I'm sure you didn't. Your friends might not understand."

"I'm warning you, shut your mouth, or I'll do it for you."

"Go ahead, Mister Nice Guy. Show me how to behave."

With a wrenching motion of the steering wheel, he pulled the car off the road and into the deserted parking lot of a shopping mall. My heart was pounding. He shut off the engine and rolled down his window. Gusts of freezing air poured in. He ordered us to roll ours down, too. Long minutes passed. The two adults, with our brother between them, sat in rigid silence. I could see the air leaving my lungs. My toes were starting to freeze, and I couldn't feel my hands any more. I could see the fuzzy white ball, looking like a soiled snowflake, hanging from his hat. I remembered the babies trying to grab it.

It was starting to snow. Flakes drifted in through the open windows. The four of us in back were all shivering with a combination of fear and cold. My mother asked, in a quieter voice, "Are we supposed to

sit here

Page Image all night?" He said nothing, just kept staring grimly ahead. "The children are cold. At least let them close the windows." Still nothing. "You bastard."

He hit her, so quickly none of us saw it coming. Blood spurted from her mouth. He was still wearing Santa's white gloves. My mother spoke through swelling lips.

"If you're satisfied now, take us home."

He hit her again and again, a flurry of blows that caused our brother to duck into a ball. She ran crying from the car. He went after her, slamming the door so hard we all shook. We waited, not daring to move or speak. I saw a flash of red under a lightpost, two struggling figures. My oldest sister spoke urgently to our brother, telling him to crawl quickly into the back. He didn't have to be told twice.

We all huddled together as the snow fell more heavily, covering our boots in white powder, dusting our coats. Faint screams could be heard from out there. I wanted to close the windows, but didn't dare. My sister rocked the boy, trying to comfort him so he wouldn't be crying when my father got back. He didn't like to hear crying, especially not from the boy.

1

Page Image

Andrea had chosen to go mad. Or so I believed. To some, madness can be seductive, a way of getting back, getting even. The only problem is, you can get lost forever. For Andrea — intelligent, angry, just recently out of adolescence, determined to destroy her family for whatever obscure wrong haunted her — the lure of craziness proved irresistible. And she played the role to the hilt. Referred to the house by a frustrated hospital worker, she was one of the few who seemed really pleased with her surroundings. She glowed with vindictive pleasure; she must have spent hours relishing the effects of her living conditions on her parents. Her clever, spoiled face, her eyes that rarely met anyone else's unless in haughty defiance, her aura of preppy boredom — all were very out of place here. It quickly became apparent that she had a

Page Image repertoire of self-destructive and bizarre behaviours. I had a confused sense of her that rapidly became heavy dislike as the weeks passed. Andrea was rude, demanding, whiny, insistent that the world should stop for her. She came from money, that much was clear, and was more than used to having her own way. She would fling open the office door and stand there, belligerently demanding cigarettes. "No"s would be met with exasperating repetitions: "I said I need cigarettes!"

She was never violent, although there was a kind of violence in her continual assault on one's time and senses. When directly confronted, she would fade, flouncing out of the room in a posture that might have been effective at age six but was ridiculous now.

When parental interest or misery seemed to be flagging, she would escalate her behaviours to bring them back in line. She did not respond well to being ignored. I had spoken to her mother a few times on the phone, when she'd called for Andrea and Andrea had huffily refused to speak to her. After a week or so, I ran out of excuses ("She's just gone out," "She's sleeping"), and to strained silence at the other end of the line, I explained that Andrea simply refused to come to the phone. I hated my role as Andrea's dagger, but her mother seemed to appreciate my sympathy and took to calling me directly to find out how her daughter was getting along. She also shared bits of Andrea's recent, tumultuous history, trying as she spoke to find threads of reason for Andrea's bitter fury.

"She hates me. At least that's clear. The reasons why

Page Image ... I don't know. It keeps me awake at nights. It seems too strange that the happy little girl I

remember so well could.... Perhaps it was the divorce. She loved her father very much. I tried to explain, but it was as though she didn't, or wouldn't, hear what I was saying. She hardly speaks to her sister, either. It's very painful for all of us."

I tried to give support to the agonized voice on the phone, but there was precious little hope to hand out. What to say? Wait her out? Write her off? Not the things you say to an aching mother, flooded with guilt, manipulated, crushed and bowed under the weight of her child's calculated rage.

Andrea, resenting the fact that her mother was no longer calling to be ignored, became angry, desperate to make her mother play the game. She threw out most of her clothing — expensive pants and sweaters, winter coats and boots. She wrapped a sheet around her naked body, toga style, and appeared in the office like a wraith, kinky hair cascading down to her shoulders, pale face pocked with freckles.

"I want cigarettes and coffee!"

Not receiving the hoped-for reaction, she started parading barefoot up and down King Street, stopping alarmed passersby, hitting them up for spare change. She got it, too, as most people were deeply struck by this ghostly, demented young woman. With her mother still not calling her directly, Andrea raised the stakes once again, wandering (after looking both ways, as I watched from the office window) onto King Street

Page Image itself, up and down the streetcar tracks, barefoot in the cold October temperatures. The owner notified her therapist at the hospital, who sighed and said he would increase her medication. I didn't hold out much hope for this half-assed solution, as I strongly suspected she wasn't even taking her current dose.

Her life took on a pattern: for weeks she was bumming on the sidewalk, weaving carefully in and out of angry rush-hour traffic on the street, her feet growing blacker, callused and cracked. I didn't hide any of this from her mother, who also called the therapist, with the same useless results. We arranged that Andrea's older sister would bring more clothes directly to the office, and include a few cartons of cigarettes that I would use to try to bribe Andrea back into more conservative dress.

The sister, an ambitious, businesslike woman of the world, came into the office and immediately expressed her bewilderment and resentment at Andrea's continuing games. Well-spoken and well-educated, she tossed out psychiatric jargon and labels, desperately seeking clear explanations. She was very polite and gracious, letting me know how much her mother appreciated my efforts on her daughter's behalf and I felt quite sorry for her at first. Up to the point where she handed me a twenty-dollar bill. I held it in my hand for a moment, puzzled.

"You want me to give Andrea a few dollars a day out of this?"

"Oh no, it's not for her. It's for you. We really do

Page Image want to thank you for what you're trying to do."

My first reaction was disbelief, quickly giving way to anger. I crunched the bill into a ball and handed it back to her. I was beginning to feel more sympathy for Andrea.

"Keep your money. I'll let your mother know how things go."

She was flustered, and she began to understand that I was offended, but was not sure why. She left immediately, which was fine with me. I resolved to tackle Andrea without delay.

First I had to get her back into her clothes. Then I wanted to have a very serious, last-ditch-effort talk with her. I called her in and explained the ground rules, carefully not saying where the clothes and cigarettes had come from. It was simple: if she came to the office dressed in the morning, she would get one pack. If

she stayed dressed the whole day, she would get another after supper. Same plan every day. Silly, but it worked. Addictions are like that. She didn't even put up much of a fuss. She flounced around a bit and informed me what a power-tripper I was, and how much I enjoyed it. I agreed, pleasantly enough. Daily, once she got her ration, she would sit in a corner of the office, watching and listening while pretending total indifference. It only took a bribe of coffee and a Big Mac — and a ton of laundry soap — to get her feet clean.

I suspected she must like me a little, though she went to considerable pains not to show it. How else to explain the hours she spent simply hanging out? She

Page Image never initiated or participated in conversations, and she kept a practised sneer front and centre, just in case someone might suspect she was lonely.

It wasn't long before I decided to go for broke with her.

"Your mother asked me to let you know that you're welcome to call her at any time."

Silence. A toss of wild hair.

"Andrea, I've got no right to talk to you like this ... but, you know I've been in hospitals, you know I know the routine. There's not much else you can do to them, kid. But there's a whole lot worse waiting for you if you don't put the brakes on now."

Silence.

"Do you know how many in here have no one left? Their families just couldn't handle the fear, the guilt, the waiting. So they cut their children, their wives, their husbands loose. Now all they got is this place."

Defiant glare.

"They just stop caring after a while. They justify it in terms of their own survival. Then you cease to matter. You almost cease to exist. I've seen people so angry, so bitter and hateful towards their parents that they literally destroyed themselves to get even. High drama. A leap from a bridge, a dive in front of a car. A final 'That'll teach them! They'll never get over the fact that they killed me! They'll never forget!' But you know what, Andrea? That's not what happens. You've let them off the hook. It's over. You're finally at peace, they'll say, meaning that they're finally at peace. And

Page Image they won't blame themselves. Oh no. Poor Andrea. She was sick, never stood a chance. No matter what we tried. Nothing we could do, nothing we could change. Nothing's going to change for you, either, ever again. 'Cause you're buried in the ground, covered up with dirt.

"It's not a game any more, Andrea, and if it ever was, you've lost it. Don't wait too long, don't keep at it. Look around you. It's already too late for almost everyone here, and many of them never had the choice you do. I won't talk to you like this again, I just thought someone should warn you."

She concentrated intently on lighting one cigarette from another, then crushed the butt in the ashtray. She looked at me challengingly.

"I want fifty cents for coffee."

I shook my head at her, and reached into my pocket.

"Have it your way, kid, at all costs. Here's some change."

She whirled away from me, out of the office, into the street, determined to continue her mad dance into the bedlam that would finally, totally, consume her.

2

From the common room, we could hear the slams, curses, her screams and his shouts rising volcanically — both of them spitting, ugly, yowling street cats, aiming for the soft part of the neck, teeth bared.

Page Image

They had been here less than a month, this elderly couple, in a house that traditionally did not admit to relationships. Since the owner was able to charge them double rates for a single room, he compromised his principles and bent the rules.

Mary Stone was a tiny five feet, with scared eyes and a habit of scuttling behind her husband before she spoke, as though she feared whatever storms her words might create. Normally soft-spoken and perennially confused, she looked as though she were searching for some answer to why life was as hard as it was for her. She seemed to be prevented from that knowledge by the dullness behind those frightened, darting eyes.

Her husband was "the Man," the provider and protector, the smart one who took care of her, made the decisions and stood between her and the chaos she sensed. He had been easier to read than her, and easier to dislike. He was artificially polite and fawning, calling everyone "Sir" or "Missus." It was obvious from his nose that he was a drinker, which suggested why they had landed here. He talked of other, better places they had been, never saying why they'd left.

I didn't like the way he talked about his wife, sidling up to you confidentially, as if to explain their circumstances. Though why explain them to us, who shared them?

"You know, the wife, she's not too bright. It's not her fault, she was born that way. There's lots like that, most of them locked up. But I take care of her, watch

Page Image out for her, make sure she eats and everything. I can't always do the best by my old girl, but I try as hard as any man can." He would end humbly, leaving me with an overwhelming urge to laugh in his face.

Eventually, when they were less afraid of the owner and the other tenants, they began to show us who they were. They were liberated by booze, which now came in great quantities. The morning after the first screaming sessions, she could be seen scurrying over to the dining room, one eye outlined in purplish-black bruises. She returned to her room and her man with two breakfasts, complaining under her breath. He would stay in bed, his body recovering from the binge that sapped his energy while recharging hers. He would order her about until something smashed against a wall, signifying the end of her patience.

The owner, already regretting his decision to house them, started going into their room at odd hours, locating offending bottles. He would bring them out to the bathroom beside the common room and empty them into the sink, while Mr. Stone assumed a boxer's stance, legs unsteadily apart, trying to block his path. At the same time, Mary would cling to the owner's arm until he shook her off, whereupon she would start a mad dance, hopping first on one foot, then the other, all the while emitting a high-pitched wail that clawed at the ears.

Mr. Stone was vicious when drunk, ugly and foul-mouthed, twisted and cruel, and I found myself actually hating the old man with a passion that

Page Image frightened me and left me shaken. They were both close to seventy. I could not justify the rage he inspired in me, it was just that he seemed so willing to reduce himself to a level no animal could ever reach. It became evident they wouldn't last out the month. The rest of us would be relieved, because their presence here reminded us that this was indeed the last resort for all who had fallen so far, and reminded us, too, in stark terms that there was nowhere after here. The Stones were our future, and it was

too uncomfortable to be forced to look into that mirror every day.

I worried about Mary, about the way they fought. He was easily twice her size and three times her strength. I worried about the next step for them, which was clearly hostels or the street. I doubted she would survive.

Over the next couple of days, I tried to separate her from her husband, needing to talk about alternatives that didn't involve him. I hit upon a good plan.

He was recovering in bed, snoring away, and she was puttering around the room when I knocked and entered. I whispered that I had a half-bottle of wine, why didn't she and I make it a girls' night out?

She glared at the buried form of her husband and turned back to me with a "let's put one over on him" smile. We went up to my room. I poured, then waited till the first drinks were gone.

"Mary, I don't know if you've thought much about where you'd go if you had to leave here."

"He'll find us a place, he always does." She was

Page Image matter-of-fact about this, not overly concerned.

"There may not be many places left, Mary. Tell me, are you happy with Mr. Stone?" I tried to keep my tone non-judgmental, allowing no shades of how I felt about the man.

"Well, yes, I suppose. We've been through a long, long time, in a lot of different places. And I need someone, I'm old, I can't take care of myself."

She twisted the glass in her hands. She had already said more than I had expected to hear from her.

"Seems to me you spend a lot of time picking up after him, taking care of him. There are places you could go, Mary, that would be clean, warm and safe. With nice people your own age. No one to beat you, to frighten you. I'll be honest with you, it looks like the owner will kick you out by the end of this month. That will mean going to a shelter if you don't make plans, and with his behaviour he's liable to get you kicked out of there, too. It must be a hell of a way to live, and it won't be getting better. Aren't you tired of all the shit?"

She was trying hard to absorb all this. Her brow was a mass of wrinkles, her eyes were struggling to focus.

"He does hit me, he shouldn't do that, he really shouldn't." She sighed, a subtler wail. "Takes care of me, he says. Disappears for days at a time, leaves me no money, no wine, spends it all being a bigshot in bars. He calls me a greedy spoiled slut. Always accusing me of finishing off bottles I never touched.... Pat, I've thought about those warm places you were talking

Page Image about, but you know, they watch you like a hawk. They go through your things, everything, to make sure you can't get a drink. But I did think about it, just packing and telling him, 'Make it a good wallop, 'cause it'll be the last you'll do to me.'

"I'm old, he's old. We've been drinking all our lives. And for people like us, there are no nice places, no pretty rooms, pretty curtains, a little kitchen ..." She swiped at her eyes and blew her nose on a corner of her sweater. Then she patted my hand, this not-so-dumb lady.

"You're a good girl. But it's too late for the likes of me and him. Now pour us another, and let's call the old bastard all kinds of names! Ooh, I can't wait to see his face when I breathe on him! Won't Mister high-and-mighty take a fit!"

I knew when I was beaten, just as well as she did.

It was less than a week from that evening that the owner lost his temper and gave them both one hour to clear out. I went upstairs, hoping to avoid witnessing what I knew would be a terrible scene. Lying on my bed, light off and eyes closed, I saw it all anyway. The old man running off at the mouth, the owner pushing him out the door, Mary punching at his back with her little closed fists. The taxi the owner had called to take them to a shelter finally pulling away, with both of them screaming like banshees on their way to oblivion.

3

Page Image

During our card games in the common room, one of the topics of conversation would be dramatic episodes that had occurred over the years in the house — some funny, some tragic, some just plain scary. There was the guy who was sure he was the Antichrist who'd knocked Phoney Father Francis across the room one day, just to prove his point. And then there was the fellow who kept trying to convince people to jump so he could resurrect them. Even Haddie had a history of "going off" in bizarre ways, throwing a pot of everybody's dinner out the window and getting herself forcibly removed to the bin.

There was a peculiar consensus that "the young ones" were the worst, the most unpredictably violent. It was strange then, that Delores and Haddie would almost immediately adopt young men, making sure they knew when meals were being served, and even after they'd driven everybody crazy, and the owner had finally evicted them, people would be muttering about how unfair it was that they had to leave.

I began to figure this out after a few more months. Eviction, and/or being sent to the bin, was something everyone feared and took very, very seriously. Every tenant felt waves of insecurity when it happened, "Who's next?" the unspoken question.

Haddie would regularly get sick a few days after an eviction occurred, even if she'd pestered the owner to carry it out. Her head would wander along past trails, grievances and warnings: "He'd better never try that

Page Image with me. There's no way he's getting rid of me like that, the bastard." Because we all knew there was nowhere better to go, and a lot worse waiting if we found our stuff thrown out on the porch. In one of the basement rooms, growing mouldy and smelly, were green garbage bags filled with clothing and miscellaneous detritus that was all that remained of people who'd been sent away. The one person who never seemed afraid or vulnerable was Jack. He was almost universally hated and feared, called a drunken bastard by many more than the landlord.

More and more of my talks with the owner spilled over to supper time, and this was causing me problems with Jack, who must have felt devalued, or threatened. Andy and Gary let me know that he was calling me "he/she" behind my back, the rough equivalent of the "Are you a boy or a girl?" so common in the sixties. I tried to stay out of his way, tried to be respectful of his ego, even deferential, but the strain was telling on me. I hate being bullied, and it goes against my nature to put up with it for any length of time.

The owner and I would appear in the kitchen about half an hour before supper was due to be served. I would lean against a counter while the food was checked for quantity and readiness. Ruth always preferred fruit cocktail for dessert, so of course Jack tried to keep it away from her.

"These bums don't need dessert, let them work for it."

I would quietly hand her a can, which she quickly

Page Image spooned out into small bowls, so that she could tilt the can and spill the liquid into her mouth for a long, long drink. She had very little pleasure in her life, and it didn't seem like much to let her have

it. Even the owner didn't mind. (Especially since she willingly, and for free, washed the dishes for seventy people three times a day, seven days a week.)

We'd be in the middle of a heated argument about Mountbatten or Gandhi ("Mountbatten! Pakistan wouldn't even let his private plane fly over their airspace!" "Gandhi was a great Hindu leader, but for the Muslims he was death. He sought our extermination or our assimilation into the society of idol-worshippers!"). Jack would join in, talking absolute gibberish, which he claimed was the owner's tongue. He actually claimed to be fluent in half a dozen languages, all spoken loudly and in ways reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky."

He was more and more abusive during the dinner line-up, especially to Bong, the Korean man with the permanent smile, to a black lady who kept to herself as much as possible and to the old man in the basement who came from some European country. "Goddamn it, get back of the line. We serve the Canadians first, even the Canadian bums before you parasites!" Haddie would smile apologetically and serve them anyway, which only made him madder.

I talked to the owner about this, warned him that Jack was going too far and that he'd have to talk to him. Unfortunately, he chose to talk to him in front of

Page Image me, causing Jack to lose face in a big way. And it wasn't actually talking, it was more screaming at him to keep his goddamn mouth shut or get the fuck out of the house. Jack started drinking more. Sometimes he'd be passed out on the kitchen floor when we'd go over to see if supper was under way.

The owner asked me if I'd like to move into Jacks room near the kitchen, as he was going to send him upstairs. I quickly refused, though it was a big room with a real lock and a window that opened. This was not out of misplaced loyalty to Jack; I had spent enough time in the kitchen to know how infested it was.

I couldn't forget one afternoon when there was a weird noise coming out of the pantry. It was my habit to bang or pound on any kitchen cupboard before opening it, to give the mice and roaches enough time to get under cover. But this time even that hadn't worked. A loud crunching noise persisted, and I finally traced it to a bulk carton of spaghetti on the third shelf. Both Jack and the owner were there, so I called to them to come and check it out.

"Must have a mouse in the box," Jack suggested. "I'll just take it out in the back, open it up and let him out."

"Don't throw the spaghetti out!" the owner shouted after him. I shivered a bit at the thought of eating that stuff, but went out with Jack to watch from a safe, phobic distance. It wasn't one mouse, or two, or three, or four — they kept leaping away for what seemed like

Page Image an hour. So, no, I didn't want Jack's room.

Jack couldn't accept the loss of status that went with losing his empire and throne room. He told the owner that his sainted mother had been pestering him for years to come back home and take care of her. She missed him dreadfully, he said, and she was getting on in years. She needed him, and he guessed he could spend (read "sacrifice") a few years ensuring her best-loved son was by her side.

The owner allowed him to call on the office phone, and a few days later a tiny old lady with a tired face showed up to collect him. It was humiliating for everyone but Jack, who either hid his awareness well or just preferred to live out this fantasy of family harmony.

He towered above her, loud and boisterous. His whole performance implied that this was the biggest gift he'd ever given her. He introduced me as one of the quality people in the house who would soon make something of herself, the way he had. With the owner standing by and silently gritting his teeth in a

supreme effort of tolerance, Jack told his mother that the owner had begged him to stay, that he was worried he would lose his business if the expert left, but that blood was thicker than water and he knew who needed him most.

His mother interrupted with a weary, "Jack, it's a very small apartment —"

"And we'll be all the closer for it, Ma, doncha worry about a thing. Your boy's a man now, you've got no more worries."

Page Image

"But Jack, you really can't stay for long, my lease specifies only one tenant, and it is so small."

"I'll take care of all that, don't worry your poor head about it. It'll be just like the old days, just you and me."

Jack left, buoyant, his mother on the verge of tears, and we never saw the ruler of the dining room again.

4

Antony, the man of many careers, had convinced the owner that he needed a phone installed in his room — at Antony's expense, of course.

"A number of people are very upset that they can't contact me. I'm the kind of man that phones are for. Nobody ever gives me messages here!"

"No one calls for you, Antony," was the owner's response. It was perfectly true, and perfectly cruel.

"*Yesss* they do," Antony hissed back. "But I don't have a phone, so they can't."

Overwhelmed by the logic, the owner gave in, in spite of his fears of somehow being stuck with the bills.

Antony was a happy man the day it was installed, spending hours solemnly handing out his phone number to anyone in the house who would take it, and the occasional passerby who wouldn't. He came to me and recited his number while I wrote it down with exaggerated care. Head firmly glued to one shoulder, he demanded that I phone and tell him daily when it was breakfast, lunch and supper time.

Page Image

"No, Antony. You've been here long enough to know the routine, and someone always shouts it out, anyway."

"I'm hard of hearing."

"No you're not. You've never missed a meal."

"Yes I am," he spat out. "And you have to do what I say, or I'll report you!"

"Good luck, and goodbye, Antony."

The next day, he began a routine that would continue for weeks, with slight variations. The phone on my desk would ring, I'd pick it up, saying, "Morning." And there he'd be.

"Good morning. It's Antony Thompson. Can you tell me what time it is?"

There not being any clocks in the house, I could only give him an approximation.

"Anyone asking for me?"

"No, Antony."

"Anyone phone for me?"

"No, Antony."

"When they do, be sure to give them my new number."

"Yes, Antony."

There was still some humour left the second, third and fourth times he called that day. I knew he was desperate to use the phone, call someone, so I went along, with strained patience. By the third week, however, those calls were getting as irritating as fingernails raking down a blackboard. I had hoped the frequency would decrease as time wore on, but if anything, it increased.

Page Image

Instead of simply asking the time of day, or about the weather, he got more and more into whether people were looking for him.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, it's Antony Thompson. Anyone come asking for me today?"

"No, Antony."

"Are you sure?"

"Antony, I got up ten minutes ago, I'm sure I would remember if anyone had come asking for you."

"Would you tell me?"

"Yes, Antony."

Then, a few hundred calls later, "Afternoon."

"Good afternoon. It's Antony Thompson. Is that Pat?"

"Yes, of course. What is it, Antony?"

"Pat ..." Heavy breathing over the line. My eyebrows went up, wondering if he had graduated to obscene calls, forgetting the principles of anonymity. But no.

"Pat, can I trust you?"

The absurdity of him being one floor above me and continually pestering me with these calls made me hedge my response.

"I really don't know, Antony. It's up to you."

Pause. Wet breathing. "Nobody been in asking questions?"

"What kind of questions?"

"So," he yelled, "someone *has* been there!"

"No, Antony. I'm just wondering what the hell you're worried about."

Page Image

"All right, I'm going to take a chance. It could be worth my life."

"By all means, take a chance." I was getting annoyed.

I really didn't like him. The owner believed, and claimed he'd heard it from Antony's therapist, that there was no physical reason for Antony to hold his head the way he did. Gary claimed that Antony often forgot which shoulder it was supposed to be attached to, going from left to right and confusing the hell out of people. Antony claimed his ex-wife had broken his neck; my sympathy was with her.

"The police are after me."

"Why?"

"I can't say. It's big. They're searching everywhere."

"Well don't sweat it, Antony, they haven't found you yet."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Goodbye, I hope for the last time today."

Four more weeks and hundreds of calls passed, all centring around his fugitive status. I could be excused for the strong impulse I had to call him on that bloody phone, and scream at him, "Run, Antony, they've come to get you!"

Of course I didn't, but I was sorely tempted. I was resolved to put an end to the nonsense, and the next phone call I told him as firmly as I could that he was driving me batty and that from now on I would simply hang up when he called.

He was, predictably, outraged.

Page Image

"You don't care that the police are going to arrest me?"

"It's more that I don't believe the cops want any more to do with you than I do, Antony. Now bug off!"

That tore it.

"Oh yeah?!"

"Yeah!"

"Well, you'll see. You'll be sorry when they storm in here, throw me in handcuffs and drag me downstairs. You'll be sorry then!"

"Oh, I don't know, Antony. I expect I'd have mixed feelings."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. I'm going to hang up now. Remember what I said."

"You'll be sorry, you —" Click.

Days passed. I carried out my threat, banging down the phone whenever he called about the Boys in Blue. He must have felt his credibility was on the line. He seemed to feel he had something to prove. Either that, or he couldn't take the tension of never knowing when he was going to be busted.

He solved the problem in his own unique fashion. He got himself arrested. A few days after our last telephone conversation, he took himself down to his bank, where he kept a few dollars in his account in order to get all those fancy cheques with his name and address printed on them. He handed a note to his regular teller (who didn't find him hard to describe) demanding all the money she had in her till. He gave her a large

Page Image green garbage bag into which she threw a few loose bills, not impressed by his threat that he had a gun. (He didn't, of course.)

He took his time heading home, probably envisioning the dramatic scene when the cops came for him at the boarding house, but they arrested him on the sidewalk a few blocks away. He wasn't terribly disappointed, though. He called me from detention a week or so later, the essence of his conversation being: "So there!"

5

I had a referral from an overly buoyant hospital social worker, who was trying to place a soon-to-be-discharged, blind, middle-aged woman. The worker breezed through a glowing description of her client's abilities, not in the least deterred when I explained that the only available bed was in a third-floor room shared by three others. I agreed, despite reservations, that they could visit the house the same day. I had already learned that the more glowing the recommendation, the more desperate the straits the ex-patient was in. The owner was anxious to fill all the vacancies, however, so there was not much discretion allowed to me.

They were at the office within the hour, an odd pair. The social worker was drenched with determined cheerfulness, her face carefully sculpted with expensive make-up, her lush body covered in a peasant dress. Page Image Standing by her, in stark contrast, a gangly, ill-favoured apparition in over-sized men's trousers and a stained shirt, tails out, was her client. She clutched a broken hockey stick, covered from top to jagged bottom with what had once been white masking tape. The other hand grasped a small green garbage bag, holding all her possessions. Her eyes were milky-white and deadened. According to the social worker, there would be no sense in showing Debbie the room, and she declined to see for herself where her client would be staying. An endorsed cheque was handed over, then the worker conspicuously checked her designer watch, mumbling that she was late for another appointment.

Andy, always on the make, led Debbie to her room while I watched the social worker roll down both windows of her sports car before revving out of the driveway.

A few hours late, Andy led Debbie into the dining room for supper, after which she seemed to have left the house. This was not rare; some new tenants still had enough sense of their own dignity to refuse to live here. I had a fleeting hope that she'd gone back to the hospital and confronted her worker.

Around midnight, the old man from the basement came up to my room, agitated and sputtering. He managed a graphic description of what was bothering him.

"There's two people downstairs, who don't even live here, they're screwing on the couch and the guy told me to get the hell out of there."

Page Image

It was not rare for homeless ex-patients to sneak into one of the basement rooms after hours, looking for any safe place to sleep that was off the street. Often they were ex-tenants who knew that there was no one

on duty at night, and no locks. I was aware of these refugees, but generally ignored them, unwilling to throw vulnerable people out on the street. But this couple was going a bit too far, if the old man could be believed. I was as reluctant to brave the basement as most of the other tenants; I had no muscle or protection to call upon. What I did have was some obligation, so I left the old man grumbling and cracking his knuckles in my room, and felt my way down the dark stairs to the basement.

The basement room was fairly dark, lit only by a crazily tilted lamp in one corner. A heavily built man was sitting sprawled on the legless couch, his pants down around his thighs, a woman's head listlessly moving, face down, in his lap. A large bottle of PineSol, uncapped, stood by his foot. They were both oblivious to me. The man leaned over, one hand grabbing for the bottle, the other bearing down cruelly on the woman's head. He sat back, tilted the bottle and took several long gulps. The sound penetrated whatever fog she was in, and she tried to raise her head, dragging his limp penis the short distance he allowed her to move. With one hand, she flailed in the direction of the gulps, struggling against him now, looking for the bottle which he held just beyond her reach, a terrible grin drawing his lips away from rotting and missing teeth.

Page Image

She jerked away from his grasp, almost upsetting the bottle before she wrested it from him and brought it to her mouth, making satisfied noises while he snarled threateningly. It was then I noticed the discarded hockey stick lying near them and abruptly became aware who the woman was.

They were each pulling at the bottle again. I struggled with rising nausea and physical revulsion, and tried to temper my own reaction by thinking over and over, like a mantra: Don't judge, don't judge (Did she pick him up? Is he her boyfriend? Does she trade sex for PineSol?), don't judge!

"Hey!" My voice was shaking, not authoritative at all; they didn't move. I plunged my hands into my pockets, where they trembled out of sight, and came into the shadowy light.

"You have to leave right now!" I directed this at him.

"Fuck off!." he spat back, used to bullying women.

"Now, brother, or I call the cops and you spend the night in detox." I worked on keeping my voice low and controlled.

Debbie was sitting up now, running her fingers through her hair, trying to straighten her clothing.

"Debbie, it's time for you to go to bed now."

The man had nowhere to go, but he was too wasted to take me on and had no intention of spending his high behind bars. Between the two of them, they managed to get his pants up. I walked behind him as he struggled up the stairs, cursing me at every step, holding

Page Image the PineSol like liquid gold in front of him.

I called to Debbie over my shoulder that I would be back directly to assist her to her room. He made lurching progress, holding on to the wall and the bottle, slammed back the front door and stepped out onto the porch. I hadn't been so steadily abused in a while, and I had to control my rising anger. He reeled back, finishing off the bottle and flinging it out onto the street, where it smashed dramatically, glass flying everywhere.

Debbie was not in the basement when I went back, but the old man was, and he smiled gratefully. I squeezed his shoulder, said goodnight and climbed the stairs one more time, unsure who or what I was so angry at, feeling like the bottle the moment it struck the road, feeling like Debbie the moment she knew

she was seen, feeling like hell ... and it was still a long way till any kind of morning.

1

Page Image

Gary, Andy, Delores, Francis and I were hanging out in the office. Summer had come once again, and with the return of warmth, some of the tensions had left the house, only to be replaced by the rumours of my leaving.

"I think you boys are just being selfish, giving her a hard time. You ought to be thinking about what's good for her, not about yourselves."

Andy nodded. "Hell, I'd leave. Except one boarding house is pretty much the same as another."

"Relax, guys, it's a long way off. There's a whole lot I need to do before it comes to leaving, like looking for a job."

I laughed at the expression on the Phoney Father's face; he didn't like the "j" word. Gary wasn't laughing; he hadn't been speaking to me since he'd heard the rumours.

Page Image He'd still sit with us, but his displeasure was evident. He was uncomfortable being angry with me, uneasy about admitting it. I got up from behind the desk, stood in front of him, my hands on his hunched shoulders.

"I'm not going to disappear, Gary. You've got to believe that."

He brushed me away, and huffed out of the room. "Don't give a shit if you fall off the earth!"

Francis shook his head sympathetically, telling me not to worry, Gary would come around.

It was disturbing; there was so much I couldn't say to them, couldn't explain. About going back to the "real world," trying once again to find a tolerable niche, one that would tolerate me. About whether or not I would get sick again, and where the hell I'd end up if I did. About feeling I had nothing in common any more with the folks we saw driving past the house every rush hour: normal people living in normal homes, with normal pasts and normal futures. About what to do with my friends who didn't have the option of returning to civilization. There was a whole stew of questions, of uncomfortable insights and real obligations.

I knew I was afraid, not sure that the gains I'd made here would stand up out there. I knew, too, that there was no way I could ever forget or "put behind me" what I'd seen and experienced here. I would be incapable of turning my back, even though leaving would appear to be doing just that. But how to stay connected? How to help? How to earn a living?

Page Image

I'd accepted some time ago that the house was not my personal punishment, that there might be a really good reason for my stay here. Maybe I would be able to do something about the living conditions facing these people. Now I wondered what it was I was supposed to do. And I worried about the consequences of making the wrong decisions.

2

For some time, I'd been working on the owner to sell the place — for the good of his soul, he should get out of the misery business. Meanwhile, he was working on me to get back to life. He couldn't understand my reluctance to earn good money and the things money could buy. I couldn't see the sense of working to

get material stuff that I had been forced to learn to live without. Being a clever man, he finally found an argument I couldn't refute.

"You say you want to do things for these people. What can you do when you're as poor as they are? You can't buy Theresa her bloody Coca-Cola. You can't buy cigarettes for Andy or Gary, or a dress for Haddie. Now if you had money, there's nothing you couldn't do for them!"

He wasn't above using arguments he didn't believe in. He would have had another heart attack if he'd thought there was a real possibility I would "waste" money that way. It got to me, nonetheless. I had Page Image experienced too many times the frustration of empty pockets when I would have loved to buy a small gift for one of the residents, do something nice for someone who couldn't remember the last time something nice had happened to them. He finally agreed to test the waters with some real estate agents, and I decided to begin preparations for leaving.

I had to get used to the outside, had to start walking around the area, checking out whatever community contained the house. A small thing, going for walks, but I felt very visible and very vulnerable my first few times, certain that the craziness still showed. Things were brighter, faster, confused on the streets and sidewalks: so many people knowing where they were going, coming out of shops with bags of groceries or other shopping, mostly self-absorbed and in a hurry. Nobody stopped and pointed, the way they sometimes did when we sat (defiantly) on the porch. A few times, I got lost wandering around, and felt a renewed sense of poverty when I grew tired or thirsty, unable to take a bus or stop and buy a soft drink.

I was startled to see so many crazy people also walking around within a ten-block radius of our home, easily identifiable by the mismatched clothing, the stiff walk, the empty, medicated eyes. I found a library a few streets away from the boarding house and took to reading community notices posted in front and on telephone poles. One of these notices advertised a community meeting, and I was amazed at the reason given for it: us, the crazy people. It seemed that a segment of

Page Image the community felt hard done by. The provincial government, they said, was "dumping" the de-institutionalized in their neighbourhood. They were planning to bury the Minister of Health in effigy.

It sounded so strange that I decided to attend. Locked away in the boarding house, we weren't aware of the organized resistance to our being here. I couldn't help wondering where there was left for us to hide ourselves, where the "more productive" citizens expected us to go.

The meeting was held at the community centre. I'd passed it a few times on my walks, so I had no trouble finding it, and there was no problem getting in. I sat on the aisle at the back, ready to take off if the situation warranted.

There was a local politician or two, and a lot of obviously annoyed taxpayers. As soon as the meeting opened, a flurry of speakers blasted the province for all the "weirdos" (one of the nicer terms used) in their midst. Store owners complained that their businesses suffered: people were afraid to come in with those "crazies" hanging around outside all the time. A man avowed that he never left his house any more on full-moon nights, and refused to allow his wife and children to, either. People talked about suffering property values, and how you wouldn't see the government dumping ex-patients in Rosedale (which I gathered was high-priced, like Westmount in Quebec). One fellow claimed his mother had been mugged. Another didn't feel like taking his kids to

Page Image the parkette; they weren't safe.

I was getting angrier and angrier, and fighting with myself to keep quiet. It was hard. I kept thinking about Alice and Gary and Haddie, what they went through every day, and how humiliated they'd be to hear all this. I stood up, the same way I had at college meetings, looking more assured that I felt, and I tried to conceal my shaking. The individual chairing the meeting recognized me before I had any clear idea what I was going to say. I'd be damned if I'd let them know I was intimidated, so I cleared my throat and just let

the words come.

I identified myself as one of the "nuts" they'd been discussing, assured them that I hadn't killed anybody or raped anybody (for at least a week), objected to being spoken of as garbage, which is what their use of the term "dumping" brought to mind. I told them that the people they labelled and accused suffered more from poverty and stigma than from whatever mental illness they might have originally been diagnosed with, and strongly suggested their energies might be better spent investigating living conditions in their community than in alarmist meetings like these.

Almost before I stopped talking, an Eastern European man stood up and denounced me: I was just pretending to be a crazy person, he knew I was not. I was just there to stir up trouble. It was too ironic, and I laughed aloud, remembering those first days when I would have loved to hear I wasn't a "crazy person." There were some decent people at the meeting, and they lent support to

Page Image my comments, but before the meeting ended I had figured out what I could do about the boarding house and the people in it. How I might try to change things.

I was feeling up to the challenge.

3

Andy and I were on the porch when Gary dragged his chair out and joined us. It was just after sunset, cool and comfortable. He was silent for a minute, busied himself rolling a cigarette, lit it. Then I heard, "Sorry I was mean. I just hate you going, you know."

"I know, me too. Me too."

"You gonna go back to Montreal?"

"No, silly, how would we stay in touch if I left the province?"

He hawked and spat over the porch rail. I wasn't sure if that was meant as a "Ha!"

"When I do get a place, Gary, you'll have the address, I promise."

He turned his head and stared hard. "No shit?"

"No shit."

He waited a while, then asked another question.

"You think you'll get a place close?"

"I think I'd better, don't you?"

"Goddamn right you better!"

And that settled that.

4

Page Image

It was only my first leaving, when I did leave. And I only moved down the street, to a bachelorette, furnished. Gary, Andy, Francis and Haddie would visit, singly or in a group, the Phoney Father often bringing goodies.

I stayed on medical welfare for some time, which meant that my cheque went for rent, and I had many hungry days. The owner asked me to "watch" the place for him when he left the country for a month, which I did, camping out in the office, collecting rent, making sure lunch and supper were under way, distributing medications and generally avoiding catastrophes. When the owner really did manage to sell, I found I'd been promised as a resource to the new owners, who had no experience with tenants like us. They promised me $25,000, and I was open to the offer, especially since they said they intended to make necessary repairs and do painting and put up curtains. I hung in until I figured out that intentions were one thing, actions another.

I did not shy away from my plan to try to improve conditions. I became heavily involved in advocacy efforts, sitting on a number of committees and task forces dealing with "the plight of the mental patient." And I landed the perfect job for me, at a newly opened drop-in for ex-psychiatric patients in the area. I stayed there for six years.

Altogether I spent about three years in the boarding house, and until the building was finally sold to a nonprofit

Page Image agency, I kept up contact and tried to keep the house in the public eye. I have a videotape of Gary, sitting on his bed, talking to a politically concerned Minister of Health we brought in to see how our people were being forced to live.

In all, I have spent twelve years advocating for the rights and dignity of mental patients, even though most of the folks who taught me what I know and feel are beyond those kinds of issues now.

Gary, Delores, Alice, Cathy, John, Mama, Theresa, Miss Pattison, Jack, Haddie, Pigpen, Andy, Phoney Father Francis, Andrea, and all those whose names have disappeared from my memory, though their misery is with me constantly.

Some survived. That is, continued on in much the same circumstances, their bodies withering under the effects of cold winters, poor diets and too much medication. Little changes for the better in our neighbourhood.

Some simply disappeared.

Some died.

I knew when Alice died. The owner drove over to where I was staying to tell me. Her death was a devastating blow. I knew how afraid she was of dying alone, undiscovered. And I knew my hopes for a better life for that sweet, abandoned woman would never be realized. I had fantasized about having tea with her (liberally laced) in a small apartment she would share with one of the other tenants, where she would be respected and cared for, permitted the dignity of her age.

Page Image

She was raped a few months before her death. A younger, transient tenant shared a bottle with her, and took her when she was senseless, aggravating the assault by bragging to the rest of the house. Alice was never the same after that. She kept to herself, hidden away in her room. She had no roommate at the time of her death, a temporary vacancy leaving her alone with her nightmare. I was never told the results of the autopsy, never told if one was ordered. She was seventy-eight.

Cathy was evicted from the house after another in a series of public health complaints about her room. Apparently, the clutter she lived in — not the house itself — was viewed as a potential fire hazard. Given twenty-four hours to throw everything out, she balked. Both she and her goods were unceremoniously dumped on the front porch. I ran into her a few times on Queen Street, sometimes staggering with one of her boyfriends, sometimes sober and frightened about what the future held for her. We always embraced

when we met, and I'd watch her walk away to God knows what.

One of her men brought her purse into the drop-in centre one day, saying she'd forgotten it and he couldn't find her. I went through the bag, looking for clues, calling the doctors whose names I found on her prescription bottles. No one was interested.

We heard, via some incredible grapevine, that Phoney Father Francis was doing some time out West. Shortly before the Pope's visit, he conned hotels and limousine services into believing he was the Holy

Page Image Father's advance man. He managed to live high on the hog before anyone got suspicious.

Pigpen was returned to the hospital, which became his home for a while. Some of the hospital staff, in the wake of Jack's failed vision, actually had him play a few mini-concerts. But Pigpen remains essentially Pigpen.

John Mettle, with that scar on his face, the one that always looked so raw. The hospital had prescribed an ointment that never worked. He was at the hospital almost every week, surrounded by health-care professionals. No one noticed the cancer until it had riddled his body, almost every organ affected. He was sent off to the Princess Margaret Hospital to die, although he begged to be allowed to return to his old ward. The staff met and decided to turn down his request, claiming it would be too disruptive for the other patients. He ended his days among strangers, eaten alive.

And Mama. I have a picture in front of me, stark black-and-white, Mama with two blackened eyes, raw bruises around her neck, bite marks above her breasts, blood congealed at one corner of her mouth. The owners claimed she fell out of bed. Mama isn't talking; she claims not to remember what happened. The police investigated, results inconclusive, last I heard. She's been transferred to a nursing home.

Theresa. I see her often and laugh at her singsong inflections. Every time we meet she asks if the man who sat on her bed with a knife to her throat long ago is in jail. I lie every time, "Of course he is, Theresa." She still goes through boyfriends like old shoes, and I

Page Image still love her. She doesn't much like her new boarding house — too strict, too many crazy people.

Miss Pattison had to be sent away. She'd been seen standing in the middle of King Street, paralysed with fear or indecision. The night she was found in the flooded basement, trying to unscrew an offending light bulb, water sloshing around her ankles, she was sent off. Not to a nice place, but to a large rabbit warren of a home that took only the old and demented. I feel certain she has gone to straighten out God and Heaven and the Angels. I hope she's successful.

I passed Andrea on Queen Street a few weeks ago. Little of her looks or personality remained. Her eyes were blank, bearing the heavily medicated look, her feet confined to shuffling along. I called her name; she did not hear me.

Jack is among the disappeared.

Haddie, I'm told, has her own place. I hope so.

Other residents sometimes come into the drop-in centre where I work, have coffee, scrounge cigarettes. Nothing but their addresses have changed.

Delores and Ted come by. They're older now, and fight less. Delores is in another boarding house. She still plays cards, but she has lost her old zest. Ted has been physically ill.

Dennis is in Penetang, an institution for the criminally insane that is an offence to all thinking, caring

people. He called me after he was arrested. There was a dilapidated building on the corner of Dufferin and King; Dennis says he was led to believe he'd be doing

Page Image someone a favour if he burned it down.

I was part of a group that toured Penetang a few years ago. Conditions were appalling, a throw-back to Bedlam. The cells were oppressively small, the corridors prison-like, the guards terrified of their wards and brutal in the execution of their duties. I left my group to peer into an area that appeared off-limits, and I heard my name shouted. I turned in time to see Dennis break out of a line-up and head towards me at a shuffling run, beaming until a guard barked and he froze. Since I was there with government permission, I ignored the command to stay behind the line and went to him. We embraced like lost children.

Not much time or opportunity to talk, with the blue-shirted guard glaring at us. I snuck him some tailor-mades and a kiss. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out two treasured chocolate chip cookies, hoarded for who knows how long, and pressed them into my hand. I'm told his chances for release are remote. It's already been six, seven years. I kept his gift for a long time, wrapped in clear plastic by my night table.

And last, my dearest friend, Gary.

I was sitting in a meeting in the board room of the local psychiatric hospital when I heard he'd died early that afternoon. In the dining room of the boarding house, just after lunch was served. Lunch.

He crashed to the floor, unable to breath. It took him a while to die, his death rattle seeming to shake the foundations of that bloody building.

Page Image

Gary, pulling at my arm as I was leaving, not understanding why I was going. "Who's gonna take care of me the next time I get sick? Get a fever of 102?"

They gave me a card when I left, signed by all the people who mattered so much to me. Gary threw in a picture of himself, taken by his grandmother when he was seven or eight years old. A happy, good-looking kid, proud and sure atop a pony, owning the world, safe, secure. Only months before he was locked up, for — he was told — attacking his mother with his fists, trying to choke her with his little hands. Institutions were to be his only world for the next decades.

I have the picture, the card, the memories, the grief, the guilt that I could not change things.

And it still goes on. And we still turn away.

Epilogue

Page Image

In 1981, I left the boarding house for the last time as a resident/worker. It took five more years, another death, another inquest, to get the house out of private hands and into a non-profit agency's care.

Number 1245 was hollowed out and rebuilt from within. The houses at 1241-3 were demolished; in their place was built a structure with multiple apartments. I was there the day the wreckers went to work, and what affected me the most was how easily it fell. It had taken so much work, on the part of so many people, just to win this, for seventy ex-patients in one house on one street in one province. It seemed that the building should have somehow put up more of a fight, instead of collapsing into itself in clouds of dust and chunks of plaster. By that time, of course, I knew about the sixty or so other

Page Image boarding houses in the area, and in the drop-in where I worked I saw hundreds of

boardingand rooming-house residents every day. It would have been of some limited comfort to have discovered that my boarding house was merely an aberration in a mental health system that otherwise functioned well. Clearly, that was not the case.

I joined with task forces and coalitions, replete with professionals and para-professionals working in the system. Often, too often, I was the only ex-patient at the table. I was continually surprised by the degree of resistance to the notion that we — those directly affected — should have more of a say in how we are housed and treated. The provincial civil service also was reluctant to hear and change what needed to be changed; many times I heard how Rome wasn't built in a day, and that the wheels of government grind slowly. I found *I* was considered the problem, not the issues I was bringing to light.

I went through periods of intense frustration, all too aware that patience is fine when you're reasonably fed, clothed and housed, when there is purpose and meaning to your life. Meanwhile, our people were forced to endure, to try to survive in intolerable circumstances through long years of committees and endless debate and red tape.

I was a founding member of the Supportive Housing Coalition in Metro Toronto, which over the next decade established hundreds of group-home beds. The problem came in making those beds available to those most in need. Neighbourhoods want only the most socially acceptable psychiatric patients, if any at all. I sat through

Page Image endless meetings that resulted in Mental Health Program services and a government-funded effort to encourage boarding-house operators to upgrade their establishments by subsidizing them on a graded scale. I was appointed to the advisory committee to the Minister of Housing on the extension of the *Landlord and Tenant Act* to roomers and boarders, and to the advisory committee to the Minister of Health and the Office of the Provincial Psychiatric Patient Advocate Program, which has advocates in each of the ten provincial psychiatric hospitals.

I also served on the advisory committee to the City of Toronto's Mayor's Action Task Force on Discharged Psychiatric Patients, which led to the establishment of the Gerstein Crisis Centre, where I am now based. I was an expert witness on after-care and boarding houses at seven inquests into the deaths of ex-psychiatric patients. With the invaluable assistance of Anne Harris, then coordinator of a mental health clinic known as Archway, we put out a paper called *The Cuckoo's Nest*, written by former patients and sympathetic (and daring) professionals. For two years, I hosted and produced (using an "all-crazy" crew) "Cuckoo's Nest Cable" on Maclean-Hunter Cable Ten.

I feel almost defensive, which is why I'm listing all the above, because it seems absurd and tragic that movement, action, has been so slow. It is only in this last year that real gains have been won, only now that I can say to myself my commitment can soon end. It was not because of lack of effort, or assistance from others.

I'm often asked why I got out when so many didn't.

Page Image I've mentioned the high school teacher who stopped me in the hall to ask for my assistance in a school performance. Before that man, whose name is Stan Asher, no one had ever looked at me or spoken to me as though I had value. For me, that's the key. Otherwise, I probably would have gone on believing that I was intrinsically bad, with nothing to offer. I believe that many in that house were never offered a positive image of themselves.

Since Stan stopped me that school day, and since he and his wife Sharon dared to hire a mother's helper with some heavy problems, dared to trust me, to offer affection and respect, I have continued to run into the kinds of people who aren't worried about reaching out to others, people who look deeper than labels.

In this, I feel very fortunate. Mr. Ernest Hirschback, the former director of the group-home agency I worked at, was another like Stan. He hired the hippie kid to work in his home, and taught me that all

authority is not unreasoning or evil. He praised my work, gave me lots of leeway, laughed at some of the innovations I brought in, but never said "no." He made me feel valued, important, productive. What a gift to someone who felt none of those things about herself!

When I left the boarding house, I found myself in a strange city where I knew few people. Again, it was the unselfish reaching out of others that helped me keep my head above water. People like Paul Quinn, who worked with me for years at the PARC drop-in centre, and who was always there when I got depressed or angry or began to feel bitter. He was always encouraging, letting me

Page Image know I was doing the right thing, especially when government mandarins and agency heads were most aggressively denying the validity of what I was publicly saying through the media and at public forums.

And I was even lucky enough to have, as a mentor and role model, former Toronto alderman David Reville, who, in spite of the risks and possible penalties, had the courage to come out as a former patient. He looked out for me, and for others of us trying to make changes in the system, and continues to do so as a member of the Ontario Legislature, and now in his new role as Special Adviser to the Premier.

The members of The Cuckoo's Nest Collective, many of whom worked in the system and risked retribution for writing and advocating for change — people like John Dorsay, Bob Rose, Anne Harris — prevented, I believe, any real accumulation of bitterness against professionals as a group, because they fought for what was right without the direct experience that motivated me.

In 1990, I was appointed to the Graham Legislation Sub-committee, which was to draft provincial community mental health legislation. We held public hearings around Ontario, and everywhere we went ex-patients stood up and described how hopeless their lives had become, thanks to poverty, isolation and horrible housing. It was a strong message: Do something! Our report to the Minister of Health says exactly what to do, when and how.

We will see how the government responds.