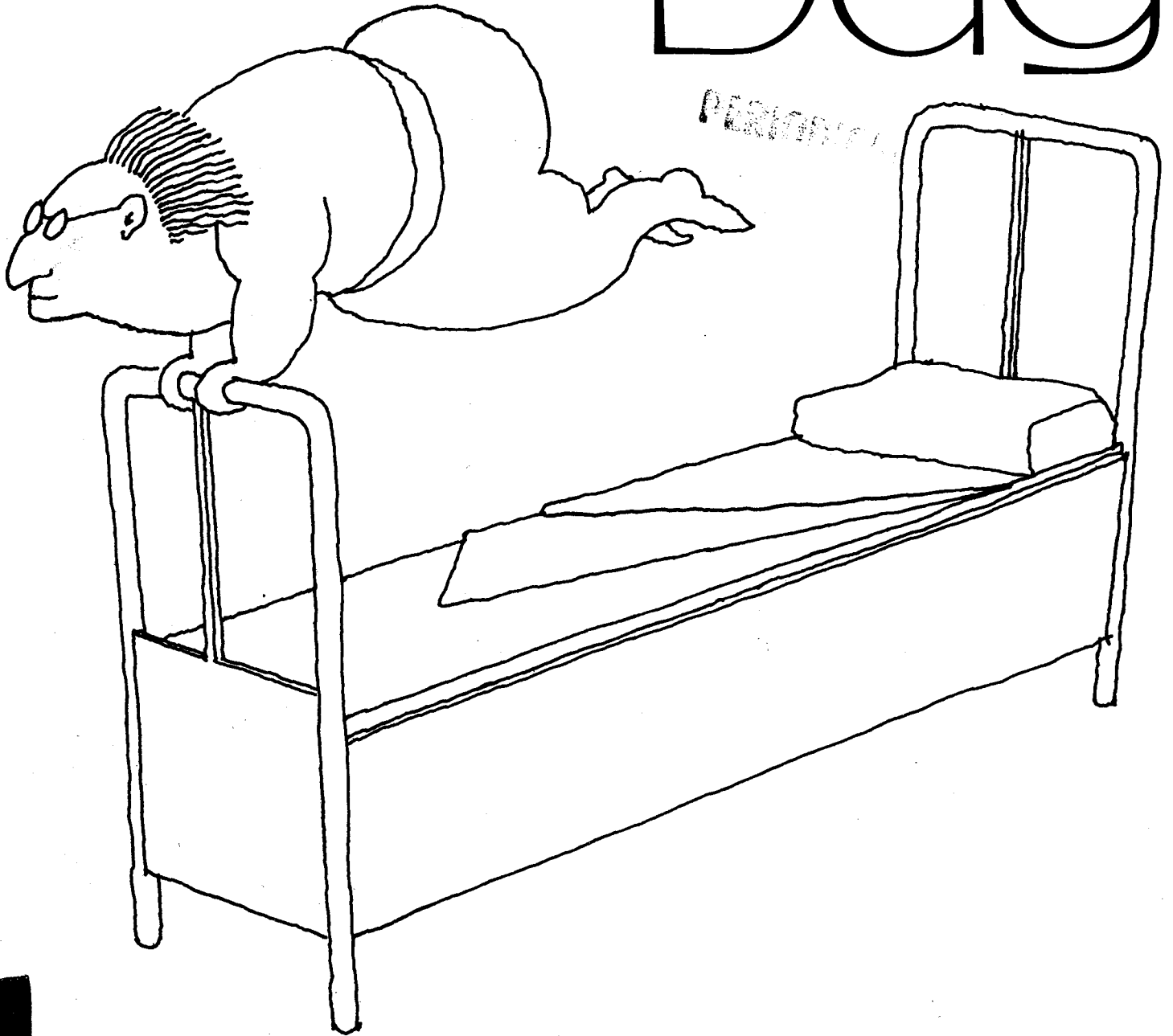


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fiction issue

YOUNGER DAYS
by George Collicott 1

ICE-ELATION
by Mark Foley 5

SOMEBODY OWES ME
MONEY
by Peter Sellers 7

MACARONIA, MOUSSAKA
AND BAKLAVA AND A
LITTLE BIT OF RETSINA
TOO
by Sophia Hadzipetros 14

THE WHITE CADILLACE
by Rob Showell 17

MORNING AT A SUMMER
HOUSE NOW BURNT
DOWN
by David MacFarlane 21

PLUMS ARE IMPORTANT
PERHAPS
by Chris Belfry 24

OSTEND
by Jindra Rutherford 26

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SPECIAL THANKS TO KENNEY NICKERSON

Younger Days

BY GEORGE COLLICOTT

Paradi-i-s-s-e Public School”, Kim yells. The words ring out like gunshots in the still air. I glance up at the cracked, painted, brick, where one can still discern the outlines of the letters which once spelled the name so proudly.

“Citadel of higher luh’nin and truth, somethin’ you boys won’t understand I know. Right here in this fine edifice, that’s the same as a building for you all, lies the only hope you’ll evuh’ have I reckon. This heah’s the working place for a very learned and worldly man, Mr. A.G. Plummer. That’s just plain ol’ A.G. to you: teacher, general commander, and probably appointed representative of the good lord hisself for all I know.”

Kim O’toole is a slightly built dervish of teenage motion, pale-faced beneath an unkempt thatch of blond sandy hair, a suggestion of rodent in the oblique dark eyes and pinched cheeks. The nose snuffles to and fro as he tosses his head about in counter-point to his wildly waving arms. It is a never-ending gesture aimed at keeping the hair out of his eyes, perfected by long practice and fascinating to watch. As he continues the speech his hands are flung alternately between heaven and the depths of his pockets. This movement also serves to hold up the baggy trousers he is wearing. The T-shirt fits in much the same manner and seems to simply hang from his shoulders. He pauses to spit, snuffles, and paws at the ground with his feet, searching for words.

“I, Mr. Kim J. O’toole; just call me Kim if you wish, hereby declare these grounds off limits to all punk hippie teenagers after the hour of sunset.”

Behind, the great red orb of the sun is reflected in the office windows as it poises above a low range of hills in the near distance. There is Vernon, Doug, Cary, Zippy, and

myself, long time friends and partners in many an evening’s adventures together. We are standing on the edge of the pavement in a semi-circle with Kim at it’s centre, each of us going through our own little pantomime as we listen to his mocking speech.

“Looks like the hour of reckonin’ is almost nigh there Rev.,” I shout, mocking his own intonation. “Do you think you’re man enough to throw us all outta’ here?”

We each turn to face him, slowly for emphasis, nailing him to the wall with our collective stare. The familiar theme from *Dragnet* comes from five mouths at once. “Dun-n de dun-dun”. He begins to back up slowly, eyes wide in mock terror, his head moving from side to side taking us all in. The silence is cleaved by a startling swish as the curtains of the large office windows are flung open behind him. We are all caught in various stages of flight and then roars of laughter as the somewhat confused look of the old school janitor appears at the window. He pushes open three small panes which swing outward with a protesting shriek of metal on metal. They are just big enough to admit some small degree of fresh air and also Kim’s head.

“Ooga booga,” Kim presses his face tightly against the screen, staring in at the uncomprehending gaze of the old man. “Hey! hey you there; janitor,” he yells and starts to giggle. Kim is taking centre stage tonight as usual.

“Hey mister”; he searches for an appropriate comic line. Hey, hey no, — wait — no! don’t!” He gets his head out of the window just in time before it is slammed shut with a resounding clang. Undaunted he runs to the next one and jams in his head.

“Hey, do you really like your job old boy?,” he says. “Have you ever considered a job in, sa-a-y-y computers?”

Yes by George that's it! Computer technology old man, a job with an eye on the future. Lay down your mop I say. Kick over that bucket and start a new life. Learn as you earn, just let us . . ."

The old man puts down his pail and shuffles forward slowly on the glossy wet floor, shaking his finger at nobody in particular.

"Now now old boy, don't miss the best part, don't do anything rash." This time we all run in and hold Kim there in the window as he struggles wildly to get free. Even the old man has joined our game now, his creased face lit up with a huge toothless grin as he whips a filthy rag from his pocket and rubs it firmly into Kim's face with a speed and delight that surprises all of us. A muffled choking comes from beneath the cloud of chalk dust. As we let go his head whips back instinctively and smacks neatly into the window frame.

"A-a-a-r-gh;" his yell of pain echoes the empty darkening field. I pause in silence for a moment, then approach his bent over form. The others seem unconcerned. "You okay"?, I ask. He makes a small noise. "Hey! Kim, say something."

He looks up at me as I make a wary retreat, pauses melodramatically, then erupts once again into a fury of laughter and motion, striking out at the nearest body which happens to be that of one Joseph P. Mate, known to all of us simply as "Zippy", or "Monk". We circle our grappling comrades with unearthly screaming sounds, urging them on, letting the whole world know how wild and dangerous we are. I push away from the wall with a lurching motion. The dirty brick tugs at my shirt as I lead a rush toward the combatants.

"Okay boys, let's give the Rev. a helping hand to that great big home in the sky." The others follow my seeming inspiration. The game has resumed. I slow just enough to let them dive on first. From a distance judged safe I watch the insane pile-up of twisting limbs. Zippy has crawled away unnoticed, and now stands beside me in the semi-darkness. His grin gives him a Chesire cat-like appearance. He is heavily built for his height. I am reminded of his father, Joe senior, who looks like a plump Austrian burgher in a beer commercial.

He seems to seek and enjoy my attention, perhaps because I am a little older. Noticing that I am watching he dives back into the melee enthusiastically, showing off like a playful pet.

I, for my part, stand watching for a few more moments, but as usual my attention wanders elsewhere seeking some new diversion. The school is bordered on three sides by dirt roads which form the perimeter of a rather uneven patch of ground which serves as our soccer field during recess from classes. To my right the road disappears around a broad

sweeping curve flanked further on by a muskrat swamp on both sides, this swamp forming the fourth and furthest end of the field and leading on into the endless flat expanse of the lake.

To my left another road runs down a small hill, past a church, and there in front of Chuck Moore's general store the two roads meet, forming what would pass in a larger town I suppose, as our four corners. The store is rather quaint looking in the fading light. The driveway is semi-circular, permitting easy access to cars approaching from either direction. It is big enough for a fleet of Cadillacs though I have never seen more than three cars parked there at once, even during summer when the Italian tourists come to the lake. A single large pole stands in the middle, casting it's pool of light into the surrounding darkness. It illuminates a huge Pepsi Cola sign bearing the name "Moore's General Store — C. Moore Prop." A girl is pictured with a frothing bottle at her lips, her eyes seemingly focussed on a point somewhere in the sky above. Her hair style is at least fifteen years out of date, like that of Lois Lane on the Superman T.V. show. Someone has pencilled in a moustache and tried to make the eyes look crossed.

In the store's picture window I can see Chuck staring out into the dark as though sending out mental commands which will pull in the passing cars by some form of magic. Strung out behind the store, forming a line across the unkempt lawn are five barely visible guest cottages painted a colour that must have once been white. In daylight they are gaudy looking with pink trim around the windows. Appropriately they border on the swamp. Chuck's wife Evelyn has slung a clothes-line between two of them, its sheets hanging limp in the night air like lifeless sails. I listen to the familiar relaxing rhythms of the night, the small waves washing endlessly onto the beach, the crickets' trilling punctuated by guttural explosions in the throats of a thousand bull-frogs.

"Sh-h-h-h: a loud hissing sound interrupts my reverie. "Hey! get down quick, shutup". The outburst from Doug surprises me even as I instinctively comply with his command. Everyone is quiet now. I look up to my left and there cruising past the church with an ominous slowness is the outline of a police car. These grounds have been placed off limits after dark as they have long been "a gathering place for gangs of teenagers", to quote the words of the local newspaper. Our hushed whispers are exciting. Our fear, I realize, is exciting, borne more out of a need for change in our dull surroundings than as a reaction to any real threat. But for now one can imagine anything. We are prisoners of war, escaped convicts, guerilla fighters. The car is silhouetted in the light of the church windows. It slows even further. The silence is broken only by soft

carillon music from the church, and the sound of children singing. It wafts gently on the night air and — settles down over the whole scene like a cool blanket, adding a touch of Hollywood suspense.

The car has stopped. A seeming utter silence, and then, “W-e-e-o-o-w-o-o-o”; a sound like an enraged monster loon tears through the night from somewhere ahead of the cruiser. For a moment I am stunned, then recognition comes. I look at the others and then a great sob of laughter tears itself from our throats and we are running in all directions, the laughter uncontrollable, pouring out of us in choking streams.

“B-u-u-l-i-ah, bu-u-l-iah”; the noise is even louder now, sounding like a German U-boat going down for a final plunge. A side-mounted searchlight stabs out from the cruiser and in the dim light we catch a glimpse of two officers throwing off their hats, faces pressed against the inside of the windshield, peering ahead into the beam of light as it sweeps the road ahead of them. It pinions a tall, leather-jacketed figure striding jauntily in their direction like a young boy coming home from school. It is Stefan Bauer.

As though drawn on invisible wires we amble back in the direction from which we have just been running, aware that we aren't the centre of attention any more, saying not a word for fear of missing out on the scene which promises to take place in front of us. Stefan is the character to top all local legends. The mere sight of the two of us together would earn me a week's grounding. We are close enough now to see him talking with the two officers, a conversation we would love to hear.

“Stay here you guys, Zippy where ya goin’? Get back, wait till they're gone”. He turns to acknowledge my caution. From the other end of the pavement in a perfectly timed entrance, comes another welcome figure, Ed Jones. He strides toward us tall and lithe. His easy manner and carefully cultivated scruffiness give him the air of a modern day denim cowboy. He is the only one among us who is big enough to give Stefan some rivalry. Before he can begin to speak we silence him, pointing in the direction of the cruiser, which is just beginning to move on.

Stefan's face resumes it's quasi-serious comical look as he bounces toward us in a peculiar loping rhythm. His head rises and falls with the energy of his movements. His easy manner makes the moment embarrassingly devoid of any danger to us. He is physically powerful, tall and blond, of German descent. If there are any misdeeds to become involved in, it is a certainty that Stefan will find a key role. His cruel, bullying nature frightens all of us.

“Are you giving the boys a hard time again Bauer?” Ed's drawling voice is the perfect counter to Stefan's overbearing manner. “A-w-w they asked me if I had

nothing better to do than walk the streets at night making weird noises. I told them that the dark always made me a little nervous, I was on my way home, and I couldn't think of any good whistling tunes. You should've seen the look they gave me. Anyway they said I should be on my way home, told me to stay out of trouble and drove off. Ha! Stay out of trouble. I'm breaking my probation just by stepping outside my door at night.”

Zippy comes forward from his place of hiding in the shadow of the wall. “They should've taken you to Whitby straight away while they had a chance Bauer,” he says. Whitby is the local mental hospital.

“Shut-up Mate or your head's gonna look like a squashed pumpkin.” Stefan is not one to be toyed with. Zippy dares to speak up because of his older brother's fearsome reputation. As for myself I am blessed with the twin virtues of natural diplomacy and small stature, both of which help me avoid most fights.

The police have disappeared now, and I feel a surge of reassurance, as though we have once again won a minor battle of some sort, another little victory over “the boys”. Someone mentions food and we drift toward the store which will soon be closing for the day.

Chuck Moore is fairly new in the community having taken the store over from its previous owner, Daisy Tulk. He looks a little uneasy as we enter, his relaxed small town demeanor is not convincing yet. It is still that of the city-dweller trying to adjust to a very different and tight-knit community. Suspicion still lurks on both sides. His wife glances down a row of jam jars at us turning her head periodically to follow our movements about the store. We begin bounding all over as though in search of some elusive article. Stefan is clearly the leader. He is reaching deep into his incredible assortment of noises, as the various flavours of ice-cream fall beneath his gaze. I feel a sudden rush of self-consciousness in the bright light and step outside again, not really wanting to be perceived as part of the gang, not by Chuck anyway. I identify him with my parents and feel uncomfortable in his presence while I am part of our motley gang. Through the window his back is turned toward me. He fingers the cash register nervously, his bald head shining in the light. I press my face to the glass, answering the grimaces of the others as they are served. As Chuck turns to reach for a bag I see two chocolate bars disappear into two different pockets.

The gang comes bounding out of the store as though they have just robbed Fort Knox. We run in a group toward the Church, running for no real reason; just the need to feel once again that we are outlaws, dangerous and pursued, anything which demands our fleeing. There is a small hill leading up to the church front steps. We sit on the freshly mowed lawn on top. The hill has a commanding

view of the road as it curves to hug the lakeshore in each direction. Directly in front of us over the treetops, a beautiful full moon is rising over the lake, casting a long silver beam out to the infiniteness of the horizon.

We all fall quiet in response to the sudden peacefulness of the night. From inside the church comes the voices of children singing. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Ye-s-s J-e-esus loves me, y-e-es Jesus loves me, yes-s-s Jesus love —" "I gotta' have a shit," Kim says. He spits the words out in a gruff, unpleasant tone, gets up, and aims himself in the direction of a clump of trees on the fringe of the field which serves as the church's back yard. He is accompanied by loud farting sounds from the rest of us. Stefan rises as though to follow, then turns toward the basement windows behind us. They are tilted open as though to give vent to the light and laughter within. He creeps up on hands and knees and pauses to peer inside, the long shadows giving his harsh features a lurid, menacing look. After a moment he moves on and disappears from view in the shadows as he rounds the corner of the building.

"Where's Bauer going now then?" Doug asks. We walk toward the wall and are stopped dead in our tracks by the loud sound of heavy boots being applied to a door frame. It sounds like a demented giant trying to knock down the gate to a fortress.

For one brief moment we are wordless, and then we are running in all directions away from the church. Something catches my foot and the ground rushes up, slamming into me with the force of a football tackle. I look up to see an enormous hulking figure not twenty yards distant, peering out into the blackness beyond the meagre light of a single light bulb above the door. The pastor is an ex-boxer, a large shambling figure in dark clothing, made more ominous as his form is silhouetted at the edge of the circle of light. His tendency to hunch over slightly increases the illusion of height.

He is coming in my direction. My throat is dry. If I run he may recognize me and if I stay I am caught. I dare not let out my breath. He stops barely ten yards away. The massive head turns to something on my right. My eyes strain to pierce the dark shadows in the moonlit field beyond. The pastor is moving again, in the direction of a figure crouched beneath a small tree. It is Kim, still squatting, his pants lying in a heap around his ankles. I can imagine more than see, the helpless look in his eyes, the innocent shrug of his shoulders as he is held captive before the disbelieving stare of his beholder. For one long moment they maintain their respective postures, the space between them reduced to a meaningless vacuum.

The pastor turns away in complete silence and bows to re-enter the small side door of the church. It closes behind

him slowly without a sound. I look back toward Kim. As he rises the others appear from the shadowed edges of the field like magic. I listen to their taunts. For the first time tonight I do not feel particularly proud of myself or my friends. I think of Stefan. His voice comes to my ears loudly across the stillness as he leads the others in a further humiliation of Kim. Always aiming his strength at someone of lesser stature. I remember one morning when I arrived at school a little early, one of the first people to trudge across the playing field. Stefan was already there, leaning against a corner of the building with his head held in his hands, his face no longer tough, his eyes red with tears. His step-father had beaten him for no apparent reason. His look told me that it wasn't the first time and I knew that this incident would not be re-told to anyone, not by me at least.

It is hard to reconcile the Stefan who is out there shouting in the darkness, with the same person I saw that morning. He seems to be yelling at nobody in particular, almost as though he felt cheated, angered at his inability to force some sort of showdown with the pastor. It could just as well be the police, anyone in a position of authority will suffice for him to play out the role of menace, which he so enjoys.

Thrusting from the ground in the middle of the field is a single metal pole. It stands slightly higher than a man, and it is capped by a small blue triangle, the emblem of the natural gas company. Stefan stalks toward it like some zombie creature of the night, his eyes fixed, his intent uncertain. He is aiming for the spectacular tonight. His strong arms wrap around it with an anger that may or may not be feigned. Next to the bulk of his huddled frame it appears almost fragile. I find myself cheering along with the others and the night seems to take on a new dimension. We stand in a circle urging him on. In the back of my mind lurking thoughts of broken gas lines emerge and as quickly disappear. Unbelievably I stand watching as Stefan begins working the pole from side to side, gradually pulling it loose from the sucking dirt. With one last heave it topples over and thuds into the ground at our feet.

"That's not bad for a start Hercules, what are ya gonna do with it now?" The taunts don't let up and he looks about himself with the realization that he has now become their victim, and face must be saved.

"This is a little present from me to the Bible class, and boy are they ever gonna know when it arrives." These last words end in a grunt as he stoops to retrieve the pole. "Give us a little war cry Tarzan," Zippy yells.

The pole must weigh well over a hundred pounds. He shoulders it with little apparent effort. Only when he turns, step by careful step, are his labours evident. He stands facing the church, the upraised pole gleaming dully in the

moonlight like a long silver lance. The attack begins.

He is obviously basking in his hero's role. The sound of his laboured breathing comes back to us as he picks up the pace. I am caught up in the mounting excitement as much as the others. As we near the church we are one body, each of us sweating beneath the burden of the weight we carry, each plodding step bringing us closer to the looming wall of the church with its neat row of windows pouring out the light and laughter from within. Our collective intent is vague and somehow unimportant, secondary only to the moment that is now; eight sets of thoroughly alive flesh and blood, all synapses firing as we march in our world of jumbled shadows. My legs are sure of themselves despite the uneven ground, as I carry the battle standard easily in my arms. The air comes into my lungs in great gulps with a

greedy sucking sound. No, it is the sound of the children inside, their singing voices. It is the last sound I hear as I summon the last dregs of my strength to lift the pole even higher.

For one second it rears high overhead, poised in flight. Down it comes in a great slow-motion arc, suspended in time, glistening now with a cruel dullness in the garish light. I ram it straight through the window with a horrifying crash of splintered glass and cries of startled terror from within.

My ears are filled with a pounding, rushing sound. It is the sound of my own flight, my feet coming to earth in slow motion, my breath coming in and out in quick gasps, entirely inadequate. Shouts pass by. There are roars turned to whispers on the wind of my own progress. ☆

ICE~ELATION

BY MARK FOLEY

The snow has been falling. It is cold. The frost has formed thick on the panes. The times I've been outside the roads have been ice and slippery. I've been outside 3 times in over a week: to shop, to mail my letters, and I visited Susan.

I feel I should state at the beginning of this explanation, that I'm not sure there is a problem. I can't say it precisely, but things have happened, things have changed, I feel different, but I'm not sure there is a problem. My anxiety, however, makes me think there might be one.

It was just beginning to get cold over a week ago. This year I was very aware of the cold creeping into my body. One morning the bus seemed exceedingly slow and all the passengers seemed well prepared with fur coats, scarves and gloves, while I froze. All that morning I couldn't get the cold out of my blood. My writing was jagged and

unfamiliar, almost illegible. There wasn't a great rush for what I was doing, although it had to be done within 2 weeks, but it had been a fine job until then and it seemed that the cold was spoiling everything. I had to fight the cold to think straight and remember how I had approached my work the previous day. It wasn't until the afternoon that I felt I was being consistent again. I remember shivering on my way home and cursing a morning wasted. I fell asleep that evening cold. I went to work next day warmly dressed however, still the cold crept into me, and my fellow passengers still appeared more adequately dressed. That day my work on the project was a war; a slow, tedious war. I could barely read my own writing. Since that day I've thought about the project, but I've not been to work, nor have I looked at my papers, but in my apartment, more or less, I've been warm.

For over a week I've been writing letters to people I no longer really know. There are many of them, to be exact: 87. After the first day when I wrote to Matthew, whom I've not seen in over a year, I made a list and the number of acquaintances with whom I've shared various interests proved to be 87. I feel I should add that comparatively, I consider this figure large.

Now there are a number of personal considerations which I feel should be stated. I'm 38 and handsome. I've not married because the 2 women I loved and I, well, our relationships didn't last. These happened: when I was 19 until I was 21 with Elizabeth, and when I was 23 until I was 26 with Claudette. They were the only 2 women I was willing to marry and until now, I have not encountered a third. For the past 9 years I have been mainly interested in my work. I make a good wage, I'm very proud of my apartment, and I enjoy sports, concerts, dinners, and friends. I consider myself an aware dresser, however, I must say, in all this I do not consider myself overly decadent; that is, I'm decadent to the extent that I enjoy life. I strongly hold 2 common beliefs: that pleasure resides in honesty which in turn resides in, 'to thine own self be true', and that the success of this depends on the axiom, 'know thyself'.

Mr. McCullan called me 2 days ago. I stuttered quite a bit and became very embarrassed. I told him as sincerely as possible what I was doing and how I felt I had to do it. He tried to be understanding, but he didn't understand and thought I was having a breakdown. He asked if I were alone and I said I had seen my friend Susan. I believe we ended our conversation with him kindly waiting for me to recover. As it is, however, I'll need another 13 weeks before I'm finished. I'm writing approximately a letter a day, although today, or rather this evening, I'm writing this explanation.

My most interesting letter so far was written 5 days ago to my highschool acquaintance Martin. He was one of the few geniuses I've ever met. Several times he and I stayed up late after an evening of partying, or gatherings with girls, talking about life and love. I remember he once said that he always wanted to sculpt no matter what else he had to do. I heard that he received 100% in second year Latin at university, and that he went into biology, but that he wasn't that happy. But I've not heard any story about him in a long time. He used to play guitar very well. The last time I heard him play guitar, years ago, he played jazz. His fingers moved fast and he was almost into his music. What I said in my letter was that his genius demanded that he first be master of his sculpture and/or guitar, and that the problem with the time of our youth was that it demanded instant success. I said that the social climate of our youth wanted trite stardom stuff and wasn't willing to appreciate

the quality of consistent development, and that this resulted in artists who were more like hockey players. Martin, who was tall and skinny, used to, to my amazement, consistently hit homeruns.

Two days ago I wrote a fine letter to my sister. I haven't seen her in about 5 years. She lives in Vancouver. She's a social worker and owns a car and a house. I've always loved her and I told her so. She always sends me a lot for Christmas. She sends me puzzles and weird games which take hours to master. Twelve Christmases ago she sent me a three-piece cube which one takes apart and is supposed to put together again. On Christmas eve 12 years ago I took it apart and I've yet to get it back together. She hasn't married either and tends to drink, or she did. I told her that people shouldn't try to find peace, or associate peace with freedom, but that people should try to know themselves, that they should try to realize that Guy LaFleur is Guy LaFleur, that Eddie Shack is Eddie Shack, and that Wayning Merit is Wayning Merit, and that she should steer clear of sociological metaphors and the ideas of evil and justice if she wishes to remain sane in her work. I also told her that I often consider justice and that I was in a safer position to do so. My sister has a tendency to get hostile about things about which she can do nothing. I suppose it's the woman in her that makes her want things in a certain way when they don't come in that way at all.

Mr. McCullan came to see me today, that's what made me begin writing an explanation. He came this morning at 10 o'clock. I had been up all night writing a very difficult letter to my friend Janet, whom I knew 9 years ago as a very interesting woman. She certainly wasn't your average psychiatrist. Mr. McCullan eyed my bottle of scotch and, I'm afraid, drew an erroneous conclusion. He read part of my letter to Janet and stared at me even while we talked. We really didn't discuss much. I told him about the cold and he talked on about the weather. He said he was concerned and he seemed uncomfortable. I told him there was nothing that I could really do until I'd finished my letters. He said I had a month's leave coming to me and 2 weeks of sickpay. I said I was aware of this, but that from my estimations the time involved was longer. I also told him I sincerely felt that what I was doing was worthwhile. He did get upset at one point, around 12:35, saying I was being irresponsible and then, of course, that I needed help. I tried to calm him down as much as possible. I said I was prepared to finish the project as soon as I've finished my letters. He argued that this was unreasonable, I believe illogical was the word he used, and he threatened to fire me. I replied that I was not worried about finding alternate employment, that I would like to finish my project, but, in either case, that my letters came first. He departed rather

unhappily. I believe I'll need to seek new employment.

Tomorrow I'll write to Gordon. I worked with him in design 11 years ago. It was a very boring job. He had the opportunity to change to another job very similar to the

one he shared with me and he asked me for advice. I've always thought that situation strange, because the jobs were so similar, the pay was the same, that the only gamble was in the exchange of fellow workers and bosses.☆

SOMEBODY OWES ME MONEY*

BY PETER SELLERS

*apologies to Donald E. Westlake

The weather had turned cold suddenly. Overnight. It was well below the average for late October.

Alfie walked south along Yonge, rather slowly, his hands plunged deeply into the pockets of his heavy, green, canvas overcoat, and a look of touch-me-and-I'll-break-your-arm sullenness on his face. The condensation of his breath mixed with the smoke from the little cigar he held tightly in the right side of his mouth.

He was just passing the Parkside Tavern when a man came stumbling out of the door, moving as if he'd been pushed. He bumped into Alfie. "Watch it, asshole," the man said.

Alfie looked at him blankly. "What?"

The man stood up straight, in the middle of the

sidewalk, facing Alfie. "I said, watch it, asshole. Now apologize."

Alfie spat, hitting the cuff of the man's pants. Then he smiled.

The man fumed. "You fucking bastard. I oughta make you lick that off. Or maybe I'll just bust your back. How'd you like me to bust your back, asshole?"

Alfie tightened his gloved hand around the switch-blade in his coat pocket. "How'd you like me to cut your ears off?" he asked, the smile not flickering for an instant.

The other man didn't move. His eyes narrowed, and he looked wary. "Oh yeah, Bullshit, man. You couldn't do that with a chain saw."

Alfie's smile vanished. "Try me," he said.

They stared at each other for a short while. People passed them going both directions, some looked at them quizzically, but most just ignored them. It was not such an unusual sight. Finally, the other man dropped his eyes, turned and went back into the tavern, raging.

Alfie grinned and continued on his way.

There was something about the city at night that appealed to Alfie. He spent all of his free time downtown and was known in all the poolhalls and bars. He felt you could find the real people there; the ones who were cheats and crooks and liars and hustlers but who couldn't be bothered putting up a front to hide it, the ones who were what they were and didn't care. He was attracted by the strange, surreal, dreamlike quality of the city at night. The black, darkened sidestreets and littered back alleys, and the garish, loud, brightly lit strip. The drunks, the junkies, the hookers, the pimps, the hustlers, the lowlifes and the down-and-outs. There was a bizarre nightmarishness to it all. The great unnatural ugliness of the concrete, glass, and steel mountains, the flashing neon, the noise, the crowds, all held both a repulsion and a strong attraction for him. The attraction of evil he supposed. But whatever it was, it drew him like a moth to the flame.

The poolhall was crowded. Noisy and smoke-filled, men playing on all the tables, men lining the walls, standing in little knots, talking, laughing, making deals, bets. Money changed hands, the 'No gambling' signs studiously ignored, as were the 'No Profanity' signs. People called across the room to one another. And beneath it all was the constant soft clicking of billiard balls meeting. It was the heart, the nerve centre, of the city.

Alfie bopped in about seven-thirty. He navigated across the jammed room, avoiding touching any of the players with practised skill. He greeted people he knew with nods, waves, and shouted greetings. He joined a small group in the far corner, watching a couple of guys shooting nine-ball.

The shooters were good. One was an aging black dude who moved around the table like a cat and hardly seemed to take a second to line up a shot, but ran long strings with effortless grace. The other one was even better. He was young, only about twenty, and wore faded, patched blue jeans, and a dirty, grey sweat-shirt with the sleeves torn off at the shoulders. He had a knife tattooed high on his right arm. A cigarette butt dangled carelessly from his lips. He squinted as he played, bent low over the table, concentrating totally on what he was doing, the shot he was to make. And he was very good.

He ran a long string, then slammed the nine-ball into the corner pocket. He looked up at the black dude and grinned. "Twenty bucks, Sharkey."

The old black grinned too. "You ain't half bad for a

young fella," he said, handing over the money.

"And you ain't half bad for an old one," the young guy said, breaking down his cue stick and putting it back into its leather satchel.

Sharkey laughed out loud, and went away to search out an easier mark.

The young one then turned to Alfie. "Hey, Alf," he said.

"Hello, Bert. Not a bad game."

Bert shrugged. "Say, I got some news. Too noisy to tell you here. Step into the can."

There was a little, old man making book in the toilet. He looked up when Bert and Alfie came in. "Hello, boys," he said.

"Hey, Camel," Alfie said.

"Camel," Bert said. "Say, Hawley riding in the fifth?"

"Yeah," the old man nodded. They called him Camel because of his hunch-back.

Bert held out a fin. "Drop this on the nose for me. Thanks. Now, could you excuse us for a minute? We got business to discuss."

The Camel grinned. "Never let it be said that I stood in the way of true love."

"Get out." Bert raised a hand, feigning anger. Camel went out laughing.

Alfie sat on one of the toilets. "What's up, Bert?" he asked.

"It's about Farley," Bert said, suddenly serious.

"What about him?"

"You know that two C's he owes you?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"He ain't gonna pay you."

Alfie grinned broadly. "The hell you say. He is gonna show up here at eight-thirty, in half an hour, with my money. Count on it."

Bert shook his head. "Are you sure?"

"Hell, he's too scared of me not to show. And what the hell makes you think he won't?"

Bert shrugged. "I heard him talking to some shits in the Bermuda. Said he was damned if he was gonna pay you. Called you a son of a bitch. For openers."

"Did he? Well, we'll wait until eight-thirty and if he doesn't show I'll go find him and have a talk with him. Nobody owes me money and then doesn't pay. I'll take it out of his fucking hide if he welches. Let's go."

They left the toilet and moved back into the crowded pool room. The smoke hung like a curtain in the air. They went over to see some people they knew. Bert went to one side of the room, Alfie to another.

Three men leaned against the wall and looked a little bored. One was a massive man with shaggy black hair, and a large full beard. On his left was a smaller, slight man with

shoulder length light brown hair and a drooping Fu Manchu moustache. He had an earring in his right ear and fidgeted a lot. The third man was only slightly smaller than the huge, dark-haired one, and he wore a black scarf which covered the bottom of his face, below his nose.

His name was Silent Jim and he always wore the scarf to hide his mouth. It was a mess. He'd been shot in the mouth during an armed robbery and hadn't been able to speak since. He nodded to Alfie, as Alfie neared the three men.

Alfie raised a hand. "Howdy, Jim."

"Alfie," the big man said.

"Hello, Cole."

"Hi, Alfie," the small man said.

Alfie nodded. "Charlie Pitts."

Leaning on the wall beside them, Alfie watched the game they were watching. Two men were playing snooker, one of them dressed in a pin-striped three piece suit. He had removed the jacket and had the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up to just below his elbows. He was in trouble. The red ball he needed to hit, could not afford to miss, was stuck in behind the pink and the black. He was hooked tight.

His name was Rick and he was in his mid-twenties, and he stood back looking at the table thoughtfully, stroking the small beard he wore. He never said a word. He just studied the table. Then he leaned forward and smoothly stroked the cue ball. It moved silently, banked off three cushions, came up behind the black and pink balls, nudged away the red one, and left his opponent hooked just as badly as he himself had been.

Alfie laughed and nudged Silent Jim. "How 'bout that, Jimbo. A fucking Jerry The Bear shot. Ain't seen one of those since Jerry took that fall. Shit!"

Silent Jim's eyes laughed.

"Yeah," Cole said. "The kid's all right."

Alfie continued watching the play on the table for a while. At eight-thirty there was no sign of Farley. Looking around, Alfie caught Bert's eye. Bert pointed to the clock on the wall and Alfie nodded. Both men made their way to the door.

"What now?" Bert asked.

Alfie shrugged. "I guess we hunt up Farley and see what the hell happened." They left the pool room.

They headed for the Bermuda. It was Farley's home away from home. It, and the Warwick. He was sitting in the Bermuda when Bert and Alfie rolled in. They saw him first, and by the time he noticed them it was too late. Rising unsteadily to his feet he tried to make it out the back door, but Alfie and Bert each caught him by an elbow.

"Hello, Farley," Alfie said. "I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind. Why don't you step into my office?"

They hustled Farley across the crowded bar, towards the

stairs to the basement. At the top of the stairs a bounce stopped them. He was a massive curly haired giant. "I don't want no trouble."

Alfie shook his head. "No trouble, Pussycat. I'm just taking this guy down stairs to talk to him. Business, you know. But no trouble. You have my word."

Pussycat pointed a sausage finger at him. "Better be no trouble, Alfie. If there is I'll come down on you hard."

Alfie shook his head. "No trouble." They started down the stairs with Farley.

At the bottom, Alfie said, "I swear, that man has about as much smile as a turnip."

Bert grinned. "Haven't I heard that before somewhere?"

Alfie laughed. "Could be."

The basement of the bar was a maze of halls and doors. They dragged Farley along to the end of one corridor, opened a door, and pushed him into a very large broom closet. There was lots of room for what they had to do.

They entered, closing the door behind them. Bert threw a light switch and the room brightened. Farley was sitting on the floor, blinking, looking a little confused. A slightly drunk man who didn't seem to fully understand what was going on. Alfie knelt beside him. Bert leaned back against the door, his arms folded across his chest.

"Now, Farley," Alfie said, "you were supposed to have two hundred dollars for me at Rocky's at eight-thirty. It is now quarter to nine. Where's the money?"

Farley blinked again. He licked his lips nervously. "I don't have it."

Alfie grabbed him by the hair and jerked. Farley winced and let out a little yelp. "What do you mean?"

"I don't have it. I'm sorry, but . . ."

Alfie shook his head. "Sorry doesn't cut it, mother-fucker. Now you listen to me, because I'm gonna give you a break. Don't ask why, because I sure as hell don't know. I shouldn't, but I'm gonna. I'll give you one hour. You have two hundred bucks cash for me at Rocky's at quarter to ten, or else. Understand?"

"But I can't. It's not long. . ."

Alfie hit him on the nose with the heel of his hand. Blood flowed down Farley's face and he cried out. "Christ," he said. "You broke it. You broke my fucking nose."

Alfie stood up. "If you don't have my two C's at Rocky's at quarter to ten I'll do a hell of a lot worse. Count on it."

With that, he and Bert turned and left the room, leaving Farley sitting on the floor holding his nose, blood oozing out from between his fingers.

Pussycat was waiting at the top of the stairs. "Where's the other guy?" he asked.

"He had to take a crap," Alfie said, as they brushed

past.

When they got back onto the street, Bert asked, "What do we do until quarter to ten?"

Alfie shrugged. "I dunno. Grab a beer, shoot some pool. Whatever."

"Let's go grab a brew. But let's make it some place off the strip. Some place a little quiet."

"Oh, Bert," Alfie lisped, "you're not gonna propose to me are you, after all this time? I'd about given up hope." He laughed.

Bert laughed too. "No such luck, buddy. But it is something kind of important."

"Okay."

They went to a small place Alfie knew of that was never too crowded, but always had a respectable amount of business. They sat at a corner table, the juke box played some good, solid Stones rock, not too loud. They ordered a jug of draft from a cute, young waitress who Alfie knew.

When the first glasses were poured, Alfie held his up. "I give you the queen," he said.

"No thanks. You can keep him." They drank. "You know, Alfie, Farley ain't gonna have that money for you."

"Yeah. I kinda wish he would, though."

"I guess. And you probably shouldn't've threatened him. Or hit him."

Alfie nodded. "I got a little carried away. But that ain't what you wanted to talk about. What's on your mind?"

Bert sighed. "You and Madge."

Alfie ran a hand through his hair. "Ah, Bert. Ah, I thought you understood, you know. I really thought you understood. I mean as far as anybody can, because God knows I don't understand it all myself. I don't understand it at all. But I do know how I feel about her, and I'm not gonna change that. I can't change that. I don't want to. I know it's pretty stupid, and I know a lot of people would think the age difference is too great, some would think it's pretty disgusting, but, God, I can't help it. And if some people don't like it that's just too bad. Hell, it's only four years. But I can't help it.

"You know, sometimes, sometimes I wish it had never happened, that that night at your apartment had never happened, but other times, other times, God, I wouldn't trade it for anything. Sometimes I feel so good, so fucking good, and other times I feel so wrong and shitty. But it doesn't change a thing, Bert. It doesn't change a fucking thing. I love her, Bert. I love Madge and I thought that you were the one person who understood. And now you want me to change it and I can't. I can't. I love her, and that's all there is to say about it."

Bert shook his head, smiling a little. "You didn't let me finish, Alfie."

"I can tell by your face that I got it wrong. You weren't

gonna tell me to forget her, right?"

Bert nodded. "Oh, yeah. You got it so wrong. What I was gonna say was why don't you tell her what you just told me. Tell her you love her, for Christ's sake."

"What?"

"You heard me. Tell her."

Alfie shook his head and scratched it. "No," he said. "I couldn't do that."

"Bullshit. You write your God damn poems to her and about her and you don't even bother to change her fucking name. And all you talk about is how much you love her, and you tell that to everybody who reads the fucking poems, so why don't you tell her. Maybe that's all she's waiting to hear." He took a long swallow of beer.

Alfie still sat shaking his head. "No. How do I know how she'll take it? She may not like me at all. No, I don't want to risk it."

"Hell, you gotta risk something sometime."

"But nobody'd understand. Especially Susan."

"You don't know. She might. And besides, you just got through telling me you didn't give a shit about what people thought."

"Do you think she likes me, Bert? Maybe a little?"

"She slept with you didn't she?"

"Yeah, but we were both so drunk. I don't hardly remember it."

Bert shook his head. "I shouldn't tell you this, but Madge told my sister Sue how she feels, and Sue told me when she was a little bombed. You know how she is when she gets half lit. She'll do anything and tell you anything. And what Madge had to say sounded a hell of a lot like what you just told me."

Alfie looked dubious. "You wouldn't shit me, would you Bert?"

Bert grinned. "I wouldn't shit you, you're my favourite turd."

"Haven't I heard that somewhere before?"

"Could be."

Alfie grinned. "Well, you know Bert, old buddy, I've been thinking on it, and I've decided I oughta have a little talk with Madge. Just to clear the air a bit, you know."

Bert smiled. "I'll drink to that."

"You'll drink to anything, you thirsty son of a bitch."

They were back at Rocky's at nine-thirty. A skinny, ferret-like punk was waiting just outside the door when they got there. Alfie had seen him around from time to time, but didn't know his name.

"Hey," he said.

Bert looked at him. "You talking to us?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Farley wants to see you."

"What about?" Alfie asked.

He shrugged. "Let's go." He seemed impatient.

"What do you think Alfie? Wanna risk it?"

Alfie grinned. "What the hell. He probably just has my money for me. Let's go."

The punk led them to a small second floor Greek restaurant, a few blocks from the pool hall. Farley was sitting at a table with two other guys, both cheap street punks Alfie knew by sight. Farley was eating roast lamb and potatoes and had a bottle of red wine on that table. A serviette was tucked into his shirt. A white gauze bandage covered his nose.

"Where's my money, Farley?" Alfie asked, standing beside the table.

Farley laughed around a mouthful of lamb. "No money," he said. "You're not getting a cent, asshole. And there's no way you can collect."

"Well, now, you certainly are singing a different tune than you did sitting on the floor in that closet. You were crying, man. And get me now, you welch on me and your life is forfeit. Worthless. You are dead, Farley. Understand?"

Farley just laughed. "Get out of here. You're spoiling my appetite."

"Let's go, Alfie," Bert said.

They headed for the door. "You're in trouble, Farley," Alfie said from across the room.

"No. You are," Farley said, enigmatically, turning back to his meal.

On the street again, Alfie wondered what Farley had meant by that last remark. It worried him a little, because he had never trusted Farley very much, and, if it wasn't for the two hundred bucks, he wouldn't have had anything to do with him.

"Shit," Bert said.

"What is it?"

"I forgot completely. Sue's supposed to be at my place at ten. She wants to talk to me about something or other. Wouldn't even tell me what it was. God, she'll be shitting bricks. I better go. Fucking sisters."

"Sure thing, Bert. I'm gonna hang around here for a bit, but I might drop in later. See you."

"See you," Bert said. He took off at a trot.

Alfie headed in the opposite direction. He stopped in at a couple of pool halls, exchanged a few words with people he knew. Ones' met on the street. But he never talked long, or stayed anywhere too long. Farley's last comment weighed on his mind.

A little past ten-thirty he met Charlie Pitts.

"Hey, Charlie. What's shaking?"

"Hey, Alfie. Glad I found you. Been looking for you all

over. You are in trouble, my man."

"How so?"

"Get this. Farley has money out for your ass. He hired two guys to burn you."

Alfie was stunned. "What? Who and for how much?"

Charlie Pitts could hardly contain his laughter. "Fifty bucks."

Alfie almost laughed too. "You're kidding. I always knew he was a cheap bastard, but that's ridiculous. Who took it?"

Charlie Pitts became serious. "You never should've beat on Farley. He's crazy, man."

"Forget that. Who took it up?"

Charlie shrugged. "Two junkies. They just blew in from Montreal. No connections, no cash. Nobody else'd touch that fifty. They all know how many friends you got."

Alfie scratched his head. "What the hell am I gonna do?"

"That's what I come to tell you. Silent Jim and Cole are going after Farley. I think they're gonna plant him. And one of the junkies seems to have had a terrible accident."

"Oh yeah. What kind?"

"Well, he got hold of some horse. It killed him."

"Bad shit?"

"No, good. Too good. Ninety-eight percent pure skezag, and he took just a bit too much. Blew all his circuits."

Alfie nodded. "It's good to have friends. What about the other guy?"

"That's what I come to tell you. We can't find him. After his buddy O.D.'d he vanished. He could be anywhere, man, and he's probably still hot for that fifty bucks. Watch your step."

"Thanks, Charlie."

"No sweat, man. Take care." Charlie moved off down the street with the odd nervous, shifting gait he had.

Then Alfie saw something else. A man in a tattered, grey overcoat was leaning on a lamp post across the street looking right at him. Must be the guy, Alfie thought. He started walking.

The guy in the tattered coat followed him for blocks, making no effort to hide from Alfie. He didn't seem to care that his prey was on guard.

Alfie lost him at one point. In front of a market he looked around and couldn't see his tail. Frantically, he looked in all directions but didn't see the grey overcoat anywhere. He got that panicky feeling that comes when you know you're being watched, but can't see who's watching you. But then the overcoat came around a corner, just strolling, and Alfie breathed a sigh of relief. He set off again.

It was beginning to get foggy. A thick, choking fog that

made car and street lights useless and distorted sound out of all proportion. The fog worried Alfie. He knew that he had to do something about his problem quickly. He knew the man in the overcoat was going to kill him, and he knew the fog was perfect cover for a killing.

The man was following Alfie closer now. Not wanting to lose him in the fog. Abruptly, Alfie turned a corner and stepped into the mouth of an alley which appeared on his left. He didn't think the follower had seen him.

Alfie leaned against a wall just inside the mouth of the alley. He could not see very well at all through the fog, but he could hear the footsteps. The sound of them was distorted and he would not have been able to tell what direction they were coming from if he hadn't known.

Then, suddenly, they became clear and distinct. A dark figure appeared in the fog. "Hey," Alfie said.

The figure stopped, turned to look into the alley, and as it did so Alfie plunged his knife to the hilt into the man's stomach, just below the ribcage.

The man had been about to say something but his words were cut short by a gasp as the blade sunk in. With his left hand, Alfie grabbed the man's shoulder and pulled him further into the alley. He pulled the knife out and plunged it in again, and he could feel the warm blood spurt over his hand, under his shirt sleeve onto his forearm. He could hear the man gasping, moaning, choking, and he could feel the man's blood covered hands, first over his own, then on his chest trying to push away.

Alfie kept on, holding the man close, working the knife around in the stomach, twisting, cutting, digging, jabbing, gouging, tearing. He could feel the blood on his shirt, on his pants, soaking right through, running down his legs into his boots. And still he kept working.

The man's struggling became weaker. Alfie now had to hold his shoulder only to keep him from slumping to the ground. He looked up at the man's face then, for the first time, and saw his eyes, bulging, uncomprehending. A slight trickle of blood ran from each of his nostrils, and, as Alfie watched, he opened his mouth as if to say something but only a shower of blood poured out.

And then Alfie could smell excrement. He still slashed the knife savagely in the man's stomach, but then the struggling stopped altogether. Alfie withdrew the knife and he heard several soft plops, felt something fall on his foot, looked down and saw the man's intestines slowly slither out of the gaping cavity which had appeared in the man's belly. He let go of the man's shoulder, and the man slumped to the ground, and lay, inside out, among the dirt and the garbage.

Alfie looked at the body for a short while, then at the knife he still held in his reddened hand. Suddenly, a terrific sob wracked his body and tears ran down his face

uncontrollably. He felt repulsed, and longed to throw the knife away as far as he could and run. Anywhere. But he realized he could not throw the knife away. He must keep it, like an Albatross, forever.

He pulled a kleenex tissue from a pants pocket and closed the knife, then wrapped it in the tissue and placed it carefully in a coat pocket. He would clean it later.

He turned and looked at the body again and a spasm shook him. Turning his head, he vomited violently. Falling to his knees, he vomited among the over-turned, over-flowing garbage cans. For five minutes he threw up, until all he could do was heave drily, painfully. And even after he was finished he remained kneeling for a long time on the cold pavement, amongst the stench. Of blood, of guts, of garbage, of death.

He stood after several minutes and staggered out of the alley.

He didn't know, at first, where he was going. He just stumbled blindly through the maze of backstreets. Whenever he heard anyone coming his way he would duck into a doorway, an alley, or turn down another sidestreet. Fortunately, the fog was thick enough and it was dark enough out, that you'd have to be very close to him to see the blood. It was not until he was almost there that he realized he had been, almost totally unconsciously, moving steadily in the direction of Bert's place. The circuitous route he had been forced to take, as well as his many short stops to hide, had made it take a lot longer than it usually did, and half the time he had not even known exactly where he was, but when he reached Bert's apartment he realized there had been no other choice.

Alfie went around the side of the building and through the Tradesman's entrance and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Opening the door a crack he peered out from the stair-well and saw no one. He moved as quickly and as quietly as he could along the corridor and rapped three times, heavily, on Bert's door. His arm felt as if it were made of lead.

He had to lean against the door frame to support himself and he felt like he was going to throw up again.

When Bert opened the door, Alfie took two steps through into the apartment and fell to his knees, exhausted. He sat on his heels just inside the door.

Susan and Madge were there. "Oh my God," Susan said, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh my God."

Madge said nothing, she only stared in wide-eyed disbelief. She never talked much around Alfie, and that was one of the main reasons he thought she didn't like him.

"Holy shit," Bert said. He knelt beside Alfie. "What the hell happened to you?"

Alfie grabbed desperately at Bert's arm. "I killed him," he said in a frantic whisper. "I killed him, by God. With

my knife I cut him wide open and his guts were on the ground at my feet. And I held him close to me while he died and I kept my knife in his stomach. I could hear him breathing in my ear, moaning and gasping. Christ, it was like we were lovers."

"Who'd you kill, Alfie?" Bert asked. "Who was it? Did anybody see you? Holy Christ." He scratched his head. "What're we gonna do?"

Alfie shook his head. "I don't know, Bert. I don't think anybody saw me. I didn't see anyone and the fog is so fucking thick. But I don't know who the hell he was. I think he was a junkie, maybe. I don't know. I've never killed anybody before, Bert."

"I know Alfie. We can talk about it later, but now we gotta do something. Christ look at you. I guess we oughta clean you up first off."

Alfie looked down at himself in the light for the first time since the alley. His right hand was caked with dried blood, and his left was only slightly less covered. His shirt and pants were stiff with it. His coat was darkly stained, as were his boots, and the right sleeve of his shirt was stuck to his forearm as if by glue. No wonder the girls had looked so shocked.

He looked over at them again and both were looking at him a little sadly, Madge a little bit concerned. He managed a weak smile. "Hello, girls," he said. "Sorry about this."

They both smiled back. Susan ran a hand through his shoulder length dark hair. "That's okay," she said.

Madge still said nothing.

Bert was busy pulling some clothes out of his chest of drawers. "Have a shower first, and then you can put on these," he said, holding out a pair of jeans and a white tee-shirt. "They'll be a bit big but they'll do for now. We'll have to burn yours, I guess."

"Thanks, buddy. I don't know what the hell I'd do without you." Alfie got slowly to his feet and took the clothes from Bert.

Bert grinned. "You'd probably get in a lot of trouble."

Alfie grinned back and went slowly into the bathroom.

Alfie came out of the bathroom with a towel around his neck. He felt much better for the shower, having the blood washed off his hands. Bert's jeans were too big for him, but he pulled them tight with his belt, and he held the tee-shirt in his hand. Madge was the only one left in the apartment.

"Hello," Alfie said. "Where'd everybody go?"

Madge, standing by the window, shrugged. "They went out for a bit."

"Where to?"

She just shrugged again.

"Oh, I see," Alfie nodded. "Who's idea was it for you to stay? Bert's?"

Madge looked at the floor. "Partly. Partly mine, too."

"Uh huh." There was a long silence and they both stopped at opposite ends of the room, not moving. Madge looked at the floor, and Alfie looked at Madge. At her short, blonde hair, at her downcast green eyes, at her nose with the slight bump on the end he found oddly attractive. She looked up and saw him watching her and he smiled and she did too, a little.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why'd you do it? Why'd you kill somebody?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's a long story, and I really don't understand myself. I'll tell you all about it sometime."

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

Alfie shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"You could go to the police," she suggested.

Alfie looked disgusted. "Don't be stupid. I killed a man tonight, for shit's sake. Don't you understand that? I murdered him in cold blood. That's twenty years at least, if they catch me. There were no witnesses, and probably no substantial clues, so I sure as hell am not going to the cops. Understand?"

She was staring at the floor, looking hurt. She nodded.

Alfie sighed. "Hey, I'm sorry, Madge. I shouldn't have said that. I guess I'm not feeling a hundred percent tonight."

"It's okay. It was a dumb suggestion."

Alfie smiled. "No comment." He paused briefly, then said, "Madge. . ."

"Yes?"

"There was something I wanted to say. I mean, Bert and I talked about something earlier, and he was saying, uh, oh God. . ."

"What is it, Alfie?"

He turned from her and leaned against the wall on his outstretched arms. Looking down at the floor, he said, "It's really nothing important. I never should've brought it up."

"I see." She took a couple of involuntary steps towards him, but checked herself when she realized it. She did not move back though. "Maybe you should tell me anyway. You ought to do that. Maybe you even need to do that."

Alfie shook his head. "No. I don't need that. I wish people would stop trying to tell me what I need."

"Don't you need anything, Alfie?" she asked, a little sadly.

"Hell, no." He pounded a fist on the wall and turned to face her. "I'm a fucking rock. An island," he said,

pounding on his bare chest. "I don't need nothing." And he looked into her eyes and saw something he had not noticed before, a gentleness, a quiet pleading. He looked at her and felt fondness and desperation. "Except you," he said softly. "I need you Madge. I'm scared and I don't want to be alone. Please don't let me be alone." He could feel the tears coming again, and his composure slipping.

Suddenly, she was holding him in her arms, and he clung to her like a child, crying into her soft, thick hair.

"It's all right," she said. "It's all right."

"I love you, Madge," he said. "I love you so much, too much. Don't ever leave me alone."

She held him tighter. ☆

Macaronia, Moussaka and Baklava and a little bit of Retsina too

BY SOPHIA HADZIPETROS

Afterwards, the whole affair seemed like a scene right out of Zorba; the matriarch was dying while the family gathered to wait and watch. At 90 years old, or as she claimed 88, her rule was about to pass to her nephew who was not at all unprepared or lacking in eagerness at the prospect. He had in fact been practising years just for this moment — but that's another story.

We found out about my grandmother's condition while watching the show in my uncle's strip joint, which by the way, is a fancy steak house during the day. On Saturday

nights the place is packed with the regulars and this night was no exception. There were the usual civil servants, who for some reason always carry briefcases, the older upper class businessman on his regular drunk in an obscure place, and the three or four old tarts who have definitely seen better days. There was a birthday cake being brought out for one of the girls, and while the 'gang' sang Happy Birthday, I noticed a Havana cigar followed by my uncle making it's way towards our table.

On reaching us he asked me for the umpteenth time in

two years where I was working now. To my usual reply of Time Magazine, Uncle Nicky said, "Oh, weren't you working there last year? What is that anyway, Time or Reader's Digest? Can you get me a free subscription?"

"Yes. Time. No."

"Well, what's the cheapest?"

"About seven dollars a year."

"Okay, put me down for one. I'm going home now, your grandmother's sick. We're going to try to see if we can get her to the hospital."

Michael, my brother, asked what was wrong, but Uncle Nick was rather vague and said he'd let us know. After he left, Michael and I discussed my grandmother and decided it was probably just another false alarm for she had been telling us the end was near for the past 20 years. We had long before decided that she was immortal. Thinking no more of it, we sat back to watch the stripper delight the audience with her massive belly jingles.

The following day, Sunday, is usually my day to sleep in. But I'd recently moved to an apartment building in the heart of Greek Town and everyone, except for the devil worshippers who hold midnight masses across the hall, gets up at the crack of dawn. Downstairs, Maria's mother begins preparing her Sunday dinner at 6:00 a.m. (it's always chicken, something which she seems unable to cook unless she's screaming at somebody). At 7:00 the 50's freak gets up to play a bongo accompaniment to Chuck Berry while the girl next door tries to drown him out with her classical records. And, of course, one must not forget the screams of children joyously killing each other in the street below while dodging those dashing Greeks dragging their red convertibles (the ones with the horns that play Never On Sunday). Needless to say, I was already awake when the phone rang at 9:00.

It was my sister calling to tell me that my grandmother was dying. I was to get Michael and his wife from their apartment two blocks away, and go down to the hospital to receive my grandmother's last blessing. When we got there, Uncle Nick, his cigar, and his family were there along with Aunt Helen who was visiting from Greece with her youngest daughter, Dina. My father was preoccupied in a corner while my mother tried to pacify my younger brother who was complaining about being up so early. Suddenly my father started yelling at my uncle.

"This whole thing is your fault, you're supposed to watch Mother. What's the matter with you!" They had been at the hospital all night and were in no condition to discuss things rationally. Aunt Helen was trying to mediate while her daughter was busy running down the hall trying to catch the eye of the young intern attending my grandmother. My uncle's four year old son decided, much to the chagrin of his mother, to have a cigarette while we

waited. She protested that four was a little young to start smoking but he was determined to finish it.

At this point I cornered my mother and asked her how they had ever managed to get my grandmother to agree to enter a hospital. Ever since my grandfather passed away at the ripe old age of 88, fifteen years earlier, the granddame has been convinced that all doctors (except Greek ones) take great pleasure in murdering their patients. All hospitals are in on the conspiracy to kill older people by jabbing them with needles and sticking tubes in them. Uncle Nick, eager to escape my father, rushed over and told me he had convinced her they were only bringing her in for X-rays. When she was finally brought in at 4:00 a.m. and found out about the lie, my grandmother was to say the least, furious. The woman had been hemorrhaging internally for eight hours, but as far as she was concerned people don't die from that, and they don't need doctors putting tubes down them to clear their passages. The fact that the doctor wanted to start pumping her stomach out did not go down too well with my grandmother. She kicked and screamed so much, that it took 2 doctors, 4 nurses and 2 coffee breaks in between to get the tubes down her esophagus. Even then, they only succeeded when, unable to fight sleep off any longer, my grandmother slipped off into dreamland. Shortly afterwards, though, the lady awoke, and realizing the conspiracy was finally overtaking her, she promptly pulled all the tubes out. She was starting on the I.V. when the doctor caught her and, after much trouble he finally got the equipment hooked up again. Then the doctors, along with the nurses, my father and uncle, all took a rest.

After we had been there for a while, my uncle and his wife went with my parents to look in on my grandmother. They came out after a few minutes to tell us she'd finally fallen asleep soundly. Uncle Nicky asked if we would mind sticking around for a while so that they could all go home to take a little nap. My aunt and her daughter, who by this time had caught up with the doctor and was eagerly asking about my grandmother's condition, were going to stay behind with us. Dina was leaving for Greece that night (if she could tear herself away from the doctor) and Aunt Helen felt it would be best for them to stick around just in case my grandmother were to die suddenly. Just before Uncle Nick left, he turned to his sister and told her to make sure Dina got a jar of his pickles to take back to Greece with her. My aunt did not feel this was a good idea and said, "what are you crazy? She's going to carry a gallon of pickles on the plane with her!?"

"But, they're my homemade pickles, the girls will love them."

"Nicky, you get on the plane and take a gallon of homemade pickles to Greece with you!!" Defeated, my

uncle left.

While we sat waiting for the nurse to come and tell us when it was all right to go in, my aunt reminisced about her mother (“She may not have been the nicest woman in the world, but she was my mother.”) My sister sat writing letters, my older brother noticed a spot on the floor that strangely resembled the plan of an archeological site he was studying at school, and my younger brother, still fuming, ate a bag of potato chips. The nurse finally came and said only two at a time. My sister and I went first.

We walked down the corridor to the Intensive Care Unit, put on white smocks and went in. When I first saw my grandmother, I was shocked. She seemed to have shrunk overnight, and, I guess I’d never really seen her as an old woman before because suddenly every line and wrinkle on her face was more pronounced than ever before. It was as if she was no longer the matriarch, instead she was just a helpless old woman, sleeping — like seeing age for the first time. The nurse came over and told us we’d better go and let the next two in. When everyone had been to see her, we went down to the cafeteria for a coffee and found Dina still talking to the doctor.

An hour later, my sister and I went back up to the I.C.U. to see if my grandmother was awake yet. When we got there, we rang the bell and went in. There were doctors and nurses rushing about everywhere this time. The place was chaotic. I tried to stop someone to inquire about my grandmother, but one after another they said, “Ask her”; “Ask him”, or, “I don’t know I’m just a consultant.” Finally, one said to just go in. We put on the white smocks but as we reached the door, we stopped. An accident case had just been brought in and the staff was rushing around trying to patch her up. We decided to leave and come back later. My grandmother was fast asleep anyways.

We waited a couple of hours before returning. The accident case was gone and things seemed calm again. A nurse came when I rang the bell and after telling her who we wanted to see, she quickly asked, “Do you speak Greek?”

“Yes,” I replied, rather surprised.

“Thank God!” she exclaimed throwing a white smock at me as she pulled me inside and over to where my grandmother lay screaming, “Get me out of here, take these things away, call my son. . .” The nurse told me she had been asking for something for the past while but no one could understand her. When I translated my grandmother’s request, the nurse said, “Oh,” and went to sit down.

I tried talking to my grandmother, telling her it was me, but she didn’t seem to understand. Then I realized that the white smock I was wearing made her think I was a doctor. Then my brother and sister-in-law came in and after much

explanation she finally recognized them. “Call your father to come and get me,” she told Michael. He told her not to worry, everything was going to be okay; then he pointed me out and told her who I was. She very warily turned to me and said “Sophia, is that you? Sophia?”

“Yes, Grandma, it’s me. It’s Sophia.”

Suddenly, with the strength of a lion, she grabbed onto my arm, hoisted herself up till we were almost eye level and said, “Mother of Jesus, I came here for X-rays and look what they’ve done to me!!! They’ve stuck these things in me, haven’t fed me since I’ve been here, and they’ve hidden my clothes!”

How do you explain to a woman who, after spending most of her life in Canada, still lives in the village (in her mind, of course) that she was being fed intravenously? I tried explaining what each tube was, but she didn’t understand. I tried telling her the I.V. was a food substitute. At that she eyed me suspiciously — probably deciding that I was in on the conspiracy too. Not knowing how to explain what glucose was, I leaned over and told her, “Look, in there is macaronia, moussaka and baklava.”

“Eh?!”

“Macaronia, moussaka, and baklava.”

Giving me a long, hard look she said, “And I suppose there’s a flask of Retsina in there, too!” She turned her back to me and started eyeing my sister-in-law (who, by the way, joined the family just two months earlier as the first non-Greek in that particular branch of the clan) and said in her most broken English, “No baby yet?” She then poked Lori’s stomach and said “No too bad. No too much meat, but no too bad.”

Then the doctor came in, followed by my cousin who was followed by her mother, who was in turn followed by my uncle carrying what looked like a jar of pickles, and coming after this little entourage was my father, muttering to himself. The doctor came to my grandmother and said “How are you?”

“No too bad, you?”

Laughing the doctor sent all of us out while he prepared to examine the lady, telling us that things were looking better. We all went to our respective corners of the waiting room and waited. Shortly afterwards, the doctor came to tell us the danger had passed and my grandmother would probably be released after a few days of testing. We were told to leave as they were going to put her in a room and she needed rest, which I thought was rather ironic since everyone else seemed to be more in need of it than my grandmother.

There was nothing else for us to do but go home and prepare for my grandmother’s next attack.☆

THE WHITE CADILLAC

BY ROB SHOWELL

A rush of cold air entered Bud's Open Kitchen with the young man, causing heads to turn up from their meals. Immediately in front of him, behind the counter, a waitress looked up and then back down at the order pad in her hands. She wore a black uniform of clinging, satiny material that almost shimmered when the light hit it at different angles. She was by no means beautiful but the shimmering uniform in addition to an ample figure presented the young man with a sight that he found hard to avert his eyes from. After a few seconds the waitress became conscious of his gaze and looked up at him again.

"Do you want to shut the door please?" she said, "it's cold out there." The young man snapped from his daydreaming and, eyes still on the girl, turned around to close the door. He moved too quickly on the accumulated slush inside the door and fell against it, closing it with a crash. From his position on the floor he saw the waitress roll her eyes at one of the men she was serving and say something about, ". . . two left feet . . . walking and thinking at the same time." The two men at the counter turned around on their swivel stools and grinned at the young man on the floor.

"Christ son, she said close it not kill it," said one of them and they both laughed. The young man picked himself up off the floor and made his way to the first booth by the window. He pulled the menu from its holder behind the ketchup, opened it, and took refuge behind its large leaves. The other customers in the room went back to their eating and the waitress went through the swinging door into the kitchen.

At the counter the two men, in green parkas and construction boots, were involved in a mild argument. One of them shovelled a large piece of pie into his mouth and then waved the empty fork under his friend's nose. "Too damn late, they left it too damn late again. How do they expect us to get these roads finished on time when they schedule them so late in the year. Some asshole somewhere in a heated, air-conditioned office decides it's got to be done . . . Doesn't know how friggin' cold it's getting."

"What, you think they plan it like this? If it hadn't been for all that rain we got back in September we'd be done by now." The second man finished his cup of coffee and asked the man behind the cash register, presumably Bud, for a refill. Bud came over, poured more coffee, and then he sat down with the men.

"Yeah, but they know it's going to rain just like they know it's going to snow . . . Hell what am I complaining for, they're just going to lay us off when this job's done anyway." They both nodded in agreement. All this time they had been staring at the swinging door to the kitchen; as if cued by the lull in conversation, the door swung open, propelled by the waitress' backside. Their vigil obviously rewarded, one of the men nudged the other. "Shit what I wouldn't give to be that door," he said, loud enough for the waitress to hear.

"If you tipped better, you might get a chance." she said with a sweet smile and headed toward the back of the restaurant with plates for a family of four. The young man came out from behind his menu and followed the swinging hips to the back of the room. He continued to watch her as she leaned and stretched over the table, handing out the

plates. She walked back toward the counter and the young man tried to catch her eye with a smile. She just looked at him queerly. "Are you ready to order?" she asked but didn't wait for a reply as she picked up a bottle of ketchup and headed back to the family of four. The young man picked up the menu again and hurried to get his order together before she came back again. He folded the menu and looked up but the waitress again walked by him and into the kitchen.

"Could I have a cup of coffee while I'm waiting?" he said to Bud who was still talking to the two men at the counter. Bud poured the coffee and, still talking over his shoulder, brought it over to the booth. The young man opened the menu again to order from Bud but Bud barely looked at the table as he set down the cup and saucer. He returned behind the counter. The young man resignedly took out and lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke into the coffee cup as he brought it to his lips.

He reached over and wiped the condensation from a patch of the window and looked out into the parking lot. He continued to smoke, watch and drink his coffee as a group of boys in their early teens emerged from a smoke shop on the other side of the plaza. They picked up snow-balls and split roughly into two sides for a battle. One group took refuge between the parked cars and the storefronts, the others between the parked cars and the roadway. The first snowball was hurled from the storefronts and landed with a loud "whump" on the roof of an immaculate white cadillac.

"Damn kids," muttered the young man and moved to slide out of the booth. Turning his head he came face to face with the waitress' order pad. She was standing next to the booth watching the snowball fight.

"Hey watch it!" she cried, backing away.

"I'm sorry. I was just going to check my car windows. They'll make a mess of the inside if they land one in there." He sat back in the booth.

"Is that your car? You look pretty young for something like that. How old are you anyway?"

The young man followed her gaze to the cadillac.

"Yeah . . . that's my car . . . do I have to be eighteen to get breakfast in this place?"

"No of course not . . . I'm sorry . . . Would you like to order now?"

"Yeah, if it wouldn't be too much trouble," the young man said in a belligerent tone but flashed a quick smile at the girl.

"Do you like the car?"

"Of course . . . I mean who wouldn't?"

The young man nodded and smiled as he once more took up his menu and studied it. "I'll have the steak and eggs, scrambled, home fries, toast and more coffee."

"Sure, but don't have the steak, the breakfast Steak Bud serves is really lousy," she smiled and looked around at Bud who was still in conversation with the road workers. "Have the ham steak, its pretty good."

"OK, the ham steak then . . . thanks."

"That's OK," she smiled again, turned and walked to the swinging door.

Her blonde hair bounced a little more as she walked away and through the swinging door.

The young man turned and looked out the window again. The snowball fight had worked its way down the street. A few cars pulled in and out of the lot but mainly it was quiet. It was too early yet for the Saturday morning rush of family shoppers.

One of the road workers drained his cup as he stood up from the counter. "Time to go, Joe," he said and slapped his friend on the back.

"Right, right," said the other and fished a large black wallet on a gold chain out of his back pocket. They argued momentarily about who was going to pay the bill. They finally settled up and were about to leave when Bud suddenly got up and called to them.

"Just a second boys. Things are pretty slow, I'll catch a ride with you up to Jim's. "He pulled on his coat and stuck his head into the kitchen. "Joan, it's almost ten o'clock. I'm going up for a haircut . . . shouldn't be more than an hour." The three men trooped out with a blast of cold from the door and the young man watched them cross to a pickup and drive away.

After a minute or so Joan came out of the kitchen and brought a place mat and cutlery to the booth. The young man had to lean back in his seat as she brushed against him, laying his place. "Do you want more coffee now?" she asked as she straightened up.

"Yeah that would be good . . . do you have any matches?"

"Coming right up." She went behind the counter to the coffee pot. "You don't live around here do you?", she asked as she poured the coffee.

"Nope, I'm just here for the day then I'm going on to Toronto tonight."

Joan brought back the cup of coffee and set a pack of matches down beside it. The young man took them and lit another cigarette while she stood next to the booth and looked out the window. There was a "ding" from the kitchen and she went back through the door. She emerged rump first again balancing plates in her arms. She set the plate of ham and eggs in front of him, the toast at the side and then returned behind the counter to pour a glass of juice and another cup of coffee. She said as she came back and set the glass in front of him. "I've got a coffee break . . . mind if I sit down with you?"

The young man looked up at her and then back down at the load of eggs on his fork. "No, go ahead if you want to."

Joan sat down quickly and drew her coffee in front of her. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from a pocket in the front of her uniform but put them to the side without lighting one. The young man put a forkful of eggs followed by a bite of toast into his mouth and then looked up to find Joan staring at him.

"Look, you can sit down if you want to, smoke a cigarette if you want to, but don't just sit there and watch me eat, OK?"

"Sorry," said Joan and quickly turned her head to look out the window. She lit a cigarette but was careful to blow the smoke away from the table and on to the window. "That sure is a nice car," said Joan, "how long have you had it?"

"Not long, my father gave it to me for my birthday a couple of months ago." He continued to eat and she to smoke, making a point of not watching him. The family in the back of the room finished their meal and Joan got up to give them their bill and clear away the dishes. The restaurant had become empty as breakfasters finished, left, but were not replaced. Occasionally the sounds of pots being washed could be heard from the kitchen. While the young man finished his breakfast Joan busied herself by removing the single sheet of the breakfast menu from the large folders at each table. She inserted the lunch specials for that day.

"My name is Joan Donaldson," she said as she sat back down at the young man's booth.

"Yeah, I know, not about the Donaldson part but I heard Bud, that was Bud wasn't it, call to you in the kitchen."

"Yeah, Bud's my uncle. I started working for him last year when I got out of school," answered Joan but saw that the young man was not paying any attention to her. He was peering out the window at the white cadillac and a man in a white sheepskin coat who was obviously watching the car. "I said yes," she continued, "he's my uncle, my mother's brother."

"Oh sorry, I was just watching that guy out there," he said, "there's a lot of tapes and an expensive tape deck in the car."

"Why don't you go out and make sure it's locked. Nothing's going to get stolen around here anyway."

"Yeah, you're right. I've been living in the big city too long, lost all my faith in human nature." The young man had, since telling her not to stare at him, been talking to the side of her face as she made a concerted effort not to watch him while he ate. "You can look at me if you want you know, I just meant don't stare." She turned from the

window and smiled at him.

"What's your name. I don't like talking to people unless I know their names."

The young man mopped up the last of his egg yolk with the last of his toast, chewed and swallowed it before answering. "Lawrence, Lawrence Scott, everybody calls me Larry though."

"Oh no I like Lawrence much better, it goes with the car. What are you doing in town, if you don't mind me asking?"

"No, I don't mind. Do you mind if I ask for more coffee first?"

"Sure, coming right up," said Joan but as she rose from the booth Lawrence held her hand down against the table.

"You don't have to get them, let me." Lawrence took her cup and his own and went behind the counter to the coffee pot. Joan was flustered by this at first but by the time Lawrence returned with the coffees she was smiling at him.

"Thanks", she said, "That's the first time I've ever been served by a customer in this place. Its a good thing Bud wasn't here. He would kill me for letting you behind the counter."

"Well, I don't think I would have done it if Bud was around. May I?," he motioned to Joan's cigarette pack and took out two cigarettes. He lit them both and handed one to Joan. Lawrence inhaled deeply and then French inhaled the smoke as it came out. Joan watched closely as if she were seeing it done for the first time.

"Well, what are you doing in town then," asked Joan as she took the first drag from her own cigarette.

"Oh yeah, sorry, I'm doing some work for my father. His company is building that stretch of highway on the 401 about ten miles south of here. They're having some trouble meeting the deadline so I just came down to see what the hold-up was. Dad was busy and couldn't get away. I'd much rather spend New Year in Toronto any way."

"Came down? Came down from where?"

"Montreal, Ste. Anne de Bellevue actually, about twenty miles this side of Montreal. That's where my parents live."

"You don't live with your parents?"

"No. I don't live much of any place right now. I spent high school at Upper Canada College in Toronto as a boarder and then from there I went straight to Queen's in Kingston for three years. I finished there last spring and I've just been travelling around, seeing friends for the last six months. That's why I'd rather go to TO for New Year's Eve. I've got a lot of friends there."

Joan just stared at him, not saying anything and then they both turned to watch as the cook came through the

kitchen door and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"When's Bud coming back?" the cook asked holding the cup and saucer in one hand and the swinging door in the other.

"Don't worry, not for half an hour at least," answered Joan. The cook shrugged his shoulders and went back into the kitchen. She turned back to Lawrence who was intently watching a man out in the parking lot. The man seemed to be admiring the car but did not have any other obvious business in the lot.

"He's probably wondering how you keep it so clean," said Joan.

"Just as long as he isn't wondering how long it will take to get the tape deck out," said Lawrence as he slid out of the booth. Just then a woman and small child came out of the variety store, the man joined them and they walked off across the road.

"Never mind, he's going anyway," said Joan, "boy are you ever suspicious." Lawrence returned to the booth and slid back in.

"Well I sure wouldn't want the car stolen and have to spend New Year's Eve in this little burg. What do you do here to celebrate New Year's anyway?"

"Same thing I've done for the last five years. A bunch of us will buy some beer and go out to this spot in the woods where we have barbeques in the summer. We take out some bales of hay to sit on and have a campfire, sing songs, tell stories about things that have happened other years . . . it's really pretty boring I guess. You'd think so anyway."

"Why would I think so?"

"Oh you know, you've gone to private schools and university and you're going to Toronto for New Year's. That all sounds a lot more exciting than sitting around a campfire on a bale of hay."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I like big, wild parties and staying up all night and everything else that goes along with New Year's." Lawrence looked down at his plate and flicked the ashes from his cigarette. He hadn't been using the ashtray and his plate was now a sticky mess of ashes, butts and congealed egg yolk. He stabbed another butt into the yellow and it sizzled briefly.

"Well there's nothing wrong with having a good time. It all sounds pretty good to me. I've been to Toronto quite a few times for concerts and things, New Year's is probably a great time."

"If you had the choice what kind of New Year would you want to have, mine or yours?"

"That's pretty hard to say," said Joan, looking out the window, "I've lived around here all my life. I've never really been to what you could call a big, fancy party. Going out to the campsite I know what to expect, it's a nice time. On the other hand big parties and lots of people is the way

you're supposed to celebrate New Year's, isn't it?"

Joan looked back at Lawrence from the window to find him staring directly at her. "Why don't you come with me and see what New Year's is like in the big city?" He continued to look straight into her eyes until she turned again to look out the window. She said nothing so Lawrence continued. "I've already reserved a hotel room and then there are a few really good parties that I've been invited to. One of them is a pool party, do you have a bathing suit?"

"What do you think I am, a polar bear? It's winter out there or hadn't you noticed?"

"Don't worry, it's an indoor pool. It belongs to the father of a friend of mine from Upper Canada. His parents have gone south for the holidays so he's throwing a party."

"An indoor pool? In a house? I've never seen one of those, let alone swam in one. It sounds great but. . . ." She lit a cigarette and turned back to look out the window.

"But what? Do you still live with your parents?"

"Oh no, that's not it. I live upstairs from here in a small apartment. My parents live about forty miles north of here on the farm."

"Well then what? A boyfriend? You don't have a wedding ring so I guessed you weren't married. If you are tell me if he's bigger than I am and I'll get the hell out of here," Joan laughed at this and looked directly at Lawrence.

"No I'm not married, I've never even come close to that. The truth is, and I hate to sound old-fashioned, but I hardly know you."

"Well this is the only way you're ever going to get to know me if you'd like to. I don't expect to be back this way for quite a while. There's double beds in the hotel room if that's what you're worried about. You don't have to sleep with me if you don't want to. Any other objections?"

"I have to be back for work by noon on Friday, would you be going back by then?"

"Sure, whenever you want to get back, no problem. I've got to get going now though, what do I owe you for the meal?"

"Ah, let's see," said Joan, looking at his plate as if she were trying to remember what he had eaten. "That's three dollars and yes I'll go to Toronto with you for New Year's, what time will you pick me up, I don't get off work until four."

"OK then, I'll be back for you about five. That way we'll get into Toronto after rush hour. I hate driving in rush hour." He handed her a five dollar bill and picked up his coat from the seat of the booth.

Joan went to the cash register and rang up the bill. She was half way back to the booth when Lawrence said, "You

can keep the change.”

She looked at the two dollar bill in her hand and then quickly stuffed it into the pocket of her uniform. She continued to the booth and picked up the plates, transferring them to the counter. As Lawrence put on his coat, hat and gloves Joan sat on one of the stools at the counter and watched him. “I’m sorry that I laughed at you before but you did look pretty funny, lying there.” Lawrence didn’t say anything but lit another cigarette

before pulling on his last glove. Joan continued, “You wouldn’t forget would you, I’m going to phone my other friends and cancel so I’m counting on you.”

Lawrence smiled at her. “Good, I won’t forget you’re counting on me. I’ll see you.” With that he walked to the door, stepped out and shut it quickly against the blast of cold. He crossed the parking lot to the white cadillac, then went past it to a small, blue Toyota two cars down. He got in, revved it up quickly and drove out of the lot.☆

MORNING AT A SUMMER HOUSE NOW BURNT DOWN

BY DAVID MacFARLANE

It was sad, she thought, that anger could last so long and find its way into so much. Time had passed; it seemed to her that a great deal of time had passed. Time was evidenced in the very fact of the carpeted, tastefully appointed gallery. It was illustrated hanging on the walls. She was surrounded by his time spent, by his ambition, by some twenty of his paintings. Addresses, he used to call them, to reality. She wondered if he still did.

And she was surprised at his work. She had been surprised by all the walls, brightly windowed with his framed views of colour, but the painting that occupied her, hanging central to the second small room, and that once she had seen she had not been able to abandon, impressed her with what must have been the emptiness of those years. She guessed that there had been no lovers and in so doing felt prodded by resentment. Apparently he had simply been

lonely. And that loneliness, she decided, had addressed itself not to any greatness of vision but to illuminations, crafted though they were, of the very opposite. His bite had proven to be small. Or perhaps — and her thoughts fell away from her — it was she who had never understood and was even now, here in the fashionable gallery of his first important show, five years after and in the afternoon of a sunny Friday in September, missing the point, again doubtless; again underestimating his intentions.

Looking, she remembered that they were lying just above the sandy hill that rose from the lake, at the edge of the long front of grass he had taken the whole cloudless morning to cut. The day was becoming hot — the cicadas had started their buzzing an hour before — and now it seemed almost shadeless. They were drowsy in the noon. Behind, across the mowed grass, the old summer house presided with its room after room of hardwood floors, flowered chesterfields, shadowy armchairs, dark wooden tables and quilted featherbeds. Its outside white frame walls were peeling, its swaybacked and dark screened veranda was scattered with rattan and old magazines. Its brick chimney, so comfortably, solidly square in the shingled green roof, was as old as three generations of summers of badminton and swims at the cribs in the weedy lake. She thought of the fireplace and thought of rainy days of scrabble and cold afternoons spent wrapped in the afghan with a mystery pulled from among the familiar titles of the bookcase behind the musty sofa. She had collected those summers like the golden charms of a bracelet. And it waited, that friendly old place, with provisions on the wax-papered shelves of its pantry, with his oils and brushes and the bowl of russet apples in the wood panelled kitchen, with her aunt no doubt somewhere in the cellar intent on the plumbing or the laundry or whatever the chore she had set for herself that day.

She remembered that his brown eyes, wide and never given to glances, had rested long in hers. His hand had moved softly on the sunned skin of her thigh, slowly in a warmth of traces and retraces until he had raised his head, raising himself with his arms straight to the grass at either side of her shoulders. His arms were clearly veined and, although thin, were tanned and lined with some strength. He had stared at the cedared shore across the narrow sparkling inlet, his neck taut with the arch in his back, his lean chest brought forward. She could smell his sweat. His hair, almost black but that the sun had unearthed its colour, curled long to his shoulders. His cheekbones were drawn with shadow. She had taken him in as he had taken in his view and then, leaning upwards, she had kissed his neck and brought him down again, resting his head beside hers on the grass. His arm lay across her breasts.

“Do you know what you’re like?” he asked. His voice

did not seem outside her ear. She moved her head against the grass; her eyes held appeared small clouds. He spoke self-consciously. “You’re like the reflection of trees in the lake. I row towards it. It’s dark and still and seems to lie across the water. And I never reach it. The boat never comes into it. And at the shore the reflection’s gone.”

At lunchtime they ate tuna-fish sandwiches and drank white wine on the veranda. Her aunt, thinking them far too young, had looked askance at the bottle but said nothing. He had spoken, she remembered, of Cézanne. A writer once said something about the appleness of Cézanne’s apples —

He said that afternoon that the light in the kitchen was perfect. He sat on the high stool, his blue-jeaned legs crooked under him, his easel established. A white china bowl, tumble full of apples and with one freed perfectly of the bowl and poised on the planked oak table, sat before him and in the sun from the window behind. Their roundness played with the line of the wood and the shafted light. Beyond the window, the lawn shaded to one white wall of the house and then broke away at the dark sharp border in a stretch of sunny, bladed green. It encircled the trunk and shadow of a gnarled tree and then reached again, widening as its colour lightened, to the beginnings of poplar and birch, their underleaves shining by the breeze.

He kept to one side of the easel a small study that he had done the day before. He considered it from time to time as he craned forward to the table and then drew back, pushing his hair from his eyes, judging his work. He always took his colour from his palette with thoughtful care as if that subtraction was his first concern and then applied it with little hesitation, almost, at times, hurriedly. There was a tension in his brief strokes. She watched the movement of his slight figure from a chair across the room. He always extended his elbow as the brush in the other hand daubed fractions of colour. She wondered at his concentration, at his ability to question the light, negotiate shadow, to demand that colours reveal their composition to him. He was delighted by shapes. She had watched him for almost an hour, and then had gone with no word from him to the lawn and the lake and the afternoon sun.

When later he came to her, smelling of turpentine, her aunt having reclaimed the kitchen for the making of dinner, he brought two cold bottles of beer. He sat on the grass cross-legged beside her.

“I was thinking,” he said, “about art.”

“How odd.” She smiled over the mouth of her bottle.

“No, really.” And though he met her smile he continued seriously. “I was thinking of the feeling I have when I see a painting, a really good painting. Like the young boy of

Giorgione's we saw."

She nodded her head, taking up his mood, recalling the beautiful face.

"It's a feeling of frustration."

"I'm sure Giorgione was much older than you are when he painted that picture," she said.

"No, not that way. Not that I'm frustrated because it's so much better than anything of mine. It's frustrating . . . well, just in its beauty."

"How do you mean?"

"Well," and he began to form his answer as he adjusted his weight on the grass, "you can see how he used light and how the light gave him his colours. You can see the form, understand the rhythms of the shapes. You can see the artist's skill. You can see, in fact, that the picture's perfect. You can feel it, really feel it." He stopped as if unsure of how to say anything more. "The problem is . . . the problem is that you don't know why." He demonstrated his full stop with a mouthful of beer.

"Why the young boy you mean?"

"Okay. At first, yes. Why the young boy? Why that expression? Why that rounded shadow?"

"Because," she answered, "it's perfect."

"Ah, there. That's the pit in my stomach. The question is why. Why is it that perfection is perfect?"

There was a moment of silence between them. The late afternoon breeze was threshing in the now darker leaves. A distant outboard came burring from beyond the point.

He continued. "Sentimental art, for example, is no good because there is nothing very inexplicable about it. It bites what it can chew. It says nothing that we cannot understand because we invented sentimentality." He swigged at his beer. "Good art is good art, well . . . because you are you and I am I and that is very mysterious. That," and he summarized his notion with a vaguely patronizing grin, leaning forward and kissing her cheek, "is very frustrating."

"I think you're nuts," she said.

"I think so too."

She recalled the day so. And so she recalled that the next morning she had left her bed before the sunrise. The hall was dark and she moved slowly, carefully. The wooden floor was cold beneath her bare feet. Over the railing she could only just make out the shapes of the living room's furniture. She moved more quietly than she had expected, passed her aunt's door, and further found his door already opened a crack. She pushed it and stood still for a moment. Vague light and cool night air came from the window open beside the bed. White drapes moved. She could see where he lay, could hear his regular breathing. She crossed the floor to the other, empty side of the quilted bed and pulled her flannel nightgown over her head, leaving it on the chair

beside the window. She pulled back the covers and came in beside him to the warmth he had made. "Ssh," she said. "It's only me. You'll wake my aunt."

She had let her hand find him, had raised him gently as they lay together on their sides. He moved his hand away and up her stomach and as he kissed her throat he lifted himself. "Slow," she said. "The bed squeaks." She reached down between them; his weight came around her and they moved slowly together. She held him tightly with her legs. They moved slowly together until he could not and she could not let it be slow.

They must have slept for when she opened her eyes she saw the blue pattern of the quilt and could see that the dresser had become clear across the room. "I'd better go," she said and he drew himself closer. "The sun's coming up." She turned away from him. The room was cold and without leaving the covers and still held by his arm she reached across the floor to the chair and her nightgown. As she did she saw between the drapes a wash of red in the light blue of the sky and, above the dark trees across the water, the softest lines of gold. "Look," she said. "The sky." He raised himself on one elbow and kissed the back of her neck. After a time they both moved from the bed and stood at the window looking out at the morning.

She was standing still before the painting. He had changed it so that the sun was rising behind the house. The lawn before it was wet with green and black and could well have been calm night water. The shape of a wide, old tree appeared strangely large and like a cut-out to the left of the shadowed veranda. It took the darkness from the lawn to the underlit white and red and gold of clouds above the distant, detailed line of trees. The house was shaped obscurely and only suggested its angled mass even though the white of its sides, the green trim, its shingles and the red brick chimney could all be discerned, dim in the still early light. All the windows but one were squares of uneven darkness. To the upper right a window was faintly lit from within. Taking their proportions from the spread silhouette of the tree, as large as medieval figures, two golden bodies looked out of their frame.

She turned abruptly from the painting and with her eyes to the floor crossed the beige, vacant carpet to the front room. She felt herself observed by the silent, well dressed attendant as she reached the glass door. Opening from the quiet to the rush of wind and the street of noise she paused. After a moment she let her thoughts leave her and hurried down the bricked steps. On the crowded sidewalk she continued quickly. Sad, she thought. And that was all. She hurried on her way. She was in a hurry because it was Friday and because she was leaving the city that afternoon to visit her aunt at her aunt's summer house at the lake. ☆

PLUMS ARE IMPORTANT PERHAPS

BY CHRIS BELFRY

Hannah pushed open the thick oak door. She was burdened with a paper bag, a shabby purse, and age. She sighed wearily in the silent hall, relieved to be home. She walked with a heavy step toward the kitchen, put her bag on the drainboard, disposed of her purse, and slowly removed her faded coat. Then she put away her few supplies.

Her next concern was to take her shoes off, so she moved, lumbering slightly, toward the living room, and carefully eased her large frame into her favourite chair. Then, leaning forward awkwardly, she gingerly removed her new black shoes.

This month had been pretty good, she thought. No worries about extra bills — new shoes from town — she had managed a nice gift for Kathleen's new baby — two of her children had come to see her with their families — and Selma had stopped by for a few visits. Hannah was conscious of her feet — they were swollen again, the ankles thick and tender. She looked at them, rubbing them gently, still mildly amazed that they belonged to her. They didn't use to look like that.

She leaned back gracefully, and propped the offending feet on an old needlepoint footstool. Karen had made the cover for it one summer as a penance — was it thirty years ago? She needn't have felt so guilty — her marks at school were not that bad. She worried so much about achieving at the time. Perhaps she still did. A dear girl though — maybe

she had needed more than Hannah realized at the time. More in the way of praise, and encouragement. Hannah always believed in giving people what they seemed to need.

Her head dropped back against the high wing back of the worn chair, her wiry black hair, so grey now, slipping away from its tenuous moorings and lumping untidily beside her ear. It feels so good to sit down, she thought, and then a soothing familiar lassitude stole through her body. She wished faintly that she had thought to make a cup of tea when she was in the kitchen. Tea had a way of soothing human ailments.

This house is too big for you, Selma had said last week, with the comfortable licence of an old friend. Your children have been gone for fifteen years now — George died so long ago — was it twenty years? she asked. This was a game they played — not Hannah's game — but she pretended she cared about the rules (No, Selma, eighteen years) George and Selma had been engaged before he and Hannah had met. Hannah had heard about the box suppers, the dances, the intrigues. They seemed to be remote when she met George, they seemed even more remote now.

Hannah, now look, your children don't like you to be here alone — those senior citizens' apartments are closer to my place — we could visit more easily. (This was another game they had played before. Selma and Cy's house had always been — well, not small really — but it never, even

when everyone tried, sounded as big as Hannah's).

Hannah rather enjoyed Selma in spite of their many differences in viewpoints. She was quite relaxing, sometimes amusing, and one always searched for something within her that just eluded definition. Hannah had thought over the years about this quality in Selma, and had decided that she had a way of listening so intently when one spoke, that it was flattering.

Selma was right about the house. But Hannah loved it. She loved every old, sparse, almost clean room. The halls, the bedrooms, the dining room, the kitchen, the pantry, they all had meaning for her. Much of the meaning had condensed because some memories were only faintly recalled, but remembrance itself had significance.

When she and George had farmed the acres around the house the farm had been two miles from the town. The town was now an abomination around the house.

Ah — but then — was she really that person? It seemed a little dimmed now. Six children. All gone. Not gone, she thought, but not here the way they were.

She moved her hips so that her stool was resting under the other side of her ankles. She still hoped for that cup of tea, and with a resolution born years ago, she rose stiffly, and walked to the huge kitchen, brewed some tea, and returned to her comfortable chair, one of her two last best cups and saucers carried a little jerkily ahead.

Settled into her chair again, she thought of the time. Six o'clock. Six o'clock.

Six o'clock twenty-five years ago meant a great deal. It seemed whenever she reflected about the past, that meals were the pivot around which everyone moved. That kitchen!

Colin never did well at school. She kept him home for three weeks every fall, to help with the pickles and jams. He was always content to sit on a stool and slice cucumbers. They didn't talk much, Colin was quiet — but he seemed happy — squatted on that old wooden stool, slicing and packing the thin perfect discs into the huge crock filled with brine, alum and dill. His thin body frame hunched delicately over each small chore. He would lift a complacent face now and then, "Maw, is this the way you want it?" Her heart went out to him sometimes more than to the others. The others were secure, stuffed with forms of self-importance that she had noted. They didn't need much concern.

Between herself and Colin in September and October they filled the pantry. She could still smell the pungent fragrance of spicy ginger marmalade, apricot jam, and dill. Green pepper relish. Bubbling sugar and vinegar syrups, drenched around all forms of fruits and vegetables. To think of it now in this huge hollow house, it was like another world. Plum jam, peach preserves with nuts,

tomatoes bottled with onions and green peppers chopped finely.

That pantry — it was filled with youngsters. They rushed in after school and chores, helping themselves to cookies, often still warm — they straightened cakes they thought uneven, until the cake was gone. And those jars — red, burgundy, yellow, orange, green, with smart, crisp silver tops. Rows and rows of them. At four-thirty every afternoon in the winter the sun would strike them, and they would glow like semi-precious stones. They looked important, functional, colourful, and they bestowed a sense of worth on those who had prepared them.

Her bun slipped now from ear to shoulder — she should get herself some dinner. They say when you live alone you don't eat properly. She believed that was true.

But that pantry, she turned her ankles over again painfully on the footstool. That pantry was something to remember. Right now she knew there were some potatoes there, at least what was left from a five pound bag, one turnip, and three jars of plum jam left from a small reminiscent batch she had made last year.

She heaved her bulky, protesting body from the chair, her mind still filled with deeds that seemed as if they had been accomplished by someone else. Someone competent, swift and accurate, unhampered with a body that had developed its own demands. She walked slowly towards the kitchen, feeling the need to dodge quick bodies that were not there. Her mind savoured their names — George, Jennifer, Jason, Nancy, Colin, Elizabeth and Kathleen. It was a litany she enjoyed.

Two were dead now — George and Elizabeth. But the house still remembered them. She moved again to the pantry and saw the hams, the bushels of apples, the boxes of salt cod fish, on the shelves. A small puncheon of molasses caught her eye, its brass bands gleaming. The whole pantry was filled, that barrel of winter pears Cy had left when he couldn't pay for the hay. The side of beef left hanging, aging, the children wouldn't eat it — they had fed the steer when it was young. The debts paid with chickens, cabbages.

But best of all the gleaming rows of work in bottles — pickles, jams, jellies. They looked like one of Colin's poems — so perfect, colourful, and eloquent.

Their voices echoed around her, clamouring, insistent, merry and faint. A warm feeling of pride in her children's present accomplishments followed a worn, familiar path through her mind.

She walked now towards the new refrigerator. It still seemed alien to her. When she approached it, the voices always stilled. She was alone again. The table in the dining room no longer boomed and rocked with voices, laughter.

Its length was not crowded with heaps of snowy mashed potatoes, salads, vegetables, pies, and joints of meat. It was silent, austere. A candle, unlit, was in the centre. The pantry was bare.

She removed the T.V. dinner from the little freezer at the top of the white, shiny refrigerator that Jason had bought

for her two years ago. She opened the stiff cardboard box, and slid the small aluminum square out. She turned a dial on the stove, and carefully placed the dinner on the bottom shelf in the oven. Salisbury steak, peas, and mashed potatoes. Perhaps she would open one of the jars of plum jam.☆

OSTEND

BY JINDRA RUTHERFORD

An hour after leaving the Brussels *Gare du Nord*, the train came to a stop in Ostend. I hurried out of the station and was greeted by a downpour coming in from the sea at a thirty-degree angle. I slipped into my raincoat and ran to the wall of the dyke that separated the beach below from the promenade above. A strong smell of ozone and iodine permeated the air. Clean, purifying smell.

A few minutes later I stood at the wall. The sea lay before my eager eyes in all its awesome majesty. September gales were pounding the grayish-brown waters like a myriad of invisible, giant churns, opening up gaping craters now here, now there, filling them instantly with rushing rivers, sending up enormous blobs of yellow foam, until — with a deafening roar — the raging fury crashed against the wall, spewing salt and sand and foam high into the sky like a row of exploding geysers.

I stood there, riveted to the pavement by the fearful and wondrous crescendos and diminuendos of the sea's symphony of sounds. Somewhere, beyond that tormented expanse, lay England. And beyond England, America. The new world, the promised land of the displaced and the persecuted. . . .

Rivulets of rainwater ran down my face and hair, and my feet suddenly felt cold. I looked down. I was standing

The above is the third chapter in a book Jindra Rutherford is writing, entitled *The Taste of Salt*.

up to my ankles in water.

With squishy steps I walked along the promenade until I found a *pâtisserie*. It could have been the very pastry shop of my hungry dreams! I entered, piled on my plate three of the richest chocolate concoctions, and ordered a hot chocolate to go with it. Life was wonderful. Each mouthful of chocolate, melting on my tongue, sent waves of delight through my whole body.

On the way out, I bought three large chocolate bars to send to my mother.

Not far from the pastry shop, along the promenade, I noticed a small hotel, *Hôtel d'Angleterre*. I walked in and asked for a room looking out on the sea.

"It will be noisy tonight, *Mademoiselle*," the clerk warned me. "They're forecasting an *ouragan*."

"Are hurricanes common this time of year?" I asked.

"Oh no, we haven't had one for at least ten years."

He took me up to the second floor and opened a door. The room was beautiful. Rich red carpeting with Persian design set off the red-velvet upholstery of an armchair and a settee, grouped around a carved mahogany coffee table. Against the wall, parallel with the two French windows, stood a huge bed draped in a red velvet spread. On the rose wallpaper, shepherds and shepherdesses danced under some exotic trees.

As soon as the clerk left, I went to the window. The rain seemed heavier as it pummeled the panes, and the sea was still a boiling cauldron.

I draped my wet clothes over the back of the chair and went to bed. I curled up in the fetal position on my right side, facing the window. My body was becoming weightless, my mind emptied. . . .

How our memories haunt us! I was suddenly wide-awake, in another bed, in another room, looking at another window . . . and I was afraid.

I was in the room of my first nightmare. Only it was not a nightmare. What happened that night was real.

I was six years old and had just started going to the nearest village school, two kilometres away from the lonely mill to which father had brought us — one of his many disastrous speculations. The mill and its outbuildings were hidden in the middle of one of South Bohemia's densest forests and, as the days were getting shorter and colder, I began dreading the long, lonely walk to school. Vera, my sister, was only four, and we had no one to play with except each other. Mother's loneliness must have been unbearable.

That terrible night, mother put us to bed, not in the bedroom of the cottage we usually slept in, but in the dark, dusty room on the second floor of the granary. The room must have been used by the miller's apprentice during the mill's better days. Everything in it smelled of flour and, during the night, mice ran across our bedcovers. We must have slept there more than once, although that night is the only one I remember clearly. The room was just large enough to hold a big bed and a little night table. One tiny window looked out on the cobbled yard. On the wall over the bed hung a large, strange painting of the sea.

I can still see that painting as though I had it in front of me. It used to fill me with a dread I did not understand. Not the sea itself, that part was beautiful. The unknown artist had chosen to paint the scene at sunset: delicate pinks shone through the white foam of the waves crashing against the dark rocks in the foreground. Had he left it at that, it would have been an enchanting seascape. But on closer examination, I could see four seagulls, their rapacious beaks open, hovering above one of the rocks. On that dark rock, like a rag-doll tossed away in anger, lay, sprawled on its back, the white, nude body of a young woman. She was breath-takingly beautiful — and she resembled my mother.

Maminko, why did you bring us into that room that night? Were you expecting something to happen? Were you trying to run away from some dark danger?

You stood the kerosene lamp on the little night-table, tucked Vera and me into the big bed, and then sat on the edge of it staring at the little, dirty window. You looked worried, and I could see your body trembling under your white dressing gown.

Mother's hand was moist as she stroked my hair and

face, softly humming a lullaby. First Vera, and then I, fell asleep.

Something must have frightened me, for suddenly I was awake, sitting up, and trembling. Mother was standing by the window, and someone in the yard below was shouting her name. The voice sounded scarcely human, so distorted it was by rage.

"Marie! Come down immediately! I know where you're hiding. Come down!"

Vera was still sleeping. Mother kissed me on the forehead, and her voice shook as she whispered:

"Alenka, stay here with your sister. I'll be right back."

I cried, "Mummy don't go, please don't go! I'm scared. Who is it?"

"It's your father, darling."

"But why is he shouting like that?"

"He's probably drunk again. People do strange things when they're drunk."

"Don't go, mummy. Don't leave us here," I clung onto her dressing gown.

"I must go. He knows where we are. I don't want him to come here and wake the little one."

She picked up the lamp and left. I could hear her going down the creaky steps.

The inhuman voice below thundered again. Vera stirred. I got out of bed and went to the window. With my fingers, I cleared a small circle on the dirty pane. The yard was in total darkness. Then a flickering light, coming from below the window, revealed a man in hunting clothes. He stood in the centre of the yard and waited, with ominous silence, for the light to come closer.

Vera was now awake.

"Alena, what are you looking at?" she said, rubbing her eyes.

"Nothing. Stay in bed. Be a good girl, Veruska."

She got up and came to the window.

"That's mummy," she said. "Where is she going with the lamp? Oh, that's daddy!" She cried out joyfully, "Daddy, daddy!"

"Be quiet," I said.

Mother was now a few steps away from him.

"Put the lamp down on the ground, you god-damned bitch!" he barked.

She said something in a soft voice I could not catch.

"I don't give a shit if I wake those bastards! Put the lamp down!"

Mother bent over. The flickering light, now on the ground, cast ghostly shadows behind the two figures, shadows that grew into frightening giants as they reached the wall of the outbuildings in a crazy, macabre dance.

"Come closer!" he thundered again, "I'll show you how we treat whores like you! Hiding away from your own

husband! You think you're too good for me." It came out like a spittle. "You and your well-bred family. To hell with you all!"

He swung wide his right arm and brought it back with full force across mother's cheek. Vera and I gasped and started screaming. Mother swayed and covered her face with her hands, sobbing, imploring him to stop.

Instead, he began punching her with both fists, on the head, on the shoulders, in the chest, in the stomach. She collapsed on the cobblestones and lay there huddled like a dying animal. Instantly, the man's leather boot landed with a sickening thud on her back, on her head, again and again, until, the demented furor in him spent, he stalked away to the cottage.

The figure in white did not move.

"He killed her! He killed her!" Vera cried. "Mummy, don't die, please don't die. We love you."

I took Vera's hand and together we felt our way in the darkness, the wooden steps creaking under our bare feet.

We fell on our knees by mother's body, tugging at her, shaking her, crying, "Mummy, it's us. Please wake up, wake up. He's gone. The beast is gone."

She stirred. A long, slow wail, like that of a wounded animal, escaped from her swollen, bleeding lips. With painful effort, she sat up. Blood was streaming from her forehead and from her hair onto the white dressing gown. Underneath that gown, her body must have been a mass of bruises.

"I never did anything to him," she sobbed, "I work my fingers to the bone in this awful mill and . . .," she broke off, clutching her head.

Blinded by tears, Vera and I struggled to help her get up. When she was on her feet, Vera took the lamp, and mother, leaning on my shoulder, slowly staggered back to that room with that dreadful painting. The room that had failed to be her refuge.

Maminko, my dearest, long-suffering angel. Why did you marry him? I search your wedding picture for an answer — I carry it with me everywhere. You look so innocent, so fragile, so young, so beautiful! Your parents

and brothers adored you, the only girl in the family. You led such a sheltered life until your marriage. Where had he come from? What did you know about him? In the wedding picture I see a very handsome young man, with black, curly hair. Was that it, mummy? Was it his looks? But look at his eyes, mummy! They're steel-gray. They're cruel. Even in his wedding picture, his eyes are cruel.

Oh, my God! I thought, will that horrible scene never be effaced from my memory?

I got up and looked reproachfully at the big bed in my Ostend hotel room, the bed that had seemed so inviting when I first saw it covered with a red velvet spread (was that it? blood? had that triggered the memory?), the bed that had not brought me sleep.

There was a sudden, deafening roar, like a thunderclap overhead, and — crash! The window flew open, glass clattered on the floor, and I nearly lost my balance as the flood hit me. Sea and sand were pouring into the room as into the cabin of a sinking ship.

I was shocked, but not afraid. Demented elements seemed easier to cope with than demented people. I rang for service. In less than a minute, the night clerk was up. Together, we tried to close the window — only one small pane was broken — but the hurricane was stronger. The clerk ran out and came back with another man. The three of us finally pushed the window back and secured the lock.

"You can't stay here, *Mademoiselle*," the clerk said, pointing to the broken window pane through which water kept pouring in. "I'll get you into another room, facing away from the sea. I've never seen anything like it. The damage on the ground floor is even worse. It's like a tidal wave, three-stories high. Look," he said, pointing to the window, "the water's coming right over the wall of the dyke!"

It was a magnificent sight. The ocean unchained. I wanted to stay there all night to watch the spectacle, but the clerk was in a hurry.

The second room was not as beautiful as the first, but it had a single bed and blue furnishings. Sleep came to me softly, like a mother's caress.☆☆