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CHRISTMAS NUMBER, 2004
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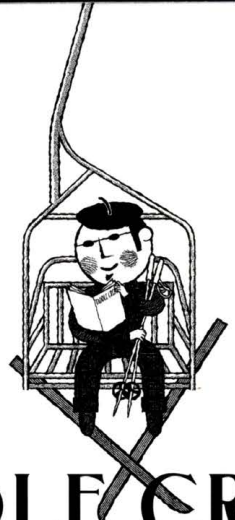

TADDLE CREEK

VOL. VIII, NO. 1 • CHRISTMAS NUMBER, 2004

FICTION

ILLUSTRATED FICTION

CITY BUILDING

Jane Jacobs persuaded us to rethink cities. Her new book warns us to rethink societies, or else.

PEOPLE AROUND HERE

POEMS

THE OUT-OF-TOWNER

COVER STAR

Unknown, circa 1962. Photograph by —aul Nicolitch.

TADDLE CREEK

"Without blue, there is no monster."

Editor-in-Chief
CONAN TOBIAS

Associate Editor
ANDREW DALEY

Photo Editor/Web Manager
PHILLIP SMITH

Illustrations
IAN PHILLIPS

Copy Editor
KEVIN CONNOLLY

Proof Reader
JOYCE BYRNE

Technical Assistance
JOHN MONTGOMERY,
DOUGLAS G. SCOTT

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Printing
POINTONE GRAPHICS

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•BUNK•

AN APOLOGY

In its very early days, in an uncharacteristic instance of grammatical forward-lookingness (or so it seemed at the time), *Taddle Creek* decided the terms "Internet" and "World Wide Web" (and, thus, also "Web") would be lower-cased within its pages. The magazine founded this style rule on the belief that the Internet is a medium, just as television and radio are mediums, and so it should be lower-cased, just as television and radio are lower-cased. *Taddle Creek* even took the time to speak to an Oxford editor, following the publication of *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary,* in 1998. The editor admitted that, even though it had been decided to upper-case "Internet" in the then new dictionary, there was serious discussion being had in regard to whether it should be lower-cased in the future.

Given the high-handed attitude *Taddle Creek* has since adopted toward all matters grammatical, it was thought best to re-examine this rule upon discovering Oxford had decided to retain Internet's capital I in the *Canadian Oxford's* second edition, released this summer. Loath as the magazine is to admit it, it seems *Taddle Creek* has been in error.

To use the above-mentioned television analogy: The medium of television is made up of various networks around the world, each broadcasting its own specific programs. A television watcher in one part of the world does not necessarily have access to the same networks and programs as a television watcher in another. In the case of the Internet, however, the medium is also the messenger, and the messenger, in this case, is a single internetwork of computers. There may be smaller internets within the network, but there is only one grand, overall Internet, and in most cases, everyone can receive all of the same "programs," no matter where they are. To use an even simpler analogy—one in keeping with that silly "information superhighway" phrase even *Taddle Creek* doesn't care for—there are many highways (lower case) but only one Trans-Canada Highway (upper case).

Some argue—wrongly—that since no one owns the Internet (and it could be argued that someone did once own the Internet, or that everyone owns the Internet, but that is unimportant) it should not be capitalized. What these people are trying to say is that no one should have a trademark on the Internet. Agreed (and Oxford apparently concurs: the new *Canadian Oxford* has ceased labeling the Internet "proprietary," as it did in its first edition). But that is not the issue here. When there's only one of something, it's usually a proper noun. And proper noun means capitalization, plain and simple. Thus, "Internet" and "Web" will thenceforth be upper-cased in the pages of *Taddle Creek.* The magazine regrets its earlier indiscretion.

That said, *Taddle Creek* does have some other issues with the new *Canadian Oxford,* specifically its treatment of "Web site" and the like as one word. But that will have to wait until next issue.

ABOUT THE TYPE

Fans of typography will note a new typeface on *Taddle Creek's* contents page. Replacing the troublesome Cityof on the page's section headings is Toronto Subway, a typeface based on the lettering that has graced the city's subway stations and much of their original signage since the system's opening, in 1954. The font was created by the typographer David Vereschagin, and released to the public this spring. Mr. Vereschagin spent more than four years recreating the typeface, using rubbings of the lettering on station walls and photographs of painted signage. A detailed account of Mr. Vereschagin's project can be found on page 23.

Taddle Creek had, in fact, been searching for the Toronto subway typeface for just this use (a lighter version will also now be used for photo and illustration

credits) for several years and is proud to be among the first to use Mr. Vereschagin's recreation in print.

EVERYTHING NEW IS OLD AGAIN

Longtime readers of *Taddle Creek* will no doubt be pleased to see Alfred Holden's return to the magazine's pages, following a two-year absence. Mr. Holden is, of course, *Taddle Creek's* in-house essayist on all things Toronto. His writings will now appear under the banner City Building, the name of the monthly *Annex Gleaner* newspaper column he has written since 1995.

"What I like to do is write about things that are ignored or hated or considered worthless and try to pull together a story so that people change their minds about them," Mr. Holden tells the magazine. "To me, city building is actually a great mystery, and when you get it right, you wonder how you did it—and you hope you can do it again. I want to make people love the city and see it as a place worth caring about."

Mr. Holden promises the new City Building will take a variety of shapes, including profiles, photo spreads, commentaries, and his familiar historical essays. This issue, beginning on page 16, he interviews the author and city-planning commentator Jane Jacobs.

Also returning to *Taddle Creek* is Dave Lapp, who last issue began drawing the "Sunday comics" companion to his monthly slice-o'-life strip, *People Around Here,* which has appeared since 1999, also in the *Annex Gleaner.* "The idea behind *People Around Here* is basically to capture actual conversations through eavesdropping," Mr. Lapp says. "The appeal to me is kind of random. It's just whatever catches my ear." Mr. Lapp's previous *Taddle Creek* contribution was the illustrated story "Bughouse," which ran in the magazine's summer, 2001, number. *Taddle Creek* hopes *People Around Here* will occupy its back page for some time to come.

Finally, a big welcome aboard to *Taddle Creek's* new associate editor, Andrew Daley. No stranger to *Taddle Creek,* Mr. Daley has been a contributor of fiction since the magazine's first issue, in 1997, and acted as a guest editor throughout 2003. *Taddle Creek* expects to see his work continue to grace its pages from time to time. ⊳

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through unix & linux
and the first browser made www
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the clearer is the need
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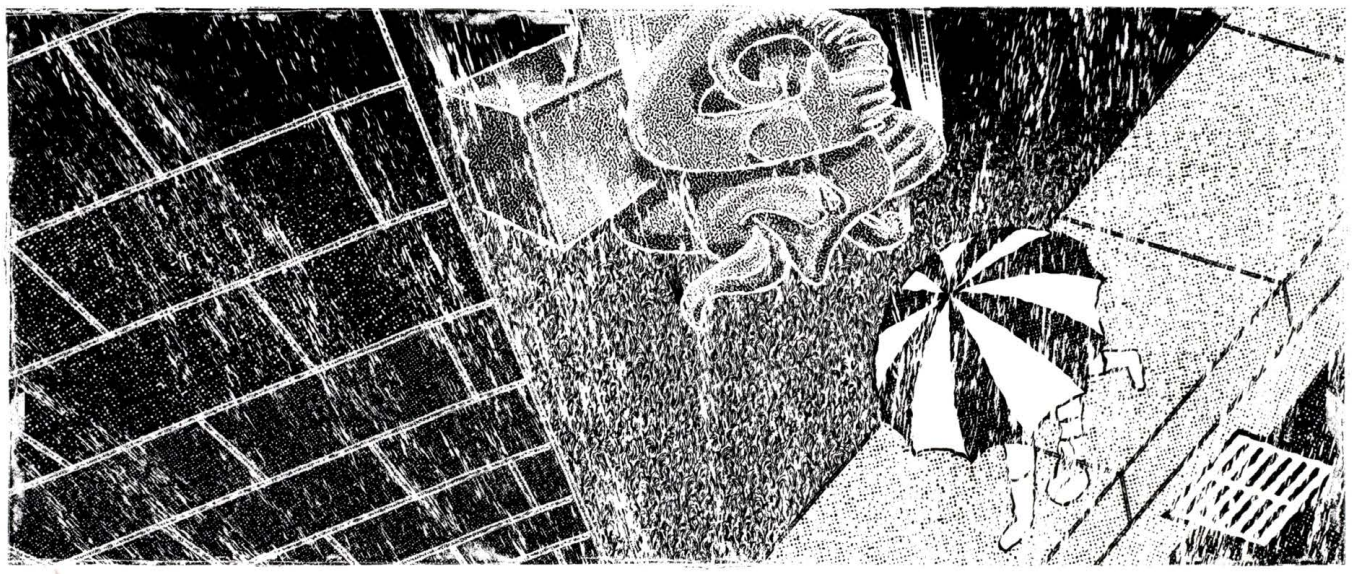


IAN PHILLIPS

GARGOYLES

BY DAVID WHITTON

Darla Griffith threw back her head and laughed—a shameless, throat-baring laugh. She laughed so hard her wine spun around in its glass and spilled all over her hand. She laughed so hard her gown, which was red and vintage and treacherously tight, threatened to blow its seams.

She laughed because Richard Finch had told a joke. Richard, with his big brown cow eyes and chiselled jaw, had told a joke. It had something to do with the groom's father, the way he looked in his tux when he danced. Darla wasn't sure exactly, because it wasn't really the joke she was laughing at. She was laughing because she was full of medication and sparkling wine and prime rib, and she was really, really happy to be alive.

She set the wineglass down, wiped her hand on the tablecloth, and reached over to touch the sleeve of Richard's tailored grey suit.

"You're bad," she said.

"I am bad, it's true," Richard said. "I'm a bad man."

"Wayward and misguided."

"A hopeless case."

"Do you have a light?"

"I do."

Richard reached for a candle in the centre of the table. Darla pulled a cigarette from her pack, leaned forward, and, with cunning strategy, placed her cleavage directly under Richard's nose.

"Thank you very much," she said.

"The pleasure is mine."

It was a sleet-soaked Saturday evening, the middle of February. The place: the East 3 Reception Hall of the Westchester Inn, on Wellington Road. The occasion: a joyful one—the fairy-tale wedding of what's their names, the uptight blond and the rich, affable dork. What *were* their names? Darla couldn't remember. But the consensus among the guests was that it was the most beautiful wedding anyone had ever seen, the bride the most radiant, the ceremony the most touching, the reception the most joyful. Whatever. Darla was here for the free bar.

"So how long do you give them?" Richard asked.

"Give who?"

"Tim and Tanya."

"Tim and . . ."

"The happy couple."

Tim and Tanya. Those were their names.

"Five years," Darla said.

"That long? Really?"

"Why, what do you give them?"

"Two at most. Knowing Tanya, that's being generous."

"Why is that generous?"

"Let's just say," Richard cleared his throat, "she thrives on novelty."

Darla didn't know the bride, had never even seen the bride before this afternoon. She didn't know the groom, either. Nor, for that matter, did she know or recognize any one of the three hundred guests who had attended the wedding, aside from her date—who wasn't really a date, just a friend she occasionally slept with who needed some arm candy—and Richard. Richard Finch, with his eyes and jaw and perfectly cut suit. She'd been sitting with him at the reception hall's darkest, most isolated table, drinking, secretly smoking, and trashing the other revellers for the last hour and a half.

"You ever notice," Darla said, "that brides are kind of creepy-looking?"

"Now that you mention it."

"All the makeup and frills. They look like nineteenth-century call girls."

"Sounds about right. Sounds like Tanya."

Darla clawed at the air. "Meow."

"What?"

"Aren't you a friend of hers?"

"Since college."

"Is this the way you talk about your friends?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

Darla watched him as he spoke, watched his mouth, his hair, watched

the way he pulled at his wedding band as he gazed around the reception hall. It had been eleven years since she'd set eyes on him. Eleven years since high school. She didn't remember him being this attractive in high school, but, truth be told, she couldn't remember much about him at all. He was a zero, a nonentity. He wasn't a nerd or a jock or a stoner. He was nothing, completely unremarkable. Still, when she'd seen him earlier today, in one of the church pews, she knew immediately who he was. She recognized him instantly, and with that recognition came a corrosive feeling of regret: She'd never fucked him. She'd never even thought to fuck him. And look at him now.

"So, do you mind if I ask you a stupid question?" she said.

"The stupider the better."

"Where's your wife?"

"My wife?"

She nodded at his ring finger. "Your wife."

"Oh. Melissa. She's not here."

"So I see."

Richard poured himself another glass of wine. "I'm appearing *in pro per.* She's at home. With the kid. She had work to catch up on."

"That's a shame."

"Uh-huh."

"I'd like to meet Melissa. What does she do?"

"Lawyer."

"Ooh. A two-attorney family."

"Aren't we impressive?"

"I'm totally impressed."

"That's right. You could put us on a postcard."

"And what about your daughter?" Darla said, pressing a finger into her temple. "What's her name?"

"Emily."

"That's a beautiful name. A beautiful name for a . . . for a . . ." But Darla couldn't finish her sentence because she suddenly felt very weird; her eyes lost focus, her limbs went limp. She sagged in her chair, let the cigarette fall from her fingers.

"Darla? Are you O.K.?"

"A beautiful name for . . . Of course I'm all right," she said, but she wasn't entirely sure about that. Wasn't sure she was even saying it or whether this was just another one of her messed-up dreams.

"Darla? Can you hear me?"

"It's the light," she said.

"The light?"

The reception hall was full of shifting light. In the centre of the room the guests danced in a pulsing green pool of it. Over their heads, a mirror ball pelted the walls with little red and blue diamonds. On every one of the forty-odd tables, cheap scented candles flickered and guttered. What this translated into, inside Darla's head, in the traumatized space behind her eyes, was a kaleidoscope of broken, flashing reflections.

"I'm not so good with light anymore. Since the accident. It makes my head throb. It'll pass in a second."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You could put your arm around me. Would you mind?"

"Um, yes, sure." Richard pulled his seat forward and scooped an arm around her waist. "Is that better?"

"Much," Darla said, laying her head on his shoulder. "That's much better."

"Should I try to find a doctor?"

"No, no, it's O.K. It's just a spell. It'll pass in a second. Really. I swear."

Richard Finch despised weddings. Despised the ministers, the hymns, the smell of the church. Despised the receiving line, the handshakes, the painful smiles. Despised the centrepiece

TILT

there are two occasions for breaking the rules. the first time
you tilt the machine, you are hoping to impress the girl with the long face,
the neat ankles, the small freckle balanced on her cheek
like longing that appears as an after-sun effect. the gates are lined up,
and the silver ball bearing zigzags lazily against the boards,
denying gravity, floating freestyle, writing her name
in sibilant z's, a new rosary no one notices
in the smoke and jukebox music. you are connecting,
the points are jamming the counter,
turning over so rapidly they freeze
zero zero zero
a long blank stare she turns on you,
witch, pausing your trigger finger just long enough
to turn your luck, the gates yawning,
and you sliding through, catching on nothing
the air rushing pure and cold and free around your heart,
breaking now, knowing winning is not enough.

years later, on your tour back home, the small dusty
city seems impossible, the bar empty and echoing, melamine surfaces
skittering your drink across the table.
that 5 A.M. feeling when your brother phones,
just another call from the holding tank—
are you good for bail, can you make it
before she gets in and sees he hasn't been home all night?
your brother is the first-born son, bears the scars
of your parents' expectations. like a stag with broken stem,
he carried you all his life,
hoisted you on his shoulders above the crush,
proud of your intelligence. you're the one
who's getting out of this town, you're the man,
and this is the moment when you see the game suspended,
the ball gliding silently in absolute promise,
the flipper bowing down in grace, ready to send you
out of this world, and all it takes is one breath
of absolution, one moment of leaning over,
one small, slight push that is against all rules
and everything will be all right this time.

—SABINA KIM

candles, the cake with the little figurines. Despised the cummerbunds, the silk-satin organza gowns, the orchid corsages. Despised the quality of paper on which the invitations were printed. Despised the dowager aunts, the dorky little brothers, the ugly sensation of having intruded on some other family's desperate dreams. Despised the tearful speeches, the tossed bouquet, the string of inoffensive pop songs from the sixties, seventies, and eighties. Despised everything about it, start to finish. The bride, the groom, the guests. The unendurable boredom.

And yet.

For reasons he hadn't quite given himself licence to contemplate, this wedding, Tim and Tanya's, was turning out all right. Yes. This wedding was turning out to be kind of interesting. Even though the ceremony had been almost an hour long, even though the reception was being held in the strip-plaza hell of Wellington Road, things were turning out almost O.K.

Part of the reason for this, of course, was Richard's prodigious consumption of rye and Cokes in the parking lot of the church. He'd brought a Thermos of it down the 401 as insurance against his boredom. Part of it was the after-dinner sparkling wine. But the other part, he was starting to understand, was currently nestling her scented blond head against his shoulder.

Darla Griffith—it really was her. After all these years. *The* Darla Griffith.

"How are you feeling?" he said.

"Nnnn," she said, into his chest.

"Would you like an Aspirin or something?"

"Nnnn."

He bowed his head, breathed in the smell of her shampoo. She'd been a superstar in high school—a dancer of promise, a gymnast of accomplishment, a student of distinction. When he'd first set eyes on her, in Grade 9, her curly blond hair and her dark eyes and her skin like cream had literally made him stop in his tracks and gasp. He knew that if he couldn't have her he would wither away and die. Over the next five years he never tired of the way she looked, never became desensitized. Of course he never had a shot; the only guys who got within a ten-metre radius of her were the very wealthy and the very muscled.

And then, when she was eighteen years old, the gargoyle entered her life and everything changed.

"Are you sure you don't want to lie down?" Richard said.

"You're sweet," Darla said, lifting her head. "No, I think I'm O.K. now. I think it's passed."

"Would you like some water?"

"Some wine would be great."

It happened the summer after high school, on a warm, stormy afternoon one month before she was to leave town and start university; an event so random, so implausible, it could have come from a Warner Bros. cartoon.

A gargoyle, set in rain-pocked masonry on the top of a building on Dundas, was caught in a sudden gust of wind. It had perched there, more or less solidly, for the past hundred years, but now, prodded by the wet wind, it started to lean. It started to lean, then lean some more, and then, caught in a second gust, it broke free from its moorings and took the long plunge, end over end, to the

sidewalk—where it found its fall broken first by a pale pink umbrella and then by Darla Griffith's skull.

That was it for the old Darla, the Darla he had loved; she went to sleep for three months—and woke up brand new.

"Something's going on," Darla said. The music had died off and the guests were standing expectantly under the green lights.

"Oh God," Richard said, "here it comes."

The D.J., a large, large man with a tiny personality, took the mic and asked the bride and groom to grab a chair and take their places in the middle of the dance floor. Then he asked the men in the crowd to please step forward.

A group of men in wrinkled suits and loosened ties gathered together, smiling awkwardly and clutching their beer bottles.

Still following D.J. instructions, Tanya took a seat in the plastic chair as Tim, kneeling in front of her, raised her gown above her knees.

"I can't watch," Richard said. "This is too painful."

"You're a pussy."

"I am, I am. I don't deny it."

Tim pulled a blue garter from around Tanya's thigh, and the crowd hollered its appreciation.

"You know," Darla said, "she seems like a bitch, but she does have nice legs."

Richard had heard horrible stories about Darla over the years from friends who'd stayed in town. Stories about dissolution. Stories about stasis. While Richard's own fortunes had gone skyward—a gratifying job in a big city, a blond, accomplished wife, a well-adjusted kid—Darla's had bottomed out. This beautiful, popular, formerly imperious girl would now go horizontal for almost anyone. The biggest losers in town—guys she previously would have mocked or pitied or, more likely, completely ignored—suddenly became visible to her. She started drinking beer with the local rock bands. She developed a thing for bass players, bouncing like a pinball from one pathetic, stringy-haired soul to the next. Richard used to imagine the contents of her dresser drawer: the antibiotics, the antifungals, the birth-control pills.

"Can we go?" Richard said. "I can't take it anymore."

"Go where?"

"Anywhere. There's a games room down the hall. Let's go shoot some pool."

Darla smiled. "That sounds good."

Her smile was the same. Many things about Darla had changed in eleven years, but her smile was the same. Her body was bigger, her skin bleached out from years of vice, but her smile was the same.

Darla knew what people thought about her. She knew some people—the guiltier ones, the kinder ones—felt sorry for her. They felt sorry for the new Darla, with her hovel of an apartment and her endless parade of boyfriends and her sad little job assistant-managing the Forest City Wholesale CD Outlet, and lamented the Darla who never was, the Darla that was never allowed to be born, with all her gifts, all her promise.

She knew also that certain other people—guys she'd slept with, mostly, and guys she'd refused to sleep with—considered her a joke. They made jokes about her.

"What did Darla say when the gargoyle landed on her head?"

"Oh my God! Skull fractures are *so* six months ago!"

They made jokes because they were boorish and cowardly and mean, it was true. But that was only part of it. They also made jokes because they found her unnerving. They made jokes because, if the gargoyle had dropped five seconds sooner or five seconds later, her life would have gone on as before. It was the five seconds that bothered them, the five seconds that gave them night sweats. They were at the mercy of random, thoughtless forces—they could feel it. So they made jokes.

Richard was racking up. "Care to break?" he said.

"You go ahead."

Darla and Richard were now loitering around the East 1 Game Nook, a small beige room with a dropped-tile ceiling not far from the reception hall. Most of the floor in here was taken up by two pool tables covered in bright purple felt. A couple of video games stood in one corner, a pop machine in another. Darla felt the urge to be depressed by this room, with its bland, institutional decor, but finally decided to ignore it; there were other, more compelling issues to deal with.

"What are you smiling at?" Richard said.

"Was I smiling?" Darla said.

"You were. And, if I may say so, you have lovely teeth."

"Stop. You're making me blush."

"Then quit smiling and take your shot."

Darla stepped to the table and frowned down at it, studying her options. "Stripy yellow in the side pocket," she said.

Her shot went wide. It went comically wide, as a matter of fact, and far too fast, plummeting across the table, rebounding off rails, careering wildly back and forth. By the end of it she'd sunk three balls, none of them yellow and none of them striped.

"Whoa, mama," Richard said. "I've never seen anything like that." He strolled around the table, inspecting the carnage.

"I missed," Darla said.

"I see that."

"But I would like to take this opportunity to point out that it's not my fault."

"There is no fault being assigned here."

"It's my head. I have no depth perception. Another fun little hangover from the accident."

Richard stopped and looked at her. "Wow. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Hey, not your fault. But it makes life an adventure."

He hesitated, then went back to the table. He put the nine in the corner, the five in the other corner, then missed as he attempted the three.

"So, Darla," he said.

"Yes, Richard."

"Do you have a lot of these . . . physical things?"

"A few," she said.

"Like what? If you don't mind me asking."

"Well . . . there's light—you know about that one. Depth perception . . . let's see . . . colours. Certain colours kind of smoulder around the edges, and other

INVENTORY OF A BASEMENT APARTMENT, AFTER BEING EVICTED

Outside the walls, family and friends,
a few good ones, the barbers all over the city
who each know a fragment of my life—the serious
Romanian barber who commented on a child,
saying, he didn't move or nothing, and I said
he was patient, only to regret what sounded
like a correction—he was patient, the barber repeated,
snipped the air, and turned back to size up my head.
My old family doctor, who retired and disappeared,
and the new one, almost my age, who smiles
like open arms, the woman who thanked me
at work saying, you've been like an angel.

In here, a lineup of Bond films—Connery perfect
in how he pulls off the wetsuit to reveal the tux—
four new walls to protect me, keep warm mice bones
hidden in the ceiling, paperwork I'll never want to see
again, the heating duct that wants to crack my forehead
but can't, the cold painted floors, the electric motor
of coffee in my heart because we're to keep going,
the thought I was buried for the sake of money.
The thin but growing river of bitterness in me,
the desire to hit someone a slightly stronger weed
in my heart each time another homeless tosses me
a nasty remark as I work my way back here.

—Alex Boyd

colours look weird . . . I get lots of headaches . . . I can see the future . . . there's a constant tingling in my hands and feet . . ."

"You—O.K., stop there," Richard said.

"Tingling?"

"Before that."

There had been lots of little surprises for Darla in the weeks and months that followed the accident. That she had even managed to pull herself from the swirling murk of her three-month coma—that was the first surprise. Then came the long, slow process of discovering all the things she couldn't do anymore. Reading, for example. While her friends were off at university, getting their degrees, going to parties, thinking about careers, Darla was at home with her parents, learning to make sounds out of letters. Speaking was tricky, too, and so was walking. But there was one thing, one freak talent she found she now possessed that she hadn't before. She found that if she happened to be in a receptive state of mind, and if she happened to touch someone, she could see the events and outcomes of their lives. Just like that. It would come at her in a jumble, this information, and could take days to sort through, but it would all be there, spread-eagle in front of her: the marriages, the babies, the job promotions. It was a gift, she knew. She understood it to be a gift. But unlike, say, a DVD box set or a new pair of flannel pyjamas, this particular gift was almost always upsetting and horrible.

"You're a psychic?" Richard said.

"Actually, more of a clairvoyant than a psychic. Not to split hairs."

"What's the difference?"

"I can't read your thoughts."

"Oh," he said, his face relaxing. "Right. So what can you do?"

Darla explained.

"So then," Richard said, after some consideration, "what's a person's life like when you see it all at one time?"

"Depends on the person. Some people have successful, satisfied lives. Some people's lives are just tragedies. But most . . . most are complete mediocrities. Their rock bands will go nowhere, their dream businesses will fold after a year or two. Their lives will be spent in small, sad cities working for insurance companies or discount department stores . . . I don't know. It's not much fun to talk about."

Richard went quiet for a while. He stared down at the pool table as though contemplating his next shot. Finally he said, "Will you read me?"

"No," Darla said. "No way."

"Why no way?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"I don't know. Are you going to play pool or what?"

"It's your turn. Why no way?"

But she really didn't feel like explaining why no way. Because the why no way was: what if someday your daughter, little what's her name, dies of a drug overdose? What if schizophrenia slowly snakes its way around your wife's brain? News like that could kill tonight's vibe and prevent her from getting laid. Richard, the poor thing, Richard didn't know what she knew. Didn't know that none of it really mattered, anyway. That no matter how much he achieved or didn't achieve, in this life, no matter how much wealth or love or reputation he amassed or failed to amass, it all amounted to just one thing: nothing. It would all be forgotten in the end. He couldn't possibly know, and she wasn't going to tell him. He still had hope.

Darla raised her hands to her head. "I think my headache is coming back." She went over to the vacant pool table, picked up her purse, and rummaged through it. In a second she pulled out a black plastic film canister, a lighter, and a pack of rolling papers.

"You've got weed," Richard said.

"Do I now?"

"I like weed."

"Is that right?" Darla pulled out a paper, laid it on the table, then popped the lid of the canister. "Well then," she said, smiling, "what a happy twist of fate."

The car on Richard's right, a burgundy Corolla, was spattered with road salt. For a long time—seconds or hours, who could say anymore—he stared at the patterns that drifted across the doors and along the wheel wells. Fractal swirls of salt collapsed in on themselves, creating still smaller designs of greater complexity and convolution. Richard felt his mind being drawn into them, falling into them, endlessly falling, into great cities full of white spires and vast sodium lakes. Voices without bodies, silvery female voices, floated pendulously to the ground like leaves, calling him by name.

"Richard, baby," they said, "it's your turn. Richard? Richard?"

"This is lovely pot," he said.

"This is wheelchair weed. We shouldn't smoke too much."

Richard turned toward the voices and saw Darla standing there, a beneficent smile on her face. She was reaching out to him. Her body seemed very far away, but her voice was right inside his head.

"Take it," she said.

He took the joint from Darla's outstretched hand. The tip was cold and wet from her saliva.

"Look at me," Darla said. "Corrupting a lawyer."

A pleasant numbness spread through Richard's body and with it the sensation of seeing everything through several panes of glass. He looked out over the parking lot. The weather had tapered off, but now a white mist hung in the air, and the cars and the pavement were covered in a thick sheet of translucent slush.

"Hey, Darla," he said.

"Yes, sugar?"

"Do you want to read my future now?"

"No, sugar."

"I promise I won't be angry or upset if the news isn't a hundred per cent positive."

"Nope."

"Please?" he said. The more she refused, the more urgently he had to know. "I'll do anything."

Darla narrowed her eyes and looked at him for a long time. "All right, then," she said. "Kiss me."

"Pardon?"

"If you'll do anything. Kiss me. On the lips. For an extended period. With tongue."

Well now, an interesting development. But if Richard were to be honest with himself—and he almost never was—not an entirely unexpected one. Darla Griffith, *the* Darla Griffith, wanted him to kiss her. He looked at her now, in the ambient half-light. Beads of ice were melting in her hair. There were dark circles under her eyes from too little sleep or too much alcohol, lending her a sexy, depraved kind of look. He found that he could, without much effort, picture her naked, lying beside him in a dark room, her pale skin glowing.

"I can't," he said.

"Those are the terms."

"Hey, I'm a married man."

"All right." Darla took a last drag from the joint and dropped it in the slush. "But are you a *happily* married man?"

"No, well, yes, no, I'm . . . that part's complicated."

"I'll try to understand."

"I'm never happy," Richard said.

"Never."

"Basically never. That's why I've accomplished so much."

It was a difficult thing to explain to people. Richard had worked hard to get what he had: first the LSATs, then law school, then the big soul-drain of his sixty-hour workweeks. He'd worked hard, and he'd been rewarded. He loved his wife. He loved his daughter. He loved his appallingly overpriced house in North Toronto. He loved it all. He possessed happiness, he really did—the problem was, he couldn't access it.

"Are you kidding?" Darla said. "You're twenty-nine years old and—"

"Almost thirty."

"You're almost thirty years old and you have everything you ever wanted. Of course you're unhappy."

"Of course?"

"Of course. You're thinking, 'Well, O.K., fine, I've got everything I want. What now?' You're thinking, 'This is what my life has amounted to, and it's great, but it's not that great. It's not, you know, winning-the-lottery, frolicking-with-mermaids great.' And that part of you, and this is important—"

"Yes?"

"That part of you wants to lose everything."

"No, no, no."

"Just listen. And then the other part of you, the part that honestly values all you've acquired, that part of you is ter-

rified of losing these things. That part of you wonders when this incredible good luck is going to end and worries that something, some unknowable thing, could sweep it all away. And that part of you, and this is also important—"

"Uh-huh?"

"That part of you wants to lose everything, too, so that you don't have to worry about losing it anymore."

A single pellet of freezing rain wobbled from the sky and smacked Richard on the back of the neck. What huge distance had it crossed, high up in the ionosphere, in order to do that? He gazed off toward Wellington Road. Cars shuttled past in both directions, kicking spray into the orange arcs of the street lamps. On the other side of the road, beyond a huge expanse of lawn, the old veterans' hospital was in the throes of demolition, its black, hulking profile barely visible in the fog.

Darla Griffith said he wanted to lose everything, and Darla ought to know. Of all people, Darla ought to know.

"O.K.," Richard said.

"O.K.?"

"Yes. O.K. I'll kiss you."

For the next ten minutes their lips and their bodies were suction-locked together. For the next ten minutes Richard could hear no sound but the sound of her breathing, could feel no feeling but the warmth of her skin. Her breath smelled like his breath: like cigarettes and alcohol and hydroponic pot.

When finally they came apart, Darla stood there for a second, looking dazed and unsteady. "O.K.," she said.

"I kissed you, like you asked," Richard said.

"Uh-huh. I noted that."

"With tongue."

"Also noted."

"So." He looked at her meaningfully.

Darla reached for his hand and closed her eyes. Richard watched her face, looking for a sign—any little flicker—that might tell him what was going on inside her head, but there was nothing. Soon she opened her eyes and regarded him with—was it pity Richard detected there? Sadness? Or was he just being paranoid?

"So," Darla said.

"What is it?" Richard was suddenly alarmed.

"Nothing. Don't worry."

"When someone tells me not to worry, that's when I start to worry."

DAWN OF THE DEAD, REVISITED

at the end of the world
promise
to meet me at the mall

—Dani Couture

"You're going to be fine. You're going to be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Capsule review: you're going to lead a stupidly successful life. You'll never have any disappointment or failure. Your children, all four of them, will love and respect you. Your family will be attractive, healthy, and athletic, and you'll die peacefully in your sleep at age ninety-nine."

"You're . . . putting me on, right?"

"Nope. Success . . . it really is destiny with guys like you. There's nothing you can do to prevent it. So relax and enjoy yourself for a change."

"Nothing I do will prevent it?"

"Uh-uh." Darla pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse. "Barring any gargoyles, of course. There are always gargoyles."

So there it was. The news was good, and it confirmed something Richard had already suspected: he was bulletproof. He should have felt relief. He should have felt happiness or at least some small satisfaction. The news was not bad. But he wasn't really thinking about what Darla had said; he was thinking about Darla herself and about the softness of her lips. It had felt cheap and sad and unspeakably titillating, this encounter, and he wanted more. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to take her somewhere and undress her, to sleep with her in creative ways, to record their sex on video and send the tape to his wife. Now that he knew his life was unalterable, he wanted more than anything to turn it to ash and start again with Darla—a life of obscurity, lost forever in this small, sad city. His faded hometown. It felt perverse, yes. It felt so perverse. But it also felt right.

"I'd like to continue this discussion with you," he said.

"Would you?"

"Yes, but," he shivered theatrically, "it's awfully cold out here."

"It is. It is."

"And it's awfully loud in there."

"It is."

"Maybe we could . . . I don't know. Where could we go?"

"I don't know."

"Would you like to get a coffee?"

"Not really."

"Then where could we . . . ?"

"I really don't know," Darla said. "Why don't we just grab our coats and think about it on the way out?"

At fifteen minutes and thirty-two seconds to four, Darla thrashed herself awake. She gave a little scream, stretched out her arms to cushion herself, and came crashing into consciousness, her pillow soaked with sweat, her sheets kicked into hot, sticky heaps.

She'd had the same dream she'd always had: a dream about high winds and crumbling ledges, about tumbling end over end to a pavement that never quite materialized. But now she was awake. She was O.K. Darla took a deep breath. Her blood was pounding, her body throbbing, but she was O.K. She was in her room. Safe and snug in her very own room. She lay in bed, staring into the granulated two-dimensional darkness, trying to orient herself. There was her bed. There was her dresser. There was her window.

She sat up, perched herself on the edge of the bed, and began to piece together the evening's events. She'd gone to a wedding—that much was solid. And . . . yes, that's right . . . she'd met her old schoolmate Richard Finch, to whom she'd burbled and cooed all night. What else? She'd played some pool, smoked some grass, and then—Oh God—she'd given in and read Richard's future, and then—Oh God—they'd kissed, and then—*Oh God*—they'd got into a cab together, and then . . . *Oh God.*

"Richard?" she said. She groped around on the bed, but the passenger side had gone cold. "Richard?"

There was a shuffling in the corner of the room, near the floor: an adjustment, a shifting of position. Then came a more organic sound, a clearing of mucous

from the throat.

"I just cheated on my wife," Richard said.

Darla stared hard into the darkness. She could make out the shape of him—even his shape looked well toned, looked cared for—but there was only so much information her eyes could give her. She wanted high-resolution. She wanted colours and contours. She wanted textures, scents, salt on her tongue.

"I love my wife, but I just slept with you," Richard said. His voice was a monotone, full of amazement. "What's more, I'm considering sleeping with you again. I'm considering sleeping with you on a regular basis."

The glowing red numbers that floated above Darla's night table read 3:49, then 3:50. Everything was calm. The only sounds were the hum of electricity in the walls, the tapping of sleet on the window.

"Well, you're an adult. You can make your own decisions," Darla said. "But aren't you, you know, afraid your wife will find out?"

"Hey, nothing bad can happen to me. You said it yourself: stupidly successful, athletic kids, and so on and so on."

"That's right. Barring any gargoyles."

Darla watched Richard's shape get up off the floor, yawn, and stretch, his fingers almost touching the ceiling.

"I feel great," he said. The light from the window cast a strip of blue across his chest. "I feel vivacious."

Now she watched his shape turn around, come toward her, and crawl back into the warm, mammal-smelling bed.

"I think," Richard said, draping an arm across her middle, "that given certain circumstances and variables . . . I mean, what we have here is, is, is so *sui generis* . . . and . . . if things continue in this vein, we may have something approaching . . . I think maybe I could fall in . . . I think maybe . . ." He sighed. "I'm not saying this very well."

"You're drunk," Darla said. She tried to sound casual, but inside, everything was lurching. Did he just say . . . ? She needed a moment to think. Just a quiet moment to string a couple thoughts together. But her heart was drumming and her mind was skipping—and there was Richard's body, right in front of her—and there didn't seem to be any quiet moments for the taking.

A life with Richard Finch. Maybe it wasn't as stupid as it sounded. Maybe, after some time had passed, he might leave his wife and start something with Darla. She tried to imagine how this would play out: the confession, the trial separation, the vicious and protracted divorce. And then? Their own engagement, probably, and their own wedding. This part of it she could see in vivid detail: the garter toss, the mirror ball, the silk-satin organza gown. And then, just as vividly, she saw a kid, hovering over them like a ghost. A beautiful kid, half Richard, half Darla.

Maybe it was . . . maybe it really was possible.

She pressed a hand to her chest and concentrated. She'd never had any luck reading herself before, but tonight might be different. She shut her eyes, trying hard to suck out some information—an image, a feeling. But nothing was there. Everything was black.

"We could meet up a couple times a month," Richard said. "I could come down here once a month, and you could come up to visit me. We could make this work."

"Just give me a sec," she said.

"Because now that we've found each other—"

Darla reached out and pushed him onto his back. "Could you please," she said, "just shut up for a second?"

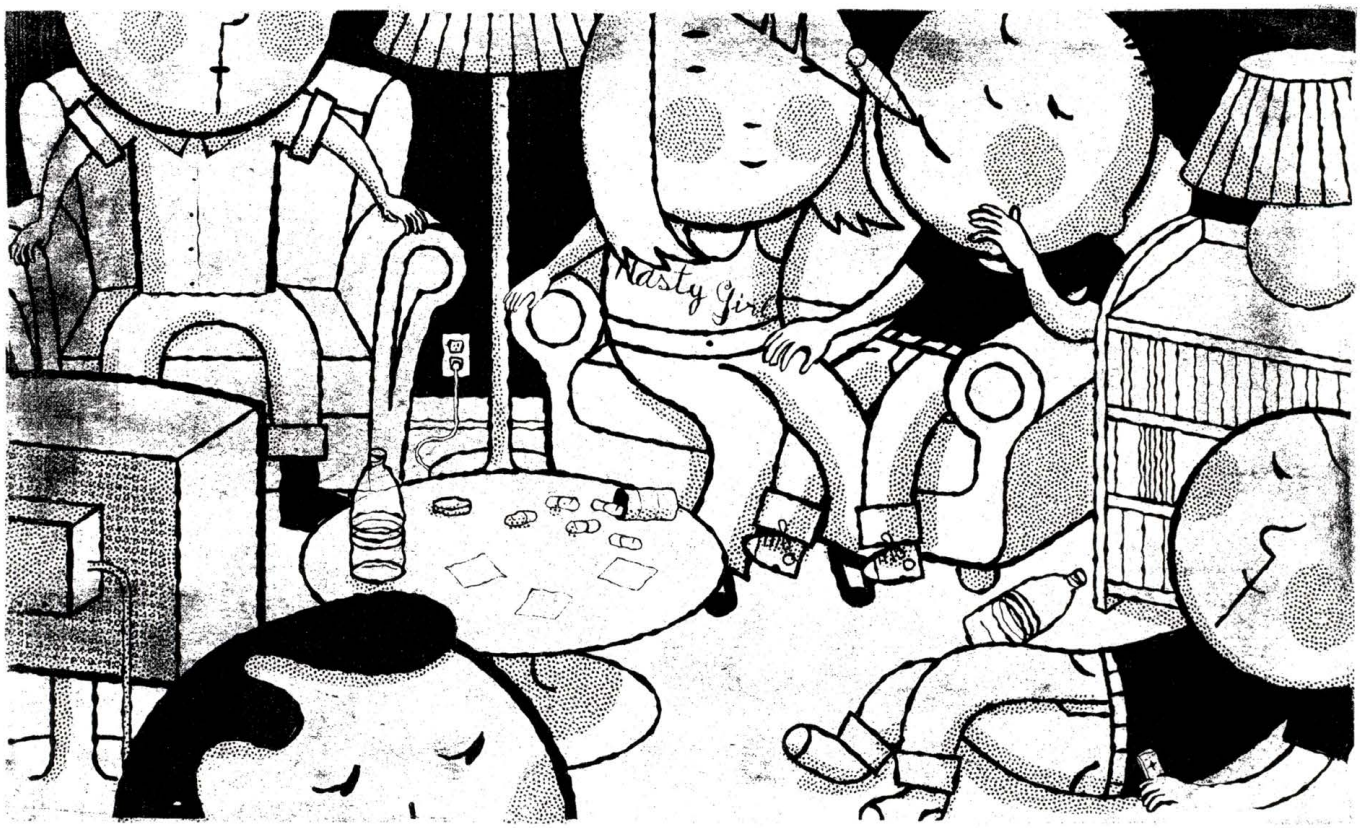
She got up onto her knees and straddled him. He looked small and fragile, lying there beneath her. She liked him like this. He looked soft-skulled, easily smashed. Just another high-school boy who wanted her attention. A pebble of sweat rolled from her lip and landed on his stomach. She felt alive, perfectly alive—full of sweat and blood and snot and piss. The future wasn't set in stone—not for her. It was pliable and willing. It was wide open and waiting.

"Twice a month?" she said.

"Or more, if you wanted. Or less."

She smiled, then sighed. For a second she rocked, lazily, back and forth, side to side—until, laughing shamelessly, baring her throat, she let herself drop. ⊳

David Whitton lives in North Toronto. His fiction has appeared in the Dalhousie Review and the New Quarterly. He is currently working on a book of short stories.



IAN PHILLIPS

SINSEMILLA

BY BEN CARROZZA

His mother woke him from hazy dreams as she put several neatly folded items of laundry on the crowded dresser top. He lifted his head, then slumped back into the pillow when he realized he would not be able to fall back asleep. His mother sighed.

"Get up, Johnny," she said.

He rolled over on his side, blinking at the floor. It seemed like he should say something.

"Is Dad at work?"

"What do you think? It's eleven thirty." She finished with the clothes and prepared to leave. "Get up."

Eventually he did, heading to the den and dropping onto the couch in front of the TV. A talk show buzzed angrily. He rubbed at his eyes, wishing he had taken it easier the night before.

In the kitchen, his mother clanked dishes and cups. It was hard to hear the couples argue on the TV, so he fumbled for the converter. She entered, shoving a mug of coffee and a croissant in front of him. He took them with a blink.

"Thanks." He put the plate down. "Isn't there brownies?"

She took the plate and left with a sigh. There was more clanking and she soon returned with a couple of brownies. It was the same plate, and there were flakes of croissant still evident beneath the brownies. He decided to ignore it.

His mother stood over him as he took a sip of coffee. He kept watching TV.

"What?"

"Are you going to pick up your prescription today?"

"Fuck. I told you I'm not taking that shit." He still didn't turn.

She continued to stand over him. He sighed.

"*Mom . . .*"

"Dr. Bynes said you should at least try—"

"For fuck's sake, Mom. Shit." He looked at her. "You want me to walk around here like a fucking robot or something?" John's mother averted her eyes. He shook his head.

His mother turned away and moved to the shelves behind the couch. He leaned back. On her way to the kitchen, she placed the white prescription paper on the table beside the brownies. He rubbed his eyes. On the talk show the host was wrapping up the program with his words of wisdom and advice. It was always surprising how quickly the segment ended.

It was somewhere around two, and the sun was high and hot, slumped heavily across the black roofs and streets. John was walking the stretch of road that nudged the fenced-off train tracks to his left and the fringes of the subdivision to his right. Friends of his had once lived over there, and he wondered where they were now. At certain points of the road, where imperfections had been recently touched up, his sneakers stuck to the heated gloop, coming off the ground in black gobs.

John held a stiff paper bag containing a brown plastic bottle with a white plastic top. He had swung by the pharmacy and picked up the prescription after all, along with a bottle of A. & W. Root Beer. The root beer was gone now, thrown into the greasy grass at the side of the railroad tracks, but he still had the bag, the bottle of pills.

As he walked he shook the bag, listening to the pills rattle around. It was a tiny though satisfying sound. Soon, he was using it to punctuate his steps with a driving percussive rhythm reminding him a little of "Street Fighting Man," by the Stones. John smiled at this, continuing to shake the bag.

He was approaching Melody Road P.S., his old elementary school. It was summer, so classes were out, but there were some high-school kids hanging around, shooting hoops in the yard. He could hear the ball strike the old wooden backboard with a dead thud.

John lit a smoke and watched for a bit, crumpling up the bag and putting it in his pocket. The kids played a relaxed game of two-on-two, spending more time and effort trash-talking each other than shooting or passing. The rubber reverb of the ball being dribbled filled the tight air of the afternoon.

Biting down on what was left of his smoke, he walked over to the court and held his hand out. "Pass." He nodded reassuringly in response to their uniform skepticism.

One of the kids crossed his arms, but the one with the ball chest-passed it over to John. He dribbled a bit, took a puff, and after passing the ball back and forth in his hands to get a feel for the cheap rubber of the knock-off, he bounced it off the rim. The kids nodded absently; the one who had crossed his arms grabbed for the ball when it bounced away.

John tossed his cigarette aside, asking for the ball again. The kid put his chin up but passed anyway. John dribbled from side to side.

"What are you dudes up to this afternoon?"

"Nothin', man."

John dribbled the ball some more.

One of the kids bit at a nail. "Why?"

John threw a perfect swish. He smiled at the kids as he reached for the bag in his pocket.

BOOZE CAN

risk another film-noir evening
licking the glorious underbelly
in artland, where everybody
is a nobody who does something.
another manic adventure with
fast women & dangerous men
fuelled by booze and the need for speed
and recreational sedation
hell-bent through another warm winter nite
to the end of the Underworld.
men with headsets and all-business shades
smart in tricky ways, sleight-of-hand kind,
cool as an old-time speakeasy, Joe-sent-me
same thing with different clothes.
Inside-scene type of lifestyle—
watching the sunrise is not a rule, neither an exception,
sleep all day and moan for a couple of hours,
get excited and dressed up and do it all over again.
none of these people have jobs, and it would appear
that they don't need them.

ten per cent of being cool is knowing when to shut up.
the rest is knowing where to sit.

—PATRICK RAWLEY

The kids had a bag of weed, and one of them, Matt, was rolling a fat five-paper joint filled with a good portion of it. John watched as he toked from one of Matt's earlier creations. Black Sabbath boomed from the stereo.

"I'm really feeling these things, man," said a kid named Adam. He turned away from a video game to show John his appreciation.

"Legal shit is always better, man." They all laughed, never having heard that one before. John could feel the wad of cash in his pocket where the bag of prescription pills once was. The pills lay on the rec-room table, spread out and scattered like stars.

Above their heads was a sudden then steady thumping as someone entered the house. John started to get up, but the others remained seated, and continued what they were doing.

"Who's that?" he asked, blinking widely.

Matt lit the joint. "My sister."

"Is she cool?"

Matt nodded as he passed the Zeppelin-like joint to the one called Corey. "I think she has some hash."

John nodded. Corey snickered, not taking his eyes off the screen. "What? She has a nice ass?"

"Fuck you." Matt threw an empty plastic bottle at his friend. "Asshole."

John sat back and waited for the joint. A girl about seventeen or eighteen, just older than the boys, entered the room. She wore a fitted belly-shirt with "Nasty Girl" scrawled in pretty pink writing across the front, and a pair of hip-huggers. Her long blond hair gently brushed her shoulders in a shopping-mall shag. She loped toward the couch. With lazy eyes she smiled at the boys.

"That better not be mine, you little fag," she said.

"Fuck off." Matt exhaled, handing the joint to John, who took a long pull, trying not to cough.

Adam and Corey watched Matt's sister straddle John's legs then settle easily beside him on the couch. She reached out for the joint. "I think I've seen you, haven't I?" she asked, drawing the smoke over her slightly parted lips. She smelled like vanilla.

John rubbed his eyes and smiled.

"Uh, maybe." He did remember her from somewhere. "I buy smokes from the variety store on Gaydon. You and your friends smoke behind there, huh?"

She took a long haul. "We watch guys." Her eyes narrowed to smoky blue slits.

"Really?" He grinned, taking the joint from her. On the floor, Corey shifted but didn't say anything. John squinted at the girl. "Watch anyone interesting lately?"

She looked down as she shifted on the couch. Her eyes met his again. "Maybe." She smiled. Their thighs brushed. She didn't move hers.

"What's this?" She leaned over to the table and picked up one of the pills her brother had bought off of John. She grinned.

Adam fingered his joystick, his eyes lazy. "They're nice . . . ," he slurred.

John nudged the girl. "So . . . you just hang out behind the variety store and then here all day, huh?" He passed her the joint. "You sound pretty boring."

She hit him on the knee and rocked back playfully. "That's not all I do." She rolled the pill in her hand. "I need some water for this. Come upstairs." She grabbed his hand. He stepped over Adam's and Corey's legs as they glanced up at him. Matt blinked at the stereo, without expression.

John turned onto his block. It was about five o'clock—the heat was still heavy, but it was becoming lazy, lacking its earlier strength. The pavement didn't grab at him like it did before. His dad would be home from work soon. The houses on his street loomed above him on their raised lots, all tall fences and beige garages. He remembered climbing into the backyards as a boy, stomping through the gardens, knowing every distinct feature of each lot—the neighbourhood's secret geography.

Approaching his house, his steep and sloping driveway falling away from the sidewalk, John rubbed sweat from his lip and smelled vanilla. He fingered the wad of cash in his pocket and smiled. As he opened the front door, walking into the silk of cold A.C., he could smell dinner, and hear his mother clanking plates in the kitchen upstairs. ⊳

Ben Carrozza lives in the Annex. This is his first published short story.

• CITY BUILDING •

PILLAR OF COMMUNITY

Jane Jacobs persuaded us to rethink cities. Her new book warns us to rethink societies, or else.

BY ALFRED HOLDEN

Jane Jacobs writes her books in an upstairs room at the back of her house, on Albany Avenue, in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. There is a countertop across the south wall—now piled with odds and ends—suggesting the room was once a kitchen. The desk is cluttered with writers' flotsam: cups filled with pens, knick-knacks serving as paperweights, and, of course, paper.

"Somebody has given me their L. C. Smith that they're through with," says Jacobs, seated at her desk in front of the now ancient manual typewriter. "I keep the top off because the ribbon reversal doesn't happen automatically anymore, and so I have to keep an eye on when it's getting near the end. . . . It's hard to find typewriter-repair people anymore." No author still producing books at the age of eighty-eight needs to make excuses for using old technology, but Jacobs, the long-time critic—and ally—of cities offers some thoughts. With a computer, it's so easy to change what you've written, she says. "And I don't think it's all to the good. It's so easy to add, that it breaks down the discipline of organization."

"How does the process work for you?" I ask, playing for useful advice.

"Well, very much trial and error, and I fill up my wastebasket with false starts," Jacobs responds, unhelpfully. "And—I'm a very, very slow writer. When I keep making mistakes and keep filling up wastebaskets and wasting paper, I know the trouble is organization somewhere. And yet I don't seem able to solve that without just trying. I don't object to writing something over again because it's harder or takes longer than with a computer because, somehow or other, manual labour helps me."

In this corner of the old house—where I visited Jacobs this past May—is a single double-hung window, looking east into typical overgrown Annex backyards. Here Jacobs, at her L. C. Smith, has breakthroughs (she calls them "earthquakes")—when ideas flow and progress is swift. She wrestles with oft-remade outlines that are "as much hindrances as helps." She struggles to gather disparate thoughts into what Naomi Bliven, Jacobs' friend, the former *New Yorker* reviewer, called "genie chapters." These are, perhaps, equivalent to the newspaper editor's cherished "nut graph," where key threads in a tale come together and jell for the reader.

"Now, in your latest book, have you perfected your writing processes?" I ask. "Is it somehow easier?"

"That one was easier, I don't know why. And quicker. Ah, but I don't understand these things," says the author of seven books. "If it comes more easily and quickly, I'm just grateful for it. I don't think it means . . . the next one will be."

Jacobs mentions the "long, difficult dry period" between *The Economy of Cities,* published in 1969, and 1984's *Cities and the Wealth of Nations.* "I did write a great deal," she says, adding with a chuckle, "but most of it was garbage."

"There's no magic elixir?" I ask.

"I wish I knew what it was."

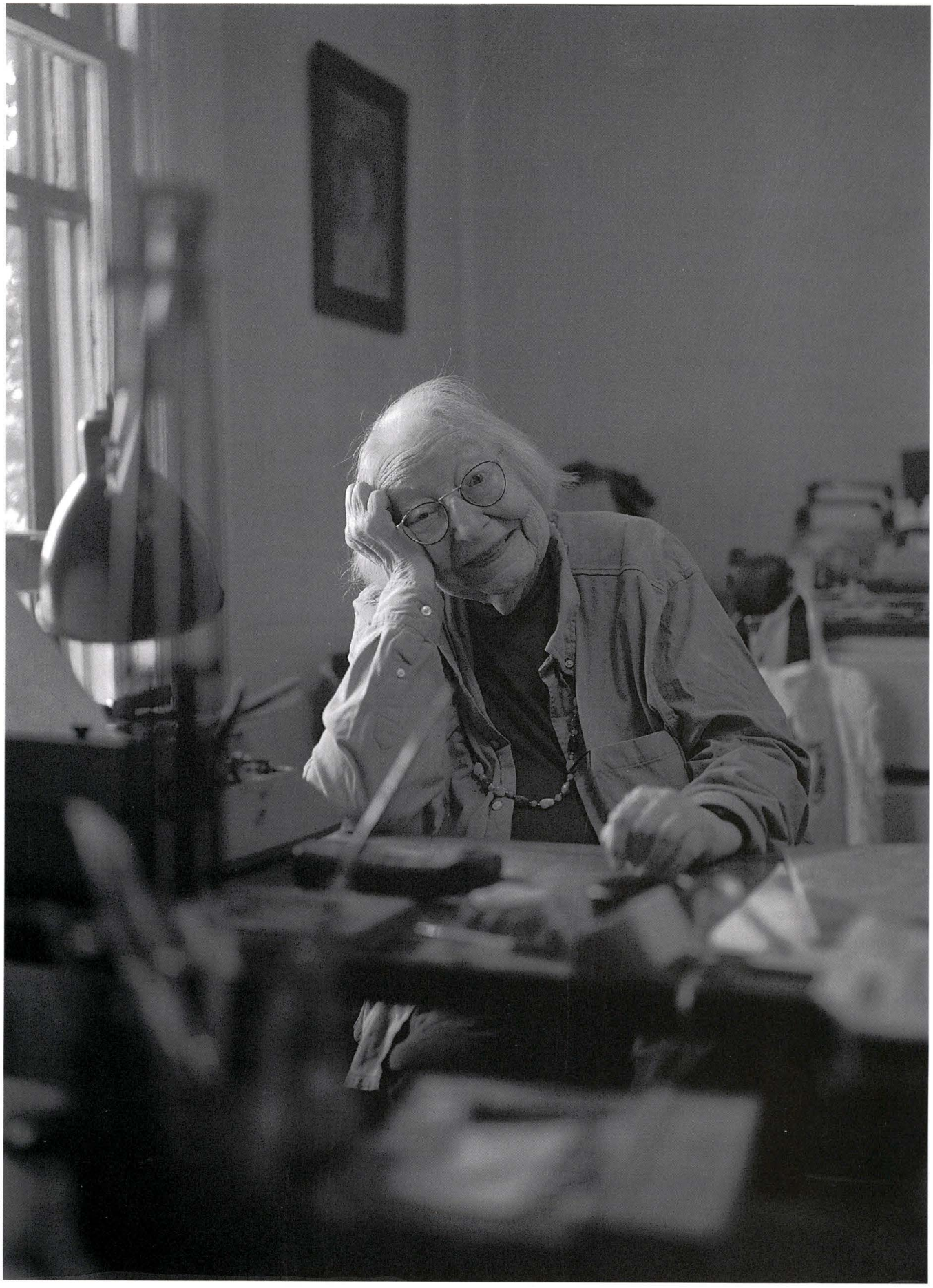
Dark Age Ahead, Jane Jacobs' latest book, was published on May 15, 2004, and pulls the zoom lens she first focused on the streets and sidewalks of Greenwich Village, in the groundbreaking 1961 urban bible *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* back, back, back, until a vast, interconnected global landscape comes into view. One of *Dark Age Ahead's* lead characters was again the author's hometown: no longer New York but long since Toronto, the great city that had done much right—in no small measure in response to her writings—until new forces began chipping at its foundation. As Jacobs describes them in *Dark Age Ahead,* those forces were amorphous—vague things like slipping discipline in learned professions—and specific, such as an amalgamation of municipalities that left the city with huge responsibilities and insufficient powers to fulfill them.

Jacobs' reporter's eye was honed from working at her hometown *Scranton Republican,* sharpened for city life in the postwar era as an editor of *Architectural Forum,* and shown dramatically to the public in a landmark article, "Downtown is for People," in the April, 1958, issue of *Fortune. The Death and Life of Great American Cities* began with disparate, seemingly trivial data literally culled from the cracks and crevices, hydrants and manhole covers of Hudson Street and constructed an incisive and ultimately vindicated exposé of city-building policies at the highest level, namely urban-renewal practices that were in fact destroying cities. Now she reverses the mould, tracing circumstances back the other way, sifting through abstract, impersonal policies and vast bureaucracies of government, business, and academia for roots of grimy problems such as homelessness and family poverty. In 2004, as in 1961, the iceberg effect held: what was initially visible hinted at broad, more universal dangers and turnings.

If its message is ultimately more dramatic—anxiety over the future, not just of cities, but of civilization as we know it—*Dark Age,* despite its title, has a surprisingly gentle, prescriptive, even hopeful nature. "Until we get into irreversible trouble, which a culture can, everything that's done right has the advantage . . . of connecting with everything else," Jacobs, in a voice leavened, now by default, with a grandmother's wisdom told me. "So you don't have to change everything at once."

But the change Jacobs is advocating would involve more than rearranging deck chairs. As she writes in *Dark Age Ahead,* there is in Canada a measure of understanding at those high-policy levels—whose broad-brush decisions, she argues are the root of some very down-and-dirty problems—but not much

PHILLIP SMITH



appetite for reform. In the United States, preoccupied with pre-emptive attacks of a more military nature, there appears to be no understanding at those levels whatsoever. Reports such as one that went out over the wires of the Associated Press a few weeks after the launch of *Dark Age Ahead* can't have seemed to very many people anything more than esoteric electrons on a dull subject: "The state takeover of Flint's finances may be nearing an end," the press agency reported in an item following up on the Michigan city's 2002 financial collapse. "The decision means emergency financial manager Ed Kurtz will relinquish power to Mayor Don Williamson and the City Council. . . . Kurtz has eliminated 300 city jobs through attrition and layoffs, reduced the amount spent on overtime pay, cut the mayor's and City Council members' salaries and angered residents by cutting funding for five neighborhood recreation centers."

Flint was the city that hoped to recast itself as lively Toronto—at least as told, tongue in cheek, in *Roger & Me,* the director Michael Moore's 1989 film debut. And now Toronto and Flint did share a predicament. In Ontario the massive rearrangement of powers undertaken by the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government in the nineteen-nineties shifted major responsibilities—portions of them or the financing of them—to the province's cities in such areas as public transportation, housing, and education. The expression "revenue neutral" was used to describe how resources would still be sufficient, but perhaps intentionally, it hadn't panned out. In practice, long-established revenue-generating powers were taken away. These included the ability to raise money for education through property taxes, itself an archaic system that failed to mirror growth in economies, but better than nothing and at least transparent to taxpayers. There was much unhappiness in the bigger Ontario cities; in Toronto, Hamilton, and Ottawa school trustees defied provincial orders to balance their budgets, now assigned by the province, by making huge cuts to school operations. Like the burghers of Flint, elected officials found their powers suspended, their offices and duties taken over by politically approved appointees.

The learned and decorated Ursula Franklin, a University of Toronto professor emeritus and Companion of the Order of Canada, felt the cuts were a deliberate grab of power by the feudally or fascistically inclined. "As I see it, they are trying through structural changes to permanently decouple citizens from local politics and, using their legislative majority, turn local government into local administration," Franklin wrote in her 1997 essay, "Citizen Politics—New Dimensions to Old Problems: Reflections for Jane Jacobs."

Jacobs herself was much more circumspect. As in 1961, she put on her glasses and looked around for parallels and precedents and connections that, more than theory, rhetoric, or ideological fashions, might explain what was going on in Toronto, in flagging Flint, in New York (where Mayor Michael Bloomberg faced a five-billion-dollar deficit in 2002), and elsewhere. Signals could be found—some of them oddly ancient yet so applicable they startled. "In the last desperate years before Western Rome's collapse," Jacobs recounts in *Dark Age Ahead,* "local governments had

been expunged by imperial decree and were replaced by a centralized military despotism, not a workable organ for governmental judgments and reflections." Not unlike the Roman guard units, who took new powers hoping to enrich themselves, the Ontario Tories duly distributed the gain in the form of tax breaks, which accrued most efficiently—ironically, but not by accident—to those with the highest incomes. Such were the books managed that the provincial government itself, in addition to the major Ontario municipalities, was mired deep in deficit at the time of its defeat in 2003.

In the current decade, as the movers and shakers who benefited from the tax cuts tooled about in premium cars and S.U.V.'s or contemplated which plasma TV to buy—all the while complaining about inadequate public schools, litter, potholes, and profligate poor—could Jane Jacobs be blamed for contending that Rome was burning?

Jacobs with her son Edward, daughter, Burgin, and husband, Robert, in the yard of their first Annex home, in 1968.

The term "pillar of the community" is self-explanatory, but the concept doesn't apply only to revered citizens. "The spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom—they are the pillars of society," wrote the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. In *Dark Age Ahead* Jane Jacobs writes about pillars of our civilization, referring to the broadest, most basic underpinnings of modern culture and commerce. She argues these pillars are deteriorating. An apt, physical city-building analogy might be spalling: attacked by acid rain, freeze-thaw cycles, and time (and sometimes more nefarious forces than neglect) the hardest stone turns to flakes, the greatest columns to dust.

The fatalist would be resigned, the preservationist alerted, and *Dark Age Ahead* is for both. *Dark Age Ahead* devotes a chapter to each of five pillars and why they are failing, concluding the book with a chapter offering ideas for remediation. Fundamentalists of various brands—libertarians, bible-thumping zealots, family-values types, Republicans, former Reform party supporters, officers of the Fraser Institute think tank—might perk up at the list. Jacobs' endangered and vital pillars are the institutions of family and community; the responsible practice of science and technology; tax policy and government "directly in touch with needs and possibilities"; education—mainly post-secondary, but Jacobs has a lot to say about the neighbourhood school; and what the author terms "self-policing by the learned professions." Those on the political left will be disappointed that many of their priorities—"such failings as racism, profligate environmental destruction . . . low turnouts for elections, and the enlarging gulf between rich and poor"—are not listed among the pillars but rather as symptoms of breakdown.

But Jacobs doesn't hold ideologies and abstract theories too dear, and the reader won't find her wisdom to be generally conventional. In the *Dark Age Ahead* chapter "Families Rigged to Fail," no fault is found with homosexual marriages, insufficient churchgoing, or polyglot households—they might offend some, but seem to work: "This world contains households with enormous varieties of members: concubines; apprentices and other students; roomers and boarders." The family pillar is weakening under many other pressures. One is financial, an unfavourable "shelter equation" where the cost of housing, whether rent or mortgage, is consuming too much for too many, "leaving too little for everything else." Jacobs suggests a range of assisted housing would go a long way toward mitigating the problem, but the option no longer seems to exist in public policy. Perversely, money that might help the situation, directly or indirectly, is being returned as tax cuts to the wealthiest citizens, who don't need it.

Some phenomena erode different pillars at once. Car-driven sprawl has superseded more human-scaled business districts and neighbourhoods, as it has eaten farmland, as it generates pollution, as running-costs of cars are among the pressures that eat at families' abilities to meet other needs. "Cars again!" admonished Bruce Ramsey in his May 2nd *Seattle Times* review of *Dark Age Ahead.* "[I]f Jacobs wanted to write about cars . . . she should have done it openly and not disguised it as a book about the eclipse of civilization."

But Jacobs, among others, feels the two are connected, which itself seems like an understatement. The sprawling urban form automobiles begat—at least in North America—has transformed much: the landscape, the environment, the family. Among many factors, family togetherness in vehicles might be measured against driver tedium, lack of exercise, and delayed advancement of certain adult skills. "I walked to school when I was a youngster, unattended," I tell Jacobs. "I did, too," she says. "Or, usually, I roller-skated to school."

"What does it mean, when kids don't learn the transit system?" I ask.

"Just sitting there in the streetcar or whatever vehicle it is, looking at the other people, you see they aren't monsters," she says. "You see that they're going to work the same as you are, or going job-hunting. You see that there are all kinds of people. These everyday connotations of life are important. I've known people who wouldn't go on the subway or a bus because they're afraid to. And that's a very bad breakdown."

Reviewers, each in their day, quibbled with the titles of Jacobs' books. "Take the title itself, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,*" declared

FRANK LENNON

a writer in the May, 1962, number of the planning magazine *American City.* "Obviously no great American city has died." (Then and now, one could argue the point.) "*Dark Age Ahead* is a pretentious title for this book," wrote Ramsey in the *Seattle Times.* "A title this far off from an author this famous cannot have come from the publisher. It must be hers." A bigger question raised by the critics: Was the author living up to her responsibility to the reader? Jacobs acknowledges she did not raise all the questions, make all the connections, or provide all the answers. Humility is a virtue to some, a fault to others. "[T]hese discussions are cursory in the extreme," wrote Michiko Kakutani in a particularly devastating critique in the *New York Times,* finding it all hard to grasp. "Despite its Cassandralike title, this book reads less like a convincing wake-up call than a collection of random jottings, glossed with unnecessary daubs of hyperbole and only occasional flashes of vintage Jacobs insight." The book's critique of auto-driven city building set people off. There were "many startling, intriguing ideas to be quarried from its pages," wrote David Evans, the opinions-page editor of the *Edmonton Journal,* finding in the end that the book seemed "more likely to provoke irritation than anything else. . . . The current writer, for example, is from Toronto and devoutly believes in public transit and walk-everywhere neighbourhoods." By about page fifty, Evans felt like "buying a big diesel pickup to take home and drive past all those trendy shoppes and yuppie infill duplexes."

Those with long memories—Jacobs herself now, surely—will see the similarities between the reception accorded *Dark Age Ahead* and that given *Death and Life.* The latter pushed the envelope of what people were ready to understand about cities in 1961. It angered the movers and shakers then involved in urban renewal. Among those rankled was the then-reigning guru of city building, Lewis Mumford, whose six-hundred-and-fifty-seven-page *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* was published almost simultaneously with *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* Imagine the stern scholar in a bookstore, in 1961, comparing the two dust covers (no pictures, similar typeface) as they sat side by side on the new-releases shelf. Mumford, too, had reservations about clear-cut urban renewal, but he was a theorist and an academic. His heavy volume, which delved deeply into ancient history, was a vital account. But where *Death and Life* delighted in the city, Mumford had a more sober view of cities as an intractable problem. He was cordial to Jacobs in personal letters to her, but to others called her "a confident but sloppy novice." By 1965 he went public with a measure of contempt. In one review of a book about early planned cities, he refers to "Jane Jacobs's preposterous mass of historic misinformation and contemporary misinterpretation in her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*" that, he wrote, "exposed her ignorance of the whole planning movement."

Jacobs would, within a decade, topple Mumford from his throne, but for now it appeared no one was listening to either writer. Clear-cut urban renewal remained the way planners and developers sought to move communities into the future—the only way, apparently, they knew. The term "historic preservation" did not seem to exist; any concept of the rehabilitation of urban fabric existed only on the margins. On May 17, 1966, a full five years after *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was published, reviewed, and dismissed by those with the most power to change directions, demolition crews started hacking at 27–33 Champlain Street, in Burlington, Vermont, to begin clear-cut demolition of twenty-seven acres of the city's mixed-use downtown. It was a case right out of Jacobs' book: a neighbourhood officially declared a slum to become eligible for federal urban-renewal funding and seized by eminent domain. On closer inspection, the neighbourhood had much good architecture, many thriving businesses, and an ingrained community life, and by this time it was surely clear that physically eliminating places couldn't eliminate problems. But residents' earnest and at times angry protests failed to move the project's developers (who stood to lose much, and would) or city fathers, and demolition of a major swath of the city went ahead. The detached box-like buildings that were constructed sporadically over the next generation failed to produce thriving businesses or generate neighbourhood

vitality. Investors lost interest long before the area achieved a critical mass of any kind. The project failed and, almost forty years later, in 2004, the most publicly visible lakeside property in an important New England city remains underdeveloped.

But if the detailed messages of *Death and Life* only simmered in the nineteen-sixties, the sprawling automotive landscape was being noticed. In 1964, Peter Blake, managing editor of *Architectural Forum*—the trade journal where Jane Jacobs had worked—published *God's Own Junkyard,* explicitly illustrating how the era's shopping centres, motel strips and gas-station alleys (which, interestingly, now look quaint and welcoming beside today's exponentially vaster highway strips) were conquering pristine landscape.

Motor vehicles and North American life seem so interconnected at so many levels that not to deconstruct their impact would be to tell no story. In *Dark Age Ahead,* Jacobs identifies how the Great Depression gave rise to widespread support in North America for substantial, active policies to ensure full employment. Such policies were driving forces behind such monumental projects as the United States interstate highway system, one of the largest construction projects ever undertaken, whose transformation of the transportation system gave the auto industry an easy ride—perhaps too easy. Jacobs notes that the U.S. auto industry has failed to lead the business, its profits riding increasingly on fads such as S.U.V.'s, which essentially recycle existing low-tech pickup-truck technology. They have failed to innovate as major foreign automakers have, particularly the Japanese, who pushed the U.S automakers out of the backbone of the market for small and mid-size cars.

In the nineteen-eighties, the *Washington Post* reporter Joel Garreau hit the road to find out just what community was out there on the sprawling edge. In *Edge City,* his resulting urban manifesto, he challenged the ideas presented by Jacobs, among others, finding real community in surprising places—mostly indoors, off parking lots—but community nonetheless. One example he gave was the seafood counter at the Yaohan Plaza in Fort Lee, New Jersey, where "for eighty linear feet, it spreads out not only six different kinds of sliced octopus—fresh—but snow crab legs next to broiled eels near Chilean abalone next to geoduck sashimi, adjacent to a display of spiny sea urchins with golden, creamy, sensuous interiors intended to be eaten raw." Lovers of big cities often remark on the array of choices a large population will support; this Japanese-flavoured shopping centre made the point that there was life, and choice, and even multiculturalism, out on the edge. "Give Edge Cities time before you lose your composure," Garreau wrote. Yet he admitted it was physically disparate, disconnected culture, focusing on indoor pockets and corporate campuses. It wasn't a complete, satisfying environment—a promenade on the Champs Élysées, an afternoon shopping in London, a ride on Toronto's Queen streetcar. Looking around he still had to write: "If Edge City is our new standard form of American metropolis—if Edge City is the agglomeration of all we feel we want and need—will these places ever be diverse, urbane, and livable? Will our Edge Cities ever be full of agreeable surprises? Will they ever come together gracefully?"

Could the case that there is insidious decay in such diverse things as sprawl, in accounting scandals and impropriety in trusted professions, in cuts to funding for public education that short-change university students of wisdom, or in corruption in science, have been better put in *Dark Age Ahead?* Jacobs wondered herself. She urged people to join her grappling with the monster—the amorphous, interconnected issues that almost defied grappling with. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., commented that living "calls for great and combined intellectual efforts." Jane Jacobs wrote in *Dark Age Ahead,* "I can only apologize for being less omniscient than I should be as I take up a responsibility—which I hope readers will also assume—for trying to do the small bit I can to give stabilizing correction a push."

ALFRED HOLDEN

Jacobs at a symposium on Dark Age Ahead held at Hart House on June 21.

It was gently put, considering the topic and the message. But inevitably, as it did in 1961, the rocking boat made many feel scolded, miffed, affronted. "*Dark Age Ahead* is a good example of the crumbling of a sixth key pillar of civilization that Jacobs fails to mention: the ability of would-be opinion leaders to communicate persuasively with people who don't agree with them," wrote the *Edmonton Journal's* Evans. Nonetheless, out there on the car-driven Canadian Prairies, *Dark Age Ahead* was propelled to No. 2 on the *Journal's* bestseller list and ranked in the non-fiction Top Ten throughout Canada for most of the summer of 2004.

From the left side of the political spectrum came a critique from the artist and compulsive letter-writer Mendelson Joe, who "escaped" Toronto for the nearby Almaguin Highlands in 2000. "Jane Jacobs is about two decades too late with her 'plea for us to awake in time,'" he wrote me in response to my May 16th review of *Dark Age Ahead,* published in the *Toronto Star.* On the back of a postcard of one of his paintings showing a landscape of fume-spewing vehicles rushing toward a brown sky, under a fume-spewing helicopter, Joe wrote, "We are pathetic self-centred slobs who hate our children." He may have been right. But were his pictures getting the message out?

Milton wrote, in the style of his times, "when a City shall be as it were besieged and blocked about, her navigable river infested, inroads and incursions round, defiances and battle oft rumoured to be marching up even to her walls, and suburb trenches, that then the people, or the greater part, more than at other times, wholly taken up with the study of highest and most important matters to be reformed, should be disputing, reasoning, reading, inventing, discoursing, even to a rarity, and admiration, things not before discoursed or written of."

This tract from *Areopagitica* is considered one of the founding essays of free speech. It is, today, inscribed in gold lettering around the perimeter of the Great Hall in Hart House at the University of Toronto, where a roomful of smart people interested in the welfare of Canada's largest and most unfortunately besieged city—and in other cities, too—gathered on June 21st to confer and debate *Dark Age Ahead.* The guest of honour: Jane Jacobs, of Albany Avenue, this day dressed in a lavender shirt and black slacks, her trademark papier mâché ear horn at the ready.

Other guest speakers were primped and prepared, and sprinkled through the audience, seated in the hall's sturdy straight-backed chairs, were various champions of the city. Over in a front row, David Crombie, former mayor of Toronto, the Conservative politician under whose watch the last renaissance of the city took hold in the nineteen-seventies. Seated near him was Anne Golden, former chief of the United Way, who in the mid-nineteen-nineties penned a governance plan for Toronto-region municipalities that argued they needed more, not fewer, powers to thrive. Over there by the stained-glass window, smiling and chatting as always, was the bow-tied John Honderich, just stepped down as publisher of the *Toronto Star.* Canada's largest newspaper had advocated Toronto's amalgamation, but as the city's fiscal position spiralled down in the late nineteen-nineties, Honderich made the notion of a new deal for Canadian cities the *Star's* crusade. The expression, of course, came from Franklin Roosevelt's push for reforms in the United States that helped ordinary people during the Great Depression. Its meaning in twenty-first-century Toronto was more literal, calling for new arrangements to bring the city, and by now other major Canadian cities, the powers and income it needed to meet its responsibilities.

Jacobs in 1969, shortly after arriving in Toronto.

TORONTO STAR

But debate is an untidy thing. In full bloom it is like Milton's sentence on the wall, a haze from which the truths must be coaxed and tested. One of the speakers that day was Robert Lucas, winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Economics. While he found much to admire in Jacobs' economic observations in her book *The Economy of Cities,* Lucas took issue with the basic message of *Dark Age Ahead.* "I don't see the darkness," he told the *Globe and Mail's* John Barber. Like Jacobs, he felt humans were abandoning their agrarian roots, but where she saw decay undermining diverse supporting institutions, he foresaw an era of fabulous growth based on technological advance.

It was a familiar juxtaposition: the theorist versus the pragmatist, the high-octane expert versus the aged bohemian, whose only credential in academia is her track record. "For her part, Ms. Jacobs graciously accepted the criticism and cheered the good news . . . with its promise of limitless growth in innovative cities," Barber reported the next day. "'That pleases me,' she said from her front-row seat in the Great Hall at Hart House. 'I hope it's right.'"

At its heart—tying the five pillars together—seems to be one thriving problem in particular: greed. It has so mutated and benefited from spin and lawmakers serving their own vested interest since the nineteen-eighties that, today, greed is wearing many virtuous masks: thrift, efficiency, necessity, bravery. The greed-packaged-as-virtue champions are extreme political parties such as the Republicans in the United States, the disgraced Harris Conservatives in Ontario, and the ever-morphing Reform/Alliance/Conservatives on Canada's federal scene. All found a formula for electoral success in a form of Newspeak whereby damaging policy—cuts to education, municipalities, services, safety nets—is presented as reckoning on behalf of ordinary people fed up with government. It was sold with decisive-sounding tough talk, strategic use of mind-boggling numbers or, most effective of all, through complex screens such as tax cuts that let basic mathematical laws do the dirty work. But everyone was promised something with tax cuts, and under that ruse, framed by the thrifty notion of tax reduction as opposed to wasteful bureaucracy and welfare, the burden of running cities and countries was shifted to those who had less, could pay less, and who, arguably, ultimately demanded less, too.

Greed does not figure prominently in *Dark Age Ahead.* Jacobs more broadly attacks fundamentalism (in whose fold she included neo-conservative politics) as severe dogma that does not sufficiently take into consideration complex realities and the greater good of society. "Neo-conservatives, they had a notion of efficiency, I suppose they still do, as stripping things down to the minimum," Jacobs says. It is analogous to the individual living close to the line, she suggests. The risks were illustrated by the 2003 SARS crisis in Toronto. Years of underfunding of medical infrastructure ended up "leaving us pretty helpless if a disaster came along like SARS," unable to respond effectively either in the lab or at the hospital. There was no room for "redundancy," sufficient systems and personnel to back up other systems and personnel in times of crisis, and keep stress at bay in normal times. Redundancy is a misleading word, implying waste, but consider it has long been the cardinal rule in the design of aircraft—systems are duplicated and sets of alternative controls installed to prevent disaster in case one fails. It raises the question: Is close-to-the-line

managing not efficiency but, in fact, an expression of greed, where decision-makers seeking shifts to benefit their own constituencies consciously sacrifice the broader good?

So Conservatives won't be happy with *Dark Age Ahead.* By the same token, Jacobs finds little solace in the performances of other, more moderate, administrations in Ontario and Ottawa. "A lot of people think the N.D.P. is different from others, but no, it has a history of belief in centralized power and certainly didn't give it up when it was the government [in Ontario]," she says. Centralization remains one of her bugaboos because, she says, it results in "one size fits all" policies that ignore local conditions. Canada's best governments in recent decades have been minority governments, she says, arguing they fostered a brokering and bargaining that cut through the tendency of majority-governing parties to pursue policies serving one ideology.

So opinionated, yet so gracious; what a dimension it adds to reckoning about Jane Jacobs. Those with a difference of opinion can't get mad at her for saying she's right, as she takes pains to say she may not be. Surely maddening is the record—the haunting rightness of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* against which Jacobs and *Dark Age Ahead* must now be measured in the context of different and extraordinarily troubled, complicated, and brutal times. It is one thing to make an airtight argument, fully reasoned, complete, and utterly persuasive, that reviewers embrace on a biblical scale. Harder is to grapple—on scales impossibly large—with the directions of an age and to discern comprehensible patterns we can learn from.

I interviewed Jacobs again in September, this time in front of a sold-out crowd at the Harbourfront Reading Series. Jacobs told the audience it took a generation for the ideas in *Death and Life* to have impact. Can we expect the same of *Dark Age Ahead?* Probably, she said.

"Do we have that long?" I asked. She wasn't sure. ☞

Dark Age Ahead is available from Random House and was nominated for a 2004 Governor General's Literary Award. Alfred Holden is the assistant financial editor of the Toronto Star and a monthly columnist for the Annex Gleaner. His work appears regularly in Taddle Creek.

THE BETTER WAY

A local typographer has done his part to preserve one of Toronto's small charms.

A city's iconography needn't always be as grandiose as a building or a statue. It can also take the shape of something so simple and transparent that most will walk by it on a day-to-day basis without taking particular notice—and yet will still always expect it to be there. Take the black-and-white street signs that have long served the intersections of Toronto. Though slightly bastardized over the years, they have remained largely unchanged since their introduction in 1947—so much so that the new street signs currently being introduced by the city (so large and flat, their typography seeming almost like an afterthought) are jarring by comparison. Looking at them, one can't help but feel a small part of the city's charm and uniqueness is lost with each sign replaced.

David Vereschagin feels the same way about another of Toronto's signposts. A typographer as well as a book and magazine designer, Vereschagin was quickly taken with the distinctive lettering gracing the walls and signage of the city's subway system when he arrived in Toronto from Edmonton, in 1983. "I knew it wasn't an existing typeface that I knew of," he says. "When people wanted that look, they usually went with Futura. It struck me as being unique."

In use since the opening of the subway's original twelve stations, in 1954, the unnamed typeface eventually began to fall out of use as new stations were built and old stations were refurbished in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, a variety of different typefaces taking its place. "No doubt this was cheaper and easier and considered 'close enough,'" Vereschagin says. "The squashed Helvetica Bold in the Queen station is particularly atrocious."

In 1992, Vereschagin began planning a way to preserve this part of Toronto's design culture, though it would be another seven years before he would begin in earnest. "In 1999 . . . I finally got around to making a systematic visit of all the Toronto subway stations that had examples of the old lettering still in use," he says. "Where I could physically reach the lettering I took sample rubbings by laying a piece of tracing paper over the lettering and lightly rubbing a soft pencil over the outlines. Where I couldn't reach the lettering, I took photographs." This past spring, Vereschagin finally released the aptly named Toronto Subway font.

As the original typeface had only upper-case characters and a few punctuation marks, Vereschagin added numerous symbols—the question mark, the exclamation mark, the euro sign, etc.—and also took the liberty of designing lower-case characters based on the principles he gleaned from the original lettering.

Though he has found examples of the typeface—handwritten—on the subway's original engineering drawings, dating back to 1948, Vereschagin has not yet been able to determine who designed the original lettering. "The naive aspects of the subway lettering hinted to me right away that it was probably not the work of an actual type designer," he says. "It seems, instead, that it may have originated with the T.T.C. engineering department. . . . Whether this was one person's lettering style or the style used by T.T.C. engineering illustrators generally, I don't yet know."

The Toronto Transit Commission revived the use of its unnamed typeface on the walls of its new Sheppard subway line in 2002, a practice Vereschagin hopes will continue, despite the fact he has still not told the commission of his creation.

Toronto's street signs should be so lucky.

—Conan Tobias

WONDERFUL

BY ELYSE FRIEDMAN

Crying. That was the last thing George heard before he left the house. Had he shut the door behind him? He couldn't remember. He felt nothing, not even the cold, though he'd left without a coat. Fat snowflakes stuck to his sweater and hair as he moved toward the centre of town, to the bridge and the falls.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Bayliss."

One of the Cole children doing something on the lawn. Snowman?

"You all right, Mr. Bayliss?"

George kept walking. He kept walking until he made the Edgewater and his favourite bar stool.

"Hey, George. What are you doing in here on Christmas Eve?"

"The usual, please."

Simon scooped some ice into a glass and poured the Bushmills. "Everything O.K.?"

"Make it a double."

"Hmm. That doesn't sound so good. On the tab?"

"No." George fished out his last twenty and dropped it on the bar. "That's fine," he said, moving away from Simon's concerned and inquiring gaze to a table in the corner where he chugged the whiskey in three swallows. No burn in the throat. And he was as sober as before. He lit a match and held his hand over the flame. He thought about Marianne's tears. He thought about the kids. "God," he said in his mind, "I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me . . . show me the way. I'm at the end of my rope."

George waited. He scanned the bar. The Ryan twins were playing darts. A group of teens was playing pool. Everyone else seemed to be involved in the electronic trivia game lighting up the monitors suspended from the ceiling. There was music from the jukebox. A rock 'n' roll version of "Frosty the Snow Man." Andrea, the good waitress, stopped at his table.

"Hey, George. Merry Christmas." She placed his empty glass on her tray. "Listen, thanks again for putting in the word with Simon. I don't how I would've made it through the holidays without this job. You want another? I'm buying."

Before he could answer, the heavily loaded tray slipped from Andrea's hand and spilled onto the table and George.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" She plucked a glass and an ashtray from his lap but hesitated before brushing away ice cubes and cigarette butts. "Sorry about that. Oh jeez!"

"It's O.K.," George said. "Don't worry about it."

"Sorry!"

George got up and left the bar. He walked down the street and across the bridge to the cliff on the north bank of the river, just below the falls. He moved close to the edge and the swirling black water. He stared hard at that swirling black water.

He jumped.

Strangely, he felt nothing as he entered the river, except perhaps a momentary flash of relief. But seconds later, as his body surfaced, he was seized by a blast of intolerable pain, one that seemed to trigger in each of his cells an overpowering desire to live. George sucked for air, but his lungs felt as if they had been squeezed shut. Myriad confused images of Marianne, the kids, his brother, and his mother cut through his brain as he thrashed in the water, determined to survive. Pure will propelled him toward the edge, and just when he knew he couldn't last another minute in the freeze, his feet found bottom.

As George struggled onto the embankment, a stranger appeared out of nowhere—an old man with ruddy cheeks, twinkling eyes, and charmingly disheveled white hair. He kicked George back into the river.

"Help!" George screamed. "Please!"

"I thought you wanted to die?" the man said.

"No. I want to live!" George hoisted himself half out of the water.

The man smiled benevolently and kicked him back in. "Just relax," he said.

"Please! My wife—my children need me!"

The man chuckled. "Trust me, George, with an eight-hundred-thousand-dollar life-insurance policy, you're worth more to them dead than alive."

"How do you know that? Who are you?"

"Somebody's dying to meet me," he said to the sky, with an aw-shucks chuckle. The man crouched and extended his hand for a shake. "Terrance Angel II. Very pleased to make your acquaintance."

George grabbed his arm and held on with every iota of remaining strength. If he was going down, this lunatic was going with him.

"Oh, Georgie," the man said, yanking him onto the bank with one effortless pull. "Why bother?"

George was shivering too violently to speak. Even after Terrance removed his overcoat and draped it around him, he shook and shook. He was disoriented, confused. He could not connect the image of the smiling codger—now wearing old-fashioned long johns and rubber boots—with the sadistic behaviour recently displayed. It was like getting punched in the throat by someone's granny at a Sunday-school picnic. Terrance sighed and put his hands on George's shoulders. He felt a tremendous warmth surge through him then, and in less than a minute his shaking had subsided, the pain had flown, and his clothes, inexplicably, had dried.

"There now," Terrance said, helping him to his feet. "Are you sure you don't want to hop back in?" He gestured to the river and patted George on the bum.

"Of course I'm sure. What the—"

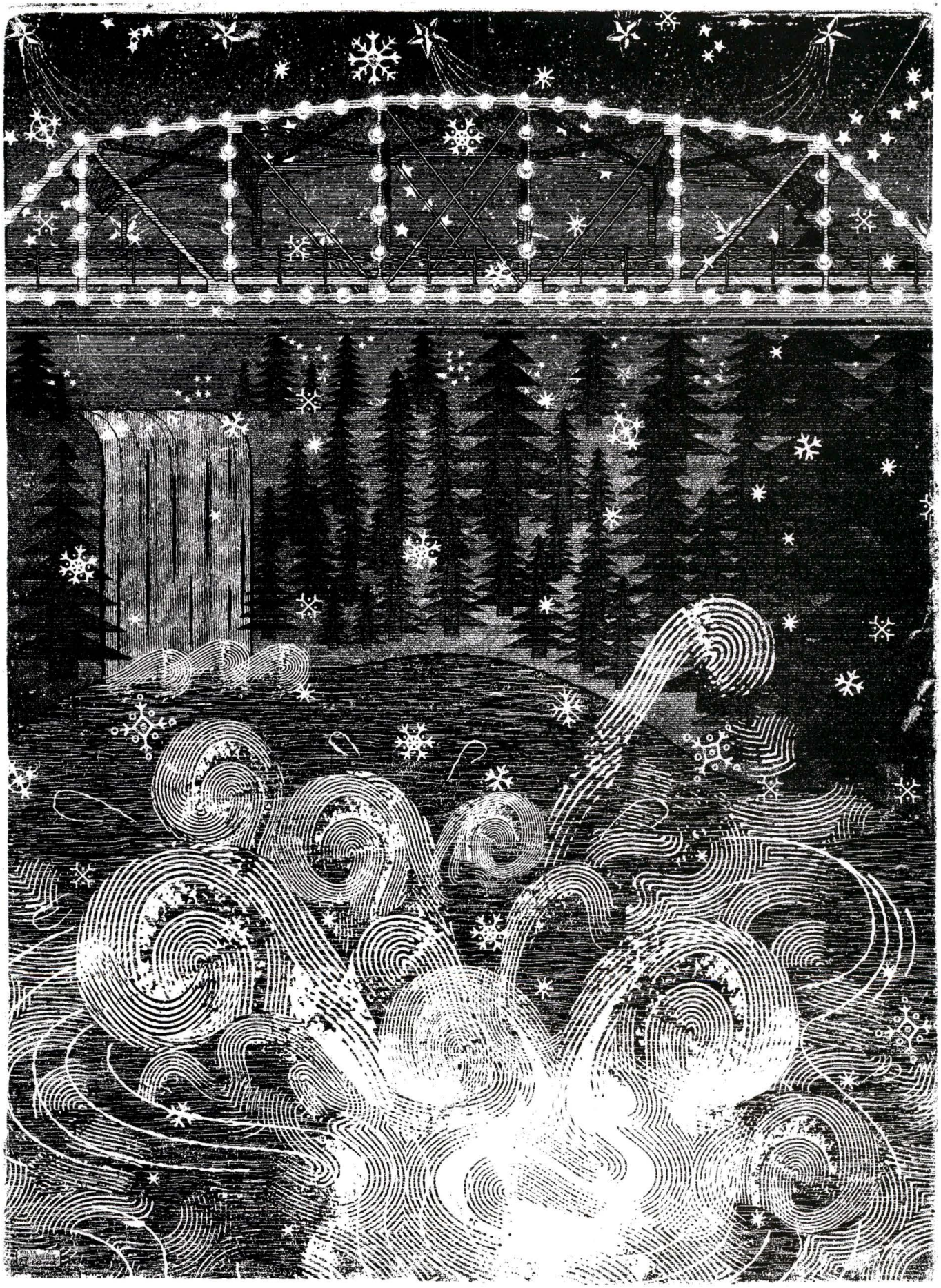
"Because if you're worried about Marianne and little Matthew and Zoey, I can assure you they'll be just fine on their own."

"Oh really."

"Indubitably."

"Look," George said, doffing the madman's coat, "if you knew anything

IAN PHILLIPS



about me you would know that my wife and children love and depend on me."

"Is that right?"

"As a matter of fact, quite a few people in this town love and depend on me."

"Really?"

"Oh, I'm not saying I'm the most important person in the world, but I'm a good man, an honest man, and I make a difference in people's lives. I make a difference in this community."

Terrance smiled gently. "Well, George, I think you may be exaggerating your impact just a tad. Not only would it not be the end of the world if you drowned yourself in the river tonight, it wouldn't really matter much if you had never been born at all."

George gasped at the coot's audacity. "How dare you," he sputtered.

"It's true," Terrance said. Then, looking heavenward, he asked, "May I?" A star twinkled as if in response. Terrance grinned and took George by the arm. "Come along," he said.

"Don't touch me! You're crazy."

"Crazy? Why, if I'm so crazy, how come your clothes are dry?"

George opened his mouth to answer, but no answer arrived.

"You've been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what life in Fenton Falls would be like without you."

"Hang on a sec," George said. "This reminds me of someth—"

"Come along. Let's get a drink at the Edgewater and warm ourselves up."

"Happy holidays, gentlemen. What can I get you?" Simon didn't seem at all surprised that George had returned so soon to the bar.

"Glass of milk, please," Terrance said.

"And I'll have another."

"Another . . . milk?" Simon said.

"No. The usual."

"And that would be?"

"Come off it, Sime. You know very well."

Simon smiled. "Sorry, must be a bit foggy tonight. Refresh my memory."

"What you served me half an hour ago; what you've been serving me practically every weeknight for the past ten—no, more like twelve years."

Simon looked amused. "Listen, pal, maybe you'd better stick with milk. Or coffee. How about a nice hot cup of coffee?"

"I want a Bushmills on the rocks, and you bloody well know it."

Simon moved off and began preparing the drinks.

Terrance said, "Relax, George. He doesn't know you."

"Of course he knows me."

"How can he if you've never been born?"

George laughed and shook his head. "Whatever." But something in Terrance's smile made him pause. He scanned the bar. The Ryan twins were still playing darts. The same group of teens was playing pool. The monitors still flashed their trivia. Bad Christmas music continued to issue from the jukebox.

"Cheers." Simon said, placing their drinks on the bar. "That'll be six seventy-five."

"On the tab, please." George lifted his glass and sipped.

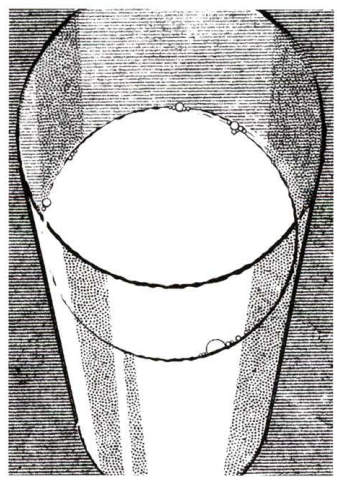
"And what tab would that be?"

"My tab."

Simon's amiable expression morphed into something less benign.

"George Bayliss's tab—you know, *George Bayliss,* the guy who approved the loan that allowed you to buy this joint in the first place. The guy who gave you a ten-dollar tip a half hour ago. "

Simon sighed. "O.K., you know what, pal, I don't know what you're on about, but I'm really not in the mood. That's six seventy-five, O.K.?"



George knew he had spent his last twenty but thought perhaps he could squeak six seventy-five onto one of his beleaguered credit cards. He reached for his wallet, but there was no wallet. His pants pockets were empty. He must have lost it in the river.

Simon folded his arms across his chest.

"Do me a favour and pay for this round," George said to Terrance.

"Oh, I don't have any cash." Terrance giggled, a milk moustache shining atop his lip. "Angels don't carry money, you know."

"O.K., that's it—" Simon leaned forward on the bar.

"Wait," George interrupted. "Get Andrea. Andrea offered to buy me a drink earlier."

"Andrea? Andrea who?" Simon asked.

"Andrea Sloane."

"Andrea Sloane's not here," Simon said, looking around the bar.

"What are you talking about? She's working tonight; she was my waitress a half hour ago."

"O.K., Merry Christmas. Drinks on the house, boys, but I'd like you to finish up quick and skedaddle. Savvy?"

"I tell you, Andrea Sloane is working tonight!"

"Andrea Sloane doesn't work here, pal. She's never worked here. O.K.? Good night." Simon snatched up their glasses and emptied them into the sink.

"Much obliged," Terrance said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "A Merry Christmas to you, sir." He slid off his bar stool and took George by the arm. "Come along, George."

"But I just saw her. She spilled a tray of drinks on me. She thanked me for getting her this job!"

Terrance pushed George toward the exit. He manoeuvred him out the door and onto the snowy street. "No, George, you didn't help Andrea Sloane get a job. How could you recommend her for a job if you had never been born?"

George stared at Terrance. "But she just said . . . Oh, I'm confused. I could've sworn she just said . . ."

"What, George?"

"That she didn't know how she would've made it through the holidays without that job. She has a son you know. He's five."

"I guess we'd better check on her, then. Since you weren't alive to get her that job, she must be in a bit of pickle, eh? Come on." Terrance took George by the elbow and steered him up the street and around the corner to Mercer's Department Store. He tapped on the glass picture window. "Have a gander."

George peered through spray-on snow, past the Xbox display, to the cash counter where Andrea was ringing up a teddy bear dressed in a Santa Claus suit. She looked different than she had in the

CONTEMPT

How boring it must've been
for Brigitte Bardot's stand-in,
lying nude on her stomach,
hour after hour, as Godard
called for yet another close-up,
tilting the camera like a telescope
aimed at the heresy of two moons.

Perhaps she yawned, watching
gaffers move light around
a soundstage, arranging
the solar system that would
best illuminate Brigitte's bottom—
or perhaps leafed through *Life,*
smoking cigarettes.
It would've been cold,
her nipples stiff and irrefutable
as she lay waiting for the director's O.K.,
his ultimate approval of light.

Only then would the real Brigitte
finally appear on-set, stripping
even as she sauntered into the scene,
her clothes collecting lazily behind
like the trail of a sluggish comet—and

only then would our stand-in
(now lingering just off-screen,
robe cinched) feel that sadness
particular to heavenly bodies
that have abandoned their orbits.
Sometimes the universe must adjust
itself to the arrival of stars.

—JASON GURIEL

bar. Her hair was now in braids. And she was wearing a green sweater instead of a red jersey.

"That's weird," George said, as he wandered to the entrance and into the store. "Andrea."

She looked up.

"You work here now?"

"Um . . . do I know you?"

"You don't know me?" George said, approaching the counter.

She smiled, confused. "Sorry. Should I?"

"You don't know me? George Bayliss?"

"Oh," said Andrea, handing her customer a credit-card slip to sign. "Are you related to Harvey Bayliss?"

"Of course. He's my brother."

"One sec," Andrea said, completing the transaction. "Merry Christmas!" She handed the bagged bear to the customer and turned to George. "I didn't know Mr. Bayliss had a brother. I guess you must be in town for the holidays?"

"I guess."

"Hey, are you all right? Where are you going?"

George stumbled out of the store and slumped on the bench where Terrance was seated, head back, mouth open, catching snowflakes on his tongue.

"This is crazy. I don't get it."

"It's really very simple, George. You weren't there to put in a word to Simon about Andrea, so she had to keep trying to find work. That's how she landed the job at Mercer's. She doesn't know it yet, but she'll be managing the place someday."

"Oh."

"And because they close in half an hour, Andrea won't be toiling all night in a smoky bar. She'll be able to spend Christmas Eve at home with little Timmy."

George sat on the bench and took it all in. He took it all in and said, "O.K. Fine. Maybe I didn't have such a big impact on Andrea Sloane's life. But she said she knew my brother, Harvey."

"So?"

"So my brother wouldn't be alive today if weren't for me."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. That's right. When we were kids we went tob—"

"Tobogganing. I know." Terrance stood up and began walking toward the park. "And Harvey's Snow Warrior went out of control, and he slid onto the river and went through the ice, and you sped down the hill and inched your way out and lay down on your belly and fished him from the water and blah blah blah blah blah." Terrance said it as if it were a boring speech he'd been forced to recite every morning for ten years.

"And let's not forget," George said, trailing behind, "Harvey's practically a hero in this town. He saved the life of a pregnant woman who was in a car accident! Pulled her right out of a burning automobile and rushed her to the hospital in his car. He saved two lives that day, which means I saved three, if you think about it."

"Well, George, that's not entirely accurate." Terrance pointed to a steep hill at the south end of the park in which they now stood. "Shall we go back to that supposedly fateful day?"

Before George could answer Terrance waved his hands, and in a flash they were standing at the base of the tobogganing hill. But now it was day. The sun was shining, dogs were barking, children were moving up and down the hill. George recognized his peers from long ago: There was little Marcy Hargreaves, and there was Michael Weigand and Daryl Samotowka and Cheryl Fields. And there was his future wife, Marianne Cunningham, so cute in her pink parka and woolly white cap. "This is incredible!" George said, running up the slope, dodging toboggans. "I don't see me. Where am I?"

"Duh. You were never born."

"Where's Harvey?"

"He's not here," Terrance said. "Harvey's at home, watching television. Remember? It was your idea to go tobogganing that day. Harvey wanted to stay home and watch cartoons."

"I don't recall . . ."

"If you'd never been born, Harvey wouldn't have ended up in the river in the first place."

"Oh. So he'd still be around to rescue that pregnant woman when the time came?"

"Right. But it's not such a good thing, George, truth be told."

"How can you say that?"

Terrance waved his hands and they were alone again in the dark park. "That woman's son, Paul, is going to grow up and become a serial killer. He'll take the lives of sixteen prostitutes and one towtruck driver before he's caught."

"Holy Hannah."

"Now had you been born and *failed* to save your brother, that would've made an impact."

"Oh . . . But wait a minute, what about all my civic actions? You know, I spearheaded the Be Nice, Clear Your Ice campaign. Who knows who might have slipped on a sidewalk and killed themselves if it weren't for me?"

"*I* know, actually. Nobody slipped."

"Well, what about the Ride-A-Thon I organized? We raised funds to erect a statue of our town's founder."

"Didn't think you'd inquire about that one. Let's check it out."

George followed Terrance to the lighted south entrance of the park where the bust of William Fenton III should have been sitting.

"Aha! Not here, is it? Just this puny little plaque that's been here forever."

Terrance gave George a pity smile. "Well, you got me there, baby. It's true. If you had never been born, that chunk of bronze would not exist."

"I admit it's not much," George said, suddenly sheepish.

"Especially since the artist you commissioned did a terrible job."

"You think?"

"Looked as if Fenton himself had been made of bronze, if you know what I mean. And that pink marble pedestal . . ."

"I'm not really an expert." George chewed a hangnail. "But you know something, pal, it's not about the art," he said, rallying, "it's about the *pride*."

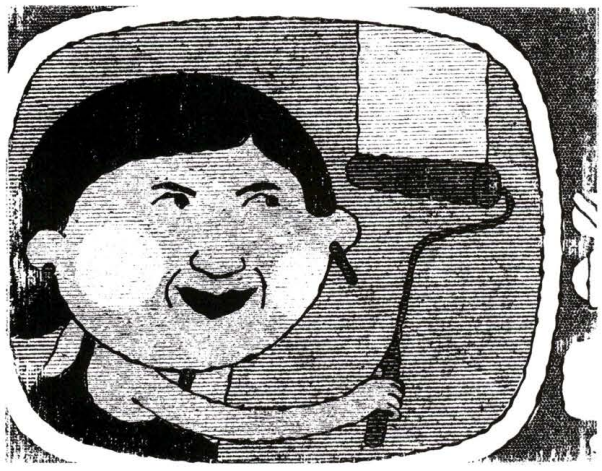
"O.K."

"And anyway," he said, following Terrance out of the park, "there are other things I've done. Truly worthwhile things."

"I'm all ears, Georgie."

Well, what about my mom? I've been giving her three hundred and twenty dollars a month for the past five years. Without me—"

"Social security. Plus, with only one child to raise, she was able to sock away some dough for her golden years."



"Oh. O.K. Well, what about all the risky loans I've approved for people in this town? All the opportunities I've created and dreams I've fulfilled?"

"Without you around to do so, the Morton family took over the savings and loan. Heidi Morton does your job."

"Really? Heidi Morton."

"Turns out she's just as nutty and generous as you when it comes to doling out the cashola. But unlike you, when the bank founders, she has a wealthy father to step in and personally save her and the company."

"I see."

"Are you all right, George?"

"Yeah, I'm just—I feel a bit dizzy."

"Do you want to sit down?"

"No." George took a couple of big breaths. "No, sitting down is not what I want to do."

"Hey, where are you going? Hey wait up . . ."

"I'm going home," George called out. "I have to see my wife and kids."

"But you don't have a wife and kids."

"Well, Marianne then," he yelled, as he jogged down Wellington Street. He sped up and turned right on Croft, then left on Pineway until he stood, panting, in front of his house—No. 72. Terrance was waiting on the porch when he arrived.

"I detest jogging," Terrance said.

"Does Marianne still live here?" The house looked the same, except for a more elaborate Christmas display, which included a rooftop Santa and sleigh complete with illuminated reindeers that appeared to have just lifted off the shingles and taken flight.

"Yes," Terrance said. "Marianne always loved this drafty old house. But wait," he caught George's wrist before he could ring the bell. "I'd better show you something first." Terrance waved his hand, and in a flash, he and George were standing in the living room of 72 Pineway. "Don't worry," he said. "I've made it so they can't see or hear us."

Two children were watching television and eating a Chocolate Orange. The house smelled like roast turkey and balsam fir.

"Is that the one what stole Christmas?" said the girl who looked a lot like Zoey but wasn't Zoey. Her small face was smeared with chocolate.

"No, stupid head," said the boy who looked quite a lot like Matthew but wasn't Matthew. "That's Billy Bob Thornton."

"This is very disturbing," George said. "Where's Marianne?"

"Upstairs. But you might not want to—"

George found Marianne in the bedroom. She was seated cross-legged on the bed, watching her favourite decorating show on television. And seated behind her, also watching the decorating show—something George had long refused to do—was Dennis Cole. He was massaging Marianne's shoulders.

"Yeah," said Marianne, "that's good right there."

"I don't believe this. I really can't believe this."

"Why not?" Terrance said. "Dennis Cole is a nice guy and, as it happens, a good father and a fine husband to Marianne."

"Yeah, I know he's a nice guy. He's my neighbour, or at least he was my neighbour. I just—damn it. I always thought Marianne and I were soulmates, you

TOQUE

No cloud, the drop of a penny, a sign from the sky.
Nothing stark as that would
mark this walk our last together—
nothing subtle either.
Not the wide-porch houses I had often
spoken of liking.
Not the bench in the park, the
sugar maple trees,
their leaves.
Not the woollen toque you brought
along in case of rain.

Except that I was longing for you to give it to me,
as tender—and thought that mere
desire would suffice.

—ELANA WOLFF

know? Like they say that each person has one true match out there. I thought we were 'it' for each other."

"So you figured if you'd never been born Marianne would remain single, grow old before her time, and become a dour spinster with bad glasses and her hair pulled too tight in a bun?"

"Well . . . something like that. Yeah."

"Sorry, George. If you want to know the truth, this is Marianne's third marriage."

"No way."

"Way. She also had a number of lively dalliances before getting hitched the first time. And not just with men."

George sank onto the edge of the bed and stared at the floor.

"Is that not the most hideous window treatment you've ever seen?" said Dennis.

"Hildi's the worst," said Marianne. "But I like the pink paint. Maybe we should do something like that in Zoey's room."

"If you like."

George leaped up and grabbed Terrance by the lapels of his overcoat.

"I have to get out of here. Now," he said, hyperventilating. "Please, Terrance, get me back. I don't want to be unborn!"

Terrance waved his hand, and in a flash he and George were standing at the edge of the river where they had first met. George paced the bank until his breathing slowed to normal.

"Now that you exist again, do you feel better?"

"Not really. I feel depressed. I honestly thought I had made more of an impact. Now everything seems so random and meaningless."

"Sorry, George. I told you, it hasn't been such a wonderful life after all."

George sighed. "I enjoyed it though . . . until the financial-ruin part. I mean, isn't that enough?"

"You tell me."

George stared out over the dark river. "Maybe," he said, his eyes brightening, "maybe I could try much harder to have a positive effect and make a difference. Like this woman I read about in the paper last week, a surgeon who runs a free clinic in Ethiopia for young girls who have fistulas—holes in their bladders from giving birth when their pelvises are too underdev—"

"Yes, yes," Terrance interrupted, "I'm familiar with the condition and the surgeon."

"Maybe I could do something like that?"

Terrance didn't say anything, he just shrugged. And slowly, the light in George's eyes dimmed as he realized he would never do something like that.

"Well, George, the way I see it, you can either jump into that water or return to your family and resume your life."

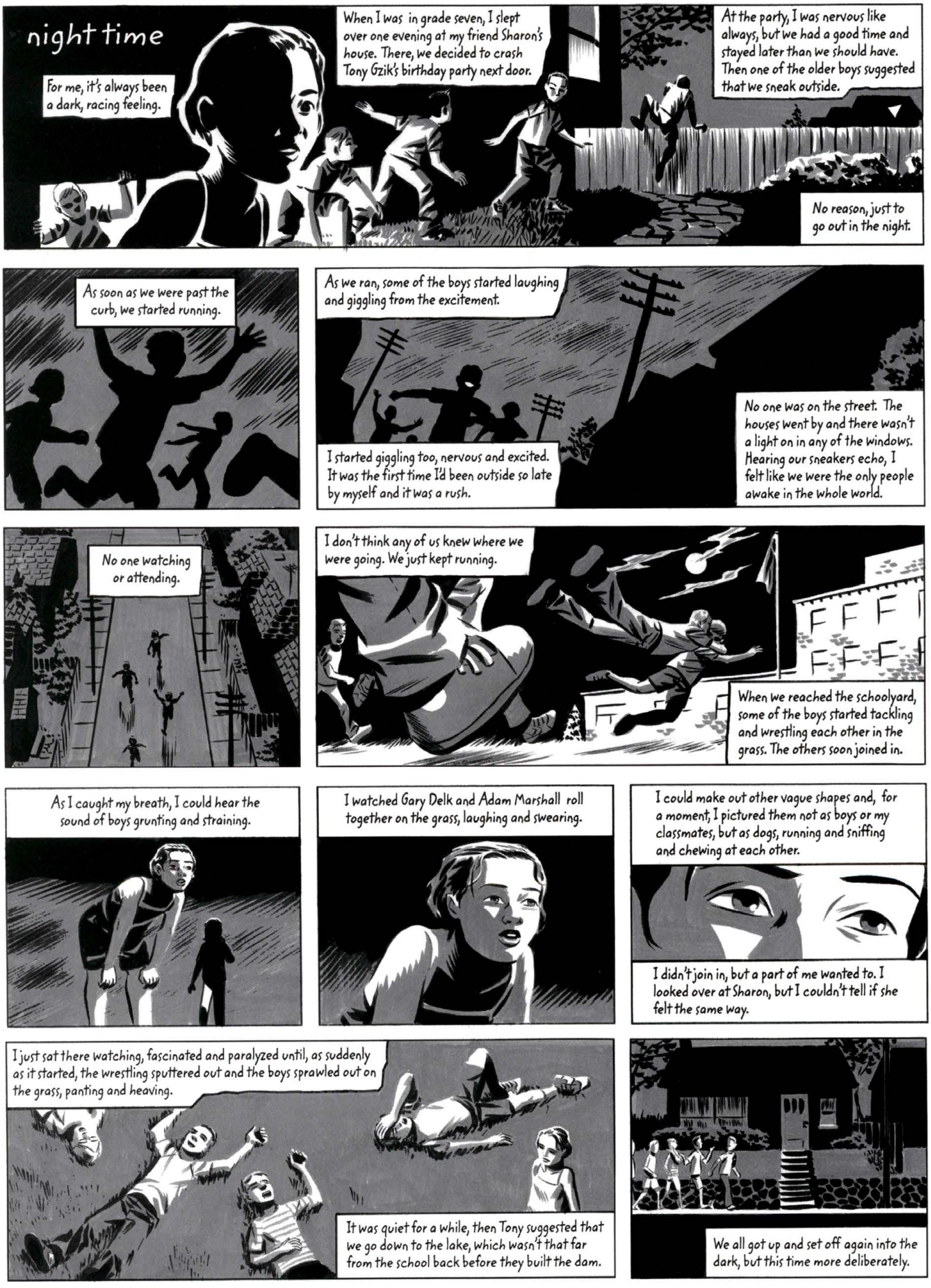
George walked away from Terrance, to the edge of the river. He thought about going home. Earlier in the evening he had confessed to Marianne that the money situation was far worse than she could possibly imagine. But maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't be so angry anymore. Maybe worry would've taken the place of rage and she'd be waiting up when he got home. Maybe, since it was Christmas Eve, the kids would be keeping a tender vigil as well. He would be greeted with shouts of relief and joy—"Daddy! Daddy!"—as he came through the door, his arms open, soon to be filled with family. And maybe Marianne would've spread the word to his friends and customers, and maybe they'd be coming by with words of support, and maybe not just words.

Oh, it almost made him cry to think of it. Unlikely, though, that the townspeople would rally so quickly on the eve of a major holiday. Probably it would just be Marianne waiting by the fire, the kids already in bed. Or maybe he would go home and find the doors locked, like the last time he stormed out after an argument. Maybe he would have to crawl through the basement window, where, if he were lucky, he would find a pillow and one of those itchy wool blankets dumped on the futon couch. Maybe Marianne would be locked in the bedroom, stinking up the place with the cigarettes she smoked one after another when she was furious. And maybe the repo men had already been there to take back the plasma-screen TV George had bought her for Christmas. She might scream at him about the money he'd been giving to his mother every month or call him a selfish prick for disappearing on Christmas Eve and making the kids worry. There really was no way to know.

George gazed up at the lighted bridge. He stared down at the swirling black water.

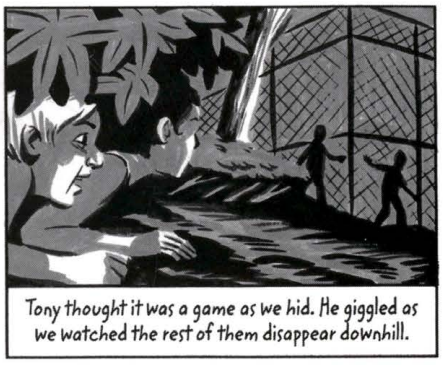
Terrance inspected his fingernails. He whistled "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and used a rock to scrape mud off his Wellingtons. "Come on, George," he said, straightening up. "Make a decision, off you go." But when he turned to the edge of the riverbank, George was no longer there. ⊳

Elyse Friedman lives near Allenby. She is the author of two novels, Then Again (Random House, 1999) and Waking Beauty (Three Rivers, 2004), and the poetry collection Know Your Monkey (ECW, 2003).


night time
For me, it's always been a dark, racing feeling.
When I was in grade seven, I slept over one evening at my friend Sharon's house. There, we decided to crash Tony Gzik's birthday party next door.
At the party, I was nervous like always, but we had a good time and stayed later than we should have. Then one of the older boys suggested that we sneak outside.
No reason, just to go out in the night.
As soon as we were past the curb, we started running.
As we ran, some of the boys started laughing and giggling from the excitement.
I started giggling too, nervous and excited. It was the first time I'd been outside so late by myself and it was a rush.
No one was on the street. The houses went by and there wasn't a light on in any of the windows. Hearing our sneakers echo, I felt like we were the only people awake in the whole world.
No one watching or attending.
I don't think any of us knew where we were going. We just kept running.
When we reached the schoolyard, some of the boys started tackling and wrestling each other in the grass. The others soon joined in.
As I caught my breath, I could hear the sound of boys grunting and straining.
I watched Gary Delk and Adam Marshall roll together on the grass, laughing and swearing.
I could make out other vague shapes and, for a moment, I pictured them not as boys or my classmates, but as dogs, running and sniffing and chewing at each other.
I didn't join in, but a part of me wanted to. I looked over at Sharon, but I couldn't tell if she felt the same way.
I just sat there watching, fascinated and paralyzed until, as suddenly as it started, the wrestling sputtered out and the boys sprawled out on the grass, panting and heaving.
It was quiet for a while, then Tony suggested that we go down to the lake, which wasn't that far from the school back before they built the dam.
We all got up and set off again into the dark, but this time more deliberately.


As we neared the lake, I could feel the breeze pick up and see the dark sway of the trees. It gave me little goosebumps on my arm and I started to get excited.
KEEP
We made our way downhill in the dark, and the brush was dense and confusing. But I could hear the water getting closer and some voices began talking about going skinny-dipping and laughing.
I didn't know if I wanted to do that. But I wanted to see the water. I'd never seen it at night.
Well before we reached the shore, we were stopped short.
It was new and too tall to climb. And it seemed to go on further than any of us could see in either direction.
A few boys swore and tried to climb it anyway, and Sharon and a couple of others wanted to turn back, but in the end, we decided to try and go around it.
We groped our way in the dark, through the tangled brush. The fence made slight turns here and there but never stopped or showed an opening.
After a while, I could feel our enthusiasm fading.
We began to walk in silence, and gradually I became more aware of the night and the night sounds.
I could hear the crickets and other insects, the steady crunch of our steps, the sound of my own tired breathing and the constant dark rustle of the branches high above us.
It was hypnotic, and I started to get this almost out-of-body feeling, like I was seeping away. My friends ahead and behind me seemed to be just formless shadows and I felt like I was becoming a shadow too.
Like a shadow overlapped by shadows.
It wasn't a bad feeling. In fact, it made me feel kind of warm.
Then, there was a sharp turn in the fence and everyone got excited again. They started filing around the corner and I could hear feet slipping and moving downhill...
...but for some reason, I didn't want to go with them anymore.


I don't know why I wanted to stay back.
Maybe I just wanted to be in the dark some more.

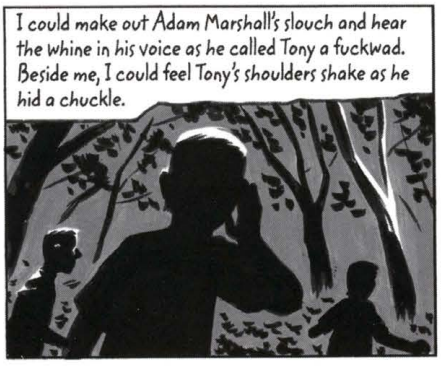

Tony thought it was a game as we hid. He giggled as we watched the rest of them disappear downhill.


I was giggling a little too, even though I didn't really know why. I had no idea why I'd grabbed Tony. It was the first time I'd ever acted like that.


The others were gone for a while, and I started to think that this was a very stupid idea. I could smell Tony's drying sweat near me and I wondered what he was thinking. I had a feeling he was looking at me, but I didn't look back.


I just kept staring ahead, feeling more and more uncomfortable, and then my heart jumped when I saw them.

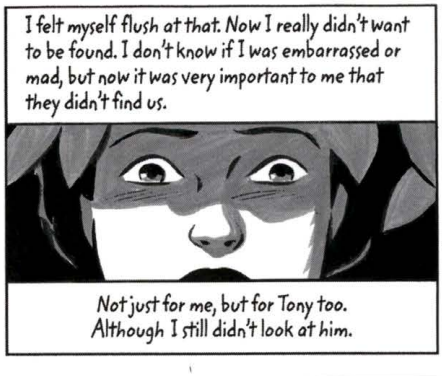

The voices came uphill, swearing at us for hiding out. The fence just kept going on further, they said, and they wanted to go home.


I could make out Adam Marshall's slouch and hear the whine in his voice as he called Tony a fuckwad. Beside me, I could feel Tony's shoulders shake as he hid a chuckle.

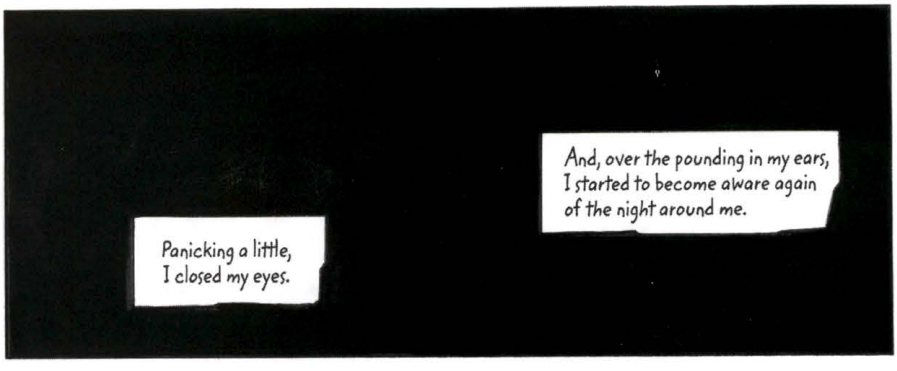

They came closer, spreading out and taunting us. I could make out several shapes stumbling toward our hiding spot.
My heart started beating faster, and I wondered what they'd think when they found us.


I was frantic inside, wondering what I was going to say...
...but the first figure passed right by us without stopping.


Tony was really enjoying himself now. He had to put his face into his arm to hide his laugh as two more of them passed near our spot without seeing us.
As they walked by, I heard Sharon's voice whisper 'They're probably making out somewhere' and Adam's nervous snicker.


I felt myself flush at that. Now I really didn't want to be found. I don't know if I was embarrassed or mad, but now it was very important to me that they didn't find us.
Not just for me, but for Tony too. Although I still didn't look at him.


More shapes moved closer, and my heart was racing. I was certain that at any second someone would trip over us and we'd be discovered. I felt dizzy.


Panicking a little, I closed my eyes.
And, over the pounding in my ears, I started to become aware again of the night around me.


I could hear the wind, rushing high through the trees...
the distant wall of cricket-noise
the sound and smell of Tony's quick breathing
And the feeling of cool and damp under my hands and cheek.
And slowly, I started to get that out-of-body sensation again. But in a much bigger way.
And as I lay there hidden, I felt this incredible aching feeling wash over me like a wave.
I can't explain it, but it was a warm feeling.
Like hiding between the coats in mom's closet when I played hide-and-seek.
It was a warm and lonely feeling in the dark.
The voices gave up and started moving away. After a while, Tony decided to get up and join them.
Wait.
He was a lousy kisser, but I didn't know it at the time.
And I didn't care.
I just wanted to kiss somebody.
cho '04

PROSPERITY

BY ANDREW DALEY

Then it was November, and Guy and Sandy had been together for six months. Sandy bicycled over to Guy's apartment, on Euclid Street, on Tuesday after work. Guy peeled off her clothes in the entranceway, then pulled her onto the futon couch in the living room. Afterward, Sandy smoked a cigarette while Guy stir-fried chicken in coconut curry. They slumped back onto the couch after dinner to finish the wine, Sandy curling into Guy. There was a weekend getaway they needed to plan.

Later, Sandy climbed on top of him when they got into bed. "Whoa," Guy said. "I don't know if I can do it again so soon."

Sandy nuzzled Guy's neck. "You couldn't top that performance in the living room, anyway."

"So you'd say you're satisfied, ma'am?"

"Completely," Sandy said. "You've had better sex?"

"Never," Guy said, as Sandy kissed his neck. Now he could feel the stirrings of an erection. "I don't have a lot to compare it to, but I betcha it doesn't get better than this."

"Well, it doesn't," Sandy said.

Encouraged, Guy turned Sandy over and raised himself over her. But not all of him was ready to go, and he soon rolled off her in frustration. "Sorry," he said into a pillow.

"For what? We had sex three hours ago. You're not fifteen anymore."

"But I need to keep you satisfied."

"And you were drinking wine, remember? You can't let these things worry you."

"Yeah," Guy said. Sandy sounded amused rather than disappointed. "I wish I'd known you when I was fifteen. I might have had a girlfriend like everyone else."

"You would have been cute." Sandy draped both legs over him. "My little math nerd."

"Pure virgin, too. I only lost it in the last week of high school," Guy said. Sandy didn't respond. "She was a friend, in case you're wondering. Kelly Weatherup, on the couch in her parents' basement rec room. It was over in seconds."

"Lucky girl," Sandy said, after a moment.

"How about you?" he asked. "Who was your first?"

"You don't want to know that story."

"Sure I do."

"No, I'm pretty sure you don't."

"Come on."

"You asked," Sandy said. She sat up and crossed her arms over her breasts. "I was at a party when I was fifteen. Grade 10. I was really drunk and smoked some pot. I passed out in the bedroom with all the coats and some guy came in and forced himself on me."

"Jesus," Guy said. "Did you even know him?"

"His name was Mike something. DeSousa. He was the guy who brought the pot. I think he was finished school. Anyway, he was older."

"Did you call the police? I mean, isn't that rape?"

"That's the funny part. It was the police who found me. There was a noise complaint from the neighbours and a couple of guys were charged with breaking and entering. Apparently the person whose house we were in, this guy Barry, wasn't home."

"So the police arrested this Mike guy, right?"

"With possession. All I remember is that there was a lot of blood—I mean tons—and everyone was mad at me because I got blood on their coats. My friend Shirley-Anne and a lady cop put me in the bathtub to clean me off, and then the cop drove me home. I was so wasted I passed out again in the cop car."

"Sandy, I am so, so sorry," Guy said. He took her in his arms.

"I'm still touchy about it. I blamed myself for a long time. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know what you'd say. People even called my parents to have their coats cleaned."

"It's O.K., honey," Guy said. He held Sandy as she sobbed against his neck. When she quieted, Guy stretched her out and covered her with the duvet. Then he lay awake beside her for two hours, glad that she was with him now, safe.

In the morning he drove Sandy to her job as a framer at an art-supply store on Spadina Avenue. She could have rode her bike, but there was a neediness about her this morning. Sandy sat with her bag on her knees, staring at the other commuters struggling through the rainy autumn morning. Guy didn't know what to say.

Later, stuck in his red Corolla in westbound traffic on the Gardiner Expressway, Guy knew what he'd wanted to say. He dialed her number on his cell. "Hi, baby. Are you all right?"

"Oh, I was just going to call you. I'm sorry I was so moody this morning."

"No, I should apologize. It was wrong of me to pry."

"I should have told you, but I didn't know how to bring it up. What still pisses me off is all the other stuff that happened because of it."

"Like what?" Guy asked. The rain was coming down so hard he had to shout above the hissing highway.

"Well, the reputation I got. It was all over school in a few days. And I lost my friend Shirley-Anne. And my best black boots. The police sent me home in someone else's Nike runners. I had these beautiful full-length leather boots I never saw again."

"Who's Shirley-Anne? You never mentioned her before."

"She was my best friend since public school. She liked Mike and thought I was trying to steal him from her. I remember when Shirley-Anne and the cop put me in the shower, Shirley-Anne turned the water on and put me in before it even got warm. Even the lady cop told her to slow down. She was so mad at me."

"Doesn't sound like you lost much of a friend."

"Yeah, but her parents had a huge swimming pool in their backyard," Sandy laughed.

Traffic was now stopped. He could have avoided this jam if he'd let Sandy

make her own way to work. "So where's Shirley-Anne now?"

"Married, somewhere out in the burbs. Markham, I think. Not to Mike, though he took her virginity, too."

"Well, that's what she wanted, wasn't it? And what became of Mr. Michael deSousa?"

"He's a mechanic, still out in Etobicoke. I only know this because he worked in one of my dad's stations a few years ago."

Guy was inching toward his exit in Mississauga. Driving Sandy to work had cost him forty-five minutes. "You should have got your dad to straighten Mikey out."

"I doubt it. My dad didn't speak to me for weeks after the cops brought me home. Then he told me there were words for girls like me. I didn't speak to him for a year after that."

"Oh God, Sandy, I'm so sorry." Guy had liked her father the few times he had met him.

"My mother blamed me, too, though we never talked about it."

"I would have done something if I'd known you then," Guy said. He was passing fast food restaurants, used-car lots and low-rise office complexes covered in mirrored glass. His office building, nearly identical, was beyond the next light.

"I could have used a nerdy boyfriend, even if he was, like, four grades older than me. Then maybe I wouldn't have developed that bad-boy habit."

"Really? I'm pretty sure I don't want to know about that," Guy said. "Honey, I'm just pulling up to the office. Can I call you back later?"

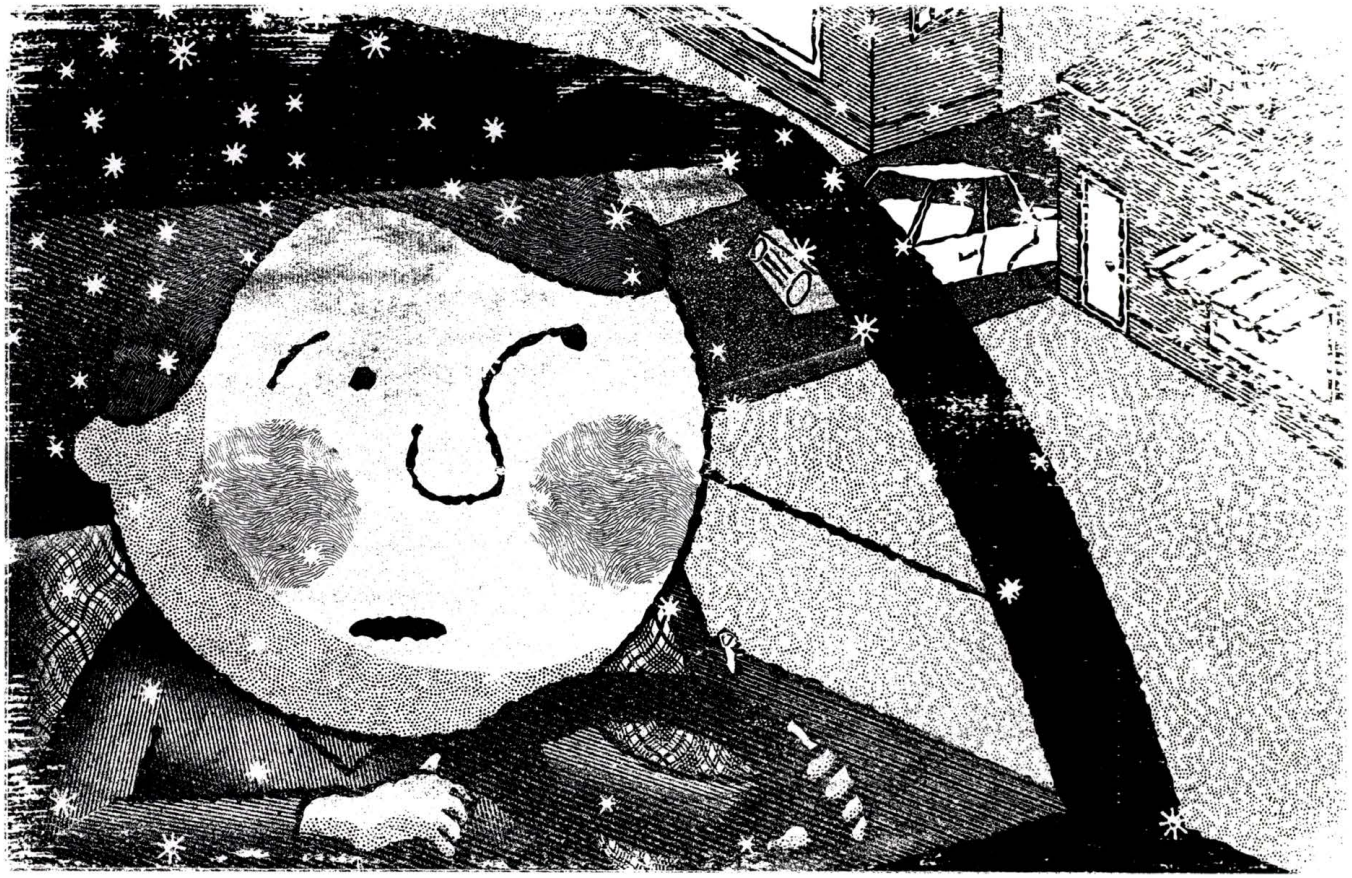
It was eight forty-five when Guy slid into his beige cubicle on the second floor of the office where he sold photographic supplies. He was ahead of his colleagues, though not early enough in a company that was floundering. Few of his co-workers would survive the impending staff cuts. Guy's intention, for himself and Sandy, was to capitalize on them.

He worked his hot list for the next two hours, returning calls and E-mails. Customers always came first; Guy had been top salesman for three of the five years he'd been with the company. Could Mike deSousa, mechanic, claim as much?

Taking a break, he got coffee and called Paul, a friend from high school, who now sold real estate. Guy wanted a house closer to work for himself and Sandy. He hadn't told Sandy yet, but he was sick of the stink and noise of living downtown, of continually worrying about where to park his car.

He had only moved downtown to be closer to the galleries when he'd wanted to be a photographer. Now that he had a real job he needed some living space. But getting Sandy to return to the land of double garages and wide, lush lawns would be difficult. What they saved by combining their rents they could put toward a house of their own. Sandy wanted a real garden, and the only place they would be able to afford that was in the suburbs.

After a lunch of leftover stir-fry, Guy cold-called former clients, then worked on a monthly sales report. His mind wandered: Guy sketched the layout of the house he and Sandy would rent. He wanted the kitchen to overlook a large, shaded back deck and the house to be surrounded by tall hedges. A garage. Soon he was rescuing Sandy from a swarthy, hairy guy at their housewarming party. Her hero, Guy laid Sandy



IAN PHILLIPS

gently across the coats in the spare bedroom and became her first.

There was a framed photograph on his desk of him and Sandy that she'd taken not long after they'd met. That was at George Brown College, where Guy was representing his company's line at a seminar on darkroom techniques. It was difficult to imagine Sandy fifteen years old. He'd seen photographs, but couldn't tell you what kind of person she'd been. Too trusting, he now knew.

That business about bad boys was troubling. Still, it didn't sound like Sandy had had a lot of boyfriends. One or two in university, maybe a couple more since then. No more partners than himself, really, and that wasn't many. There had been Sharon in university, whom he had eventually broken up with to become a photographer. He'd been on some dates since then, nothing that had taken.

At four thirty Guy found himself staring out the window at the rain-swept office parking lot as the afternoon light faded. His colleagues in the sales office were chattering around him. He had a sales call to make at a drugstore running a promotion on disposable cameras, though first he needed to make arrangements with Sandy for the evening. He was getting tired of this endless shuffle between apartments. And her roommates.

When he called, Guy was told Sandy was out back smoking. "Hey, baby," he said, when she finally got to the phone. "How was your day?"

"Not bad for a rainy Tuesday. I so don't want it to be winter again."

"How about we move to Costa Rica? You can take pictures of flowers all year round."

"Will you be my sugar daddy?"

"I'd probably be better at it than those bad boys you mentioned," Guy said. "So what's going on tonight? My place or yours?"

"My place, Guy. I want to have a bath and go to bed."

"Are you not feeling very well?"

"It's all that stuff. I don't know why you forced it out of me."

"That wasn't it at all . . ."

"Hey, settle down. Men like to know these things. I understand. But please keep your 'bad boy' comments to yourself. You don't know what my life has been like."

"No, of course I don't. It really pisses me off that this happened to you."

"That's why I never talk about it. Look what it can do thirteen years later."

"All right," Guy said. "You can talk to me about it if you want, you know."

"I should go. I'll call you this evening."

"I'll be home," Guy said, sensing that he'd gotten off easy.

And it was all the fault of Mike deSousa. Guy looked up the name in his telephone book. There were quite a few Michael deSousas, as well as M. deSousas and Mike deSousas, scattered across the city. The one closest to Guy in the west end was on Fifth Street near Lake Shore Boulevard, not far from where Sandy grew up. Guy figured this was the big man himself; punks like that never travelled far from home.

Sandy was touchy for the next few days. Guy couldn't understand why she was angry with him about something from her own past. The rain ended on Thursday, the day Guy got a call from Paul about a house in Bloor West Village. That was far enough out. He got Paul to hold it until Monday.

Guy and Sandy spent the weekend at a spa in the Caledon Hills, north of the city. For Guy it was simple: they had similar interests and goals, the sex was fantastic. . . . At dinner on Saturday Sandy agreed to see the house even before their entrees arrived.

On Monday Guy picked Sandy up after work and doubled back west along Lake Shore Boulevard. Paul met them at the house on Beresford Avenue. They were shown through it by the elderly owners, who were retiring to a lakefront condominium. The couple were still affectionate with one another, which Guy knew would work well with Sandy.

The house was two storeys with three bedrooms and a finished basement. It even had the kitchen and back deck he wanted. Unfortunately, Sandy demurred: the bedrooms were too small and it was too far from downtown. Yet the manicured backyard, green even in November, was enticing to a woman living in an Annex basement. Still, it was only after he had shown Sandy the shopping and restaurants along Bloor Street, and how close High Park and the subway were, that she agreed to the move.

THE WANT MONSTER

I was a kid like any other.
There was a monster
under my bed, except
as I got older,
it started sleeping in
my bed, and ever since,
I've been trying
to tame it, teach it, telling it:

"Don't be greedy, desperate, needy!"
"Don't eat that, buy that, fuck that!"

But it would not listen.
So I chained it in the basement
and put it on a diet
of bread, water, and *Family Circus* comics
until I thought it was finally broken.
But all along it was just playing
dead and saving up its strength, because

today, when I sat thinking coolly,
calmly of you, up it rose, crushing
my ceilings and walls with its bursting
breasts and itchy hips and headed straight

for you, the one it wants more
than it's ever wanted anything
before. But don't worry, I
may be scared of it, but you
are what the want monster wants,
and so the want monster is scared of you.

—Alexandra Wilder

Sandy didn't mention her rape again. In the busy, rambunctious days leading up to Christmas—their first together—and the move, she seemed to forget how awfully she had felt after being reminded of it. Guy certainly didn't bring it up again.

In mid-December, two-thirds of Guy's colleagues and most of the warehouse and accounting staff were cut on a savage afternoon. Happy Christmas. Kept on over two superiors, Guy was made the regional sales manager of the digital-imaging-systems division. There wasn't much of a raise, but a better bonus structure was put into place and a secretary was provided to free up more time to get that bonus. Guy could feel himself taking flight.

Sandy's bed, which was newer, was chosen for the master bedroom. The remainder of their Scandinavian furniture barely filled the other rooms. The best colander was chosen out of a pile of four and decisions were made as to how many frying pans were required. Guy watched happily as his rusty bachelor-era utensils, castoffs from his mother, were garbaged. It was his first experience living with a woman—Sandy had briefly lived with a boyfriend while she was at Concordia—and he couldn't have been happier. They took walks through the neighbourhood in the evenings, Guy thrilled by the snow-covered lawns.

Soon their lives had a simple rhythm. After work on weekdays they made love and dinner, the order of which depended on their appetites. On Saturday mornings, Guy usually found himself at Home Depot earlier than when he showed up for work. He let Sandy choose the colours and patterns. There were often visitors on Saturday nights, Guy's and Sandy's friends coming harmoniously together.

Sundays were for Guy and Sandy alone. After brunch up on Bloor Street they would walk in High Park. Sandy brought her camera to photograph a new fall of snow in the woods or the skaters on Grenadier Pond. Guy happily carried her tripod and camera bag, confident of her progress under his tutelage. In the abundant winter air he felt he could think again for the first time in years.

They did their weekly shopping at the No Frills on the way home. Here, too, Guy let Sandy lead, following behind the cart as she selected the bran cereal he ate every morning or the apple juice she liked. Sandy wore a turquoise ski jacket, which left her rounded bottom, in faded blue jeans, wonderfully exposed. It was a mild February day, the scent of spring not far off. Guy wanted to hurry home and get Sandy naked on their new living-room couch. On days like this he felt—and this frightened him some—like he wanted to make her pregnant.

It was only when they had turned the corner into the fruits and vegetables section that Guy sensed they were being followed. Or watched. He kept an eye on the path they had just walked as Sandy bagged red leaf lettuce. Soon a man of about his own age rounded the corner and met Guy's eye. He was an artsy type, with short, curling dark hair and black-rimmed glasses. Guy had no idea who he was, but knew instinctively Sandy would. The man wouldn't meet Guy's eye again and instead started to pick through a mound of green beans.

"How about some beans?" Guy said, steering the cart in the direction of the stranger.

"All right," Sandy said. She tossed the lettuce into the cart and followed Guy. The stranger looked up from the beans to see Sandy approaching. As Guy watched, the man looked momentarily startled but recovered quickly to nod in Sandy's direction.

"Hello," Sandy murmured. She stepped aside to let him past.

The man didn't look back as he left the section. "That wasn't fair, Guy," Sandy said. "You set that up."

"He was following us. I didn't know if it was safe to point him out to you or not." Guy also didn't like the knowing, sardonic look on the guy's face.

"It doesn't matter. He's more harm to himself than anyone else."

"Who was he, some boyfriend or something?"

"Brian Thompson. He played drums in a high-school band called Rockopuluss."

"Who is different from the boyfriend you had at university who played drums in which band? Jesus, Sandy."

"I had a life before I met you, Guy."

"Of course you did," Guy said. In the checkout line Guy watched Brian leave the store with his single bag of groceries.

On their walk home Guy explained how his temporary jealousy was simply the result of how deeply he loved Sandy. But he couldn't rekindle his desire when they got in from the cold, and that evening they used the new couch for watching television. Still, he was doing better than Brian the drummer.

That week Guy started a list at the back of his Day-timer of the men—himself included—with whom Sandy had slept. Some of these were legitimate boyfriends, while others were men he could only assume she had been intimate with. He knew more about her time in high school—after Mike deSousa there was Louis and Rory and Mark and Brian—than he did about her time at Concordia, in Montreal. That was when she had lived with a guy named Chris and dated a Carlos and a Dave and a George, all significant boyfriends. Back in Toronto, after university, there was a William and an Ewan and another Mike, plus a Wayne, and Stephen, a fellow she had worked with.

And these were just the men Guy knew of. By his own reckoning, for every person Sandy had had sex with there must be two with whom she had just fooled around. He was careful not to ask direct questions, instead waiting for the names and dates to come up in conversation. Twice he ran out of space and had to start the list again.

One afternoon in March the muffler fell off Guy's Toyota. Rather than get on the highway, he drove to a Mr. Muffler outlet on the Queensway, cringing at the sound of the metal dragging. Settled into a stacking chair in the dusty waiting room with a copy of the *Toronto Sun,* he called Sandy and explained he'd be late getting home.

Half an hour later a man in a Mr. Muffler uniform told him his car was ready. He was a little younger than Guy and smelled of cigarette smoke. His nametag introduced him as "MIKE," and Guy immediately wondered if this was the famed and dreaded Mike deSousa. He felt sick to his stomach, like he did the night Sandy told him about her rape.

As Mike explained which parts had been replaced, Guy realized everything

about this guy fit: his name, his age, his job. Driving home, Guy's nausea became a nervous energy. He felt guilty all that evening, like he'd cheated on or lied to Sandy.

The next day, at the office, he dialed up the Mr. Muffler outlet on the Queensway, asking for a Mike DiMarco. "Do you mean Mike deSousa?" a man asked. Guy hung up.

Arlene arrived two weeks later. She was a friend of Sandy's from Montreal who needed a place to stay for a couple of weeks before moving on to Vancouver. She was short, mousy, and a little heavy. Arlene moved into the spare bedroom and was so quiet Guy sometimes forgot she was there. He hadn't met Arlene before, but there were many of Sandy's friends from Concordia he didn't know. This sometimes worried him.

On Friday evening the girls went out downtown with some of Sandy's girlfriends. Guy invented a reason to work late, thinking the girls might like some time alone. The house was empty when he got home around nine. Guy nuked some leftover Greek food, opened a beer, and watched the Leafs get a lucky win in Buffalo. He dozed in front of the news before going to bed. There was a lot he wanted to get done the next day before some of Sandy and Arlene's friends came over for a dinner party.

When Sandy came in a few hours later Guy was still awake. He could hear the girls giggling in the living room. While he feigned sleep, Sandy undressed in the dark, slipped into bed, and fell asleep quickly beside him. His insomnia had been especially bad since Arlene's arrival. Guy disliked Sandy teasing him that all the men on the street were jealous that he had shacked up with two beautiful women. He wondered if she mistrusted him.

Guy could smell the halo of cigarette smoke around Sandy. Now she'd have to quit all over again. He got up and wrapped himself in the white terry-cloth robe that had been her housewarming gift to him. Guy took a leak, then stood outside the spare bedroom listening to Arlene's heavy breathing. Arlene had been flirty with him, but Guy thought she was simply being friendly. Perhaps that's what Sandy had misinterpreted.

He settled into his new living-room chair with the Jane Urquhart novel Sandy had wanted him to read. What he had to realize was he would never know, or be able to control, the kind of person Sandy had been before he met her. Guy finally dozed off but woke dreaming of Sandy and Mike deSousa having sex on the new couch. Mike wore his Mr. Muffler uniform and Sandy's hair, long and curly, like in her high-school photographs, lay across the cushions of the couch.

He slipped quietly back into bed, but sleep still wouldn't come. Minutes passed. Then hours. Guy listened to the patterns of Sandy's breathing change as she moved through various stages of sleep. He felt the return of daylight before he saw it. Beside him Sandy rolled over and muttered something in a dream. She sensed it, too. Guy got up and dressed in yesterday's work clothes: beige chinos and a powder-blue shirt.

All he had wanted was a good night's sleep—just like everyone else he knew got—in expectation of a very full day. Included with that evening's guests was some guy named Kevin Sandy had known at Concordia. It sounded like Kevin and Sandy had been more than friends, but Guy had to let the asshole

into his house because Arlene was visiting and everyone was friendly now.

It was a drizzly morning, the grey half-light still uncertain. It had been a mild winter, and early March felt like late April. Guy started his Toyota. His first stop would be Home Depot, where he'd get some lumber for shelves in the tiny bedroom he was converting to a darkroom. Sandy appeared in the front window of their house, wrapped in Guy's bathrobe. He pretended he didn't see her and turned his cellphone off.

Instead of driving north toward the lumber store, Guy found himself going south along Parkside Drive. On Lake Shore Boulevard he pulled into the parking lot of Sunnyside Park, where he spent forty-five minutes trying to determine where the grey sky met the grey lake. A few early joggers and rollerbladers passed.

Further west, beyond the fifties-style motels being bulldozed to make room for more condos, Guy pulled into the parking lot of a Coffee Time. He took his medium regular and raised chocolate to a table in a corner and watched as four burly City of Toronto public works employees entered. Guy had always hated that meatheads like that could drop out of school and earn more than he did without ever having made an effort in their lives. They were dead weights, the Mike deSousas of the world.

He checked his cell for messages. There was one from Sandy, sounding worried. He now felt anxious, like he used to before university exams. He wanted to call Sandy but was worried he would say something stupid. Then he remembered Mike deSousa didn't live far away. He took his coffee over to the pay phone. According to the phone book there was a Michael deSousa at 27 Fifth Street, just a few blocks away.

The rain now fell steadily. Hot coffee spilled across Guy's knuckles as he climbed back into his Toyota, though he scarcely felt it. He had a sense he was about to make a mistake he'd spend years regretting. But he was confident that what he was about to do should have been done a long time ago.

Through his flapping windshield wipers, Guy watched the last few rain-streaked blocks of Lake Shore Boulevard pass before he made a left, back toward the lake, onto Fifth Street. No. 27 was a bungalow not unlike his own. Did deSousa own or rent? There was an old Hyundai in the oil-stained driveway, as well as a muscle car, a Duster or a Nova, up on blocks. The brown, ragged lawn was strewn with shopping bags and empty cigarette packages—the red kind that Sandy smoked—while the blackened remains of a snowbank ran alongside the driveway.

Guy walked up the driveway between the cars and the snowbank. There was a blue-green light, like the glow of a television, coming from the living-room window. He passed this window on the way to the front door but couldn't see anyone inside. Guy rapped quickly on the wooden front door. It was almost eight. One could reasonably expect people to be up by now.

What he didn't count on was the door being laboriously opened by a little blond girl, about three years old, in a pink flannel nightgown. She stood blinking, unsure of what to make of him.

"Is your father home?" Guy asked.

Before the little girl could answer, both she and Guy heard footsteps approaching from the hall. Then a voice boomed out of the darkness, "Who's there? Christy? Where are you, honey?"

"I'm here, Daddy," the girl said, before slipping behind the door again.

When Guy saw her next she was wound between the striped pyjama-clad legs of the same Mike who'd replaced Guy's muffler a couple of weeks before. "Who are you?" the man demanded.

"Are you Mike deSousa?"

"I asked you a question first, buddy." The man was barefoot and bed-headed, sleep still hanging on his face. He turned the girl around, saying, "Christy, go inside, please."

"My name's Guy Kwan," Guy said, after the girl had left. "I'm a friend of Sandy Ewart."

"Who the hell is she?"

"Oh, I think you know," Guy said. He pulled Mike deSousa onto the sloppy lawn while making a fist of his right hand. Stunned, Mike grabbed at Guy's left hand. As Guy wound up for his first punch he could see the little girl in the living-room window. ⊳

Andrew Daley lives in Dufferin Grove. With this issue, he assumes the role of Taddle Creek's associate editor. His work has been appearing in the magazine since 1997.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sabina Kim ("Tilt," p. 7) lives in a leaning house on the border of High Park and the Junction. She is a writer and editor doing graduate work at York University, concentrating on poetry and the empty subject. Her work has appeared in *Grain* and *Absinthe.*

Alex Boyd ("Inventory of a Basement Apartment, After Being Evicted," p. 9) lives in Little Italy. He is the host of the IV Lounge Readings Series and has published poems, essays, and fiction in various newspapers and magazines.

Dani Couture ("*Dawn of the Dead,* Revisited" p. 11) lives in the Church-Wellesley Village. She is a staff writer for the *Danforth Review* and *Word.* Her poetry has appeared in *Generation, Qwerty,* the *Windsor ReView,* and the *Fiddlehead.*

Patrick Rawley ("Booze Can," p. 14) lives in Christie-Ossington. His work has appeared in *This, Word, Dig,* and the anthology *The IV Lounge Reader* (Insomniac, 2001), and he knows all the words to the *Spider-Man* theme song.

Jason Guriel ("Contempt," p. 27) lives in Etobicoke. His poems have appeared in the *Dalhousie Review* and *Exile.*

Elana Wolff ("Toque," p. 29) lives in Thornhill, Ontario. Her second collection of poetry, *Mask,* was published in 2003 by Guernica.

Michael Cho ("Night Time," p. 30) lives in Little Portugal. He works as an illustrator, drawing children's books and comics.

A native of Toronto, Alexandra Wilder ("The Want Monster," p. 37) is currently living in Brooklyn, New York, while she pursues a master of fine arts in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College. She has previously been published in *Good Girl* and will soon appear in the *Texas Review.*

Dave Lapp (*People Around Here,* p. 48) lives near the Church-Wellesley Village. He teaches cartooning to children, self-publishes the mini-comic *Window,* and is the co-editor of the comic anthology series *Don't Touch Me.*

SO THIS IS HOW IT HAPPENS

BY MARY-LOU ZEITOUN

Susan woke up in grey sheets with a dry mouth and a queasy stomach. She ate out of cans at home. She hated the sun. She used to be a publicist for a hip TV station, but she now worked writing press releases at a government office, where she usually accomplished only two hours of work in her eight-hour day. Like a cow tied to the trough, she had become motivated only by appetite: coffee in the morning, smoke at break, usually a sweaty, too-salty lasagna with iceberg lettuce for lunch, and, finally, a bottle of wine when she got home. Coffee, smoke, lunch, smoke, bottle, and many more smokes. Susan was thirty-five, fifteen pounds overweight, and divorced.

The divorce was five years ago—so long that it felt like she had never been married. Susan and Fred's tight two-year courtship had stalled to a slow, appalled feeling a week before the wedding, but they went through with it anyway; they had already booked the city's most popular swing band for the reception. They did not wound each other unduly in the divorce one year later. It turns out a job at a TV station and consistently cool footwear are not the best measure of suitability as a life partner, but then again, what was? Fred discovered that Susan, in spite of her ability to turn a phrase, was not really Dorothy Parker. Susan discovered that Fred was jaw-droppingly shallow and that he expected her to clean the toilet. During their time together, Susan and Fred threw theme parties—their scotch-tasting party on Robbie Burns Night was a legendary orgy; they even had haggis—and went on road trips to rural areas that made them giggle. Susan had always felt beautiful, but of course they were drunk every night. Fred had been hysterically interested in sex—any sex—and had assumed a "naughty" air about it that was delicious at first. Later, Susan suspected he might be gay.

After the divorce they both left their warehouse digs. Susan left the TV station, as well. She now rented a small clapboard house with a sagging front porch on a concrete slab—the kind of house built in the nineteen-forties for labourers to live in while they were building the mansions two blocks over. At sixty years old, it was rotting and the joists creaked. The windows leaked cold in the summer and heat in the winter. It was very dark, and Susan had never had the confidence to tear down the faded urine-and-dusty-rose-coloured wallpaper in the living room, the first room you saw when you entered the house. Fred would have whipped the place into shape in no time. The one window facing the street held crooked yellowing blinds that winked lewdly at passersby. Furniture-wise, Susan had inherited the do-not-pay-until-1999 (that was in 1998) overstuffed couch and armchair from her marriage. They were huge, the backs of them swollen with puffy, hunched pillows. The couch pushed you off when you were sitting and gathered you in if you were lying down. Black with pink slashes, they were covered in a fabric that served only to remind one how appalling the previous trends were, let alone imitations of those trends generated by discount textile warehouses

Fred had moved on to score a condo. Susan hadn't realized he had that much money. She guessed his parents came through when he finally got rid of her. Susan jealously imagined the condo furnished with the requisite new furniture, all-chrome kitchen, chocolate-brown walls, and fake-fur pillows. He was still producing at the station and was now dating one of the tiny, haggard television anchors, a girl who looked remarkably like Fred in drag. Susan was, if not glad, relieved to be rid of Fred, but she still switched the channel whenever his little television hostess came on and the credits rolled by.

Susan's house was attached to an even more rundown house next door. Those windows that weren't boarded had tinfoil on them. A lot of the houses in her east-end neighbourhood had tinfoil or sheets on the windows. Susan could understand the sheets, but not the tinfoil. A tattooed man in his thirties and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend lived in the house next door. They may have been squatting, Susan didn't know. Besides saying the occasional furtive hello and hearing their beery yelps in the summer, she had very little contact with them.

When Fred went so did most of Susan's social life, but Susan's friends were appalling, anyway. Working in the media world, she had slipped into hanging around too many bars and openings and had aligned herself with people who had great hair and no character; people whose savage self-interest would cause them to dump, ditch, betray, or, even worse, forget Susan in an instant, however much they protested at three in the morning, drunken tears in their eyes, to be loyal and faithful friends. Just like right after the breakup, when she drove to Carnaval, the winter festival in historic Quebec City, with her friends Omar and Paula.

Fred and Susan had been crazy about Carnaval. It had a mascot they adored: Bonhomme Carnaval, a roguish white snowman with a red cap and a sash, rather like the Pillsbury Doughboy. They had even built a sort of Buddhist shrine in their loft to a one-inch Bonhomme on a key chain. They surrounded it with Kinder toys and Pixy Stix.

Omar and Paula were blatantly using the trip as an excuse to cheat on their mates, and Susan provided a good smokescreen. In their erotic frenzy and greed for each other they somehow justified driving home without her. They weren't monsters; they had it in their heads that they would contact Susan at the hotel with some vague emergency. Only they didn't. Susan waited for them at breakfast, ate alone, then searched the hotel and finally called Paula on her cell, now five hundred kilometres away. Paula pretended to be cut off. Choking with incredulity and rage, Susan went over her Visa limit on the two-hundred-dollar train ticket home, and sat for eight hundred kilometres beside a white-haired lady who seemed very sweet until she casually remarked, "No

wonder they get raped," when a teen in tight jeans walked by.

Disposable Susan spent hours watching her reflection in the train window. Her sallow, boozy face flickered over acres of black-tree skeletons and snowy fields. By the time she looked away, a shabbier idea of herself had been pressed into her mind. She fed it glutinous white-bread egg-salad sandwiches and four Coffee Crisps, the only chocolate bars available on the train. Sometimes she looked at the dozing, dissatisfied face of the old woman next to her, leaking distaste from a drooping mouth and shivering eyelids. Between her drawn reflection and the old lady's ire, Susan's resiliency permanently slackened. When she got back she started drinking more at home and didn't see her remaining friends as much. Paula and Omar were eventually found out and in the way of offenders, somehow managed to blame their victim for it. Susan lost another coterie. In any case, Susan's friends were getting harder and harder to get in touch with as they got older and had accessory children or their own affairs and successes.

Until she was a teenager Susan had managed to find truly kind, centred people as her best friends. But she lost that gift. Perhaps the competitiveness of university, her generic underweight prettiness, her upper-middle-class background had ruined her character. She hadn't noticed it going and now wasn't quite able to define when her life felt less authentic, or when the goals of job, man, and house ceased to be attainable. She guiltily suspected it had something to do with gaining weight. "Could I be," she wondered, "that shallow?" She saw women older than she was on television talking passionately about weight loss and Botox and thought, "Does it ever end?" A phrase kept going through her head when she saw people talking about plastic surgery. "Why get a nose job when you have a hunchback?"

Sometimes she fell to her knees in the kitchen. She usually managed to drag herself up, but sometimes she just lay on her back and looked at the greasy ceiling. At these times she felt fortunate. She had never lay on her back and stared at the ceiling when she was with Fred. There was something luxuriously childlike about it.

One Sunday night Susan came home from a boozy, fruitless dinner party. She had been generally ignored there—having neither sex appeal nor job opportunities to offer anyone—so she had gone too far, secretly drinking the hosts' scotch and constantly refilling her wine glass. Slamming the cab door and staggering up her gravelly, weed-infested path like a drunk housewife in a fifties melodrama (she really should tidy up the lawn a bit; it could be quite cute), she froze. In front of her was a skunk. Flat, furry spatulate head. Pointed nose. Waddling nearsightedly it passed by her unconcerned and disappeared under the neighbour's front porch. She got through the front door and collapsed on her overstuffed couch, one leg lewdly dangling over the arm and the other on the floor. She sat up straight again. Skunk! She could smell it. She had never really noticed it before, assuming the sour air in the house was due to mouldy beams and damp particleboard. Now skunk was all she could smell.

The skunk nosed comfortably under the porch, glad to get back in the black, tight tunnel of dirt, the ensuing smell of minerals and mud. The humans didn't bother her, humans never did. Skunks are confident animals. Besides, this person left food out for her all the time in her battered tin garbage can. The skunk was a female. She had three babies curled in the dark interior of the sub-porch. They had been born in May. They were four weeks old.

Susan dozed on the couch that night and dreamt of skunks coming through her front door and nesting in the corners. She woke up at five after nine. Late for work, her mouth filled with a sulphurous cloud, she decided to call in sick, something she had been doing way too much lately.

IAN PHILLIPS

Her boss, Marta Vansyana, a middle-aged woman with a frowning maternal air, was not pleased. Marta had left Bombay on the arm of her arranged husband when she was twenty. She had two daughters and two sons, all of them imperious, spoiled, and embarrassed by their parents. Marta cooked and cleaned for them all while also being communications co-ordinator of Susan's department. Marta's husband worked for parks and recreation, riding around the city in yellow trucks with his cronies, smoking in the cab, elbow on the window, and performing occasional light labour.

Marta had black tire marks under her eyes and wore lipstick the colour of pink entrails on her now-sagging mouth. Like an eighty-year-old lady who still wears passion-red lipstick because that was the style in the fifties, not noticing she was sliding into hooker wear, Marta applied and reapplied magenta fusion all day—the colour respectable business ladies wore in 1985.

She unenthusiastically told Susan to get well soon. Marta was deeply and passionately perturbed by violations of procedure. She hated that Susan's work was well-written and on time, because Susan was clearly not working the full eight-hour day. Accustomed to the unreasonable deadlines of the TV station, even with an average of five sick days a month, Susan was getting all her work done. Marta's resentment of Susan burned deep, charring her eyes even further. She made a note to give Susan her first warning when she came back. Two warnings and, according to procedure, she could fire her.

Feeling the familiar combination of guilt and relief when she called in sick but indifferent to her increasingly unstable work status, Susan crawled up the worn stairs to her room and fell deliciously asleep for another four hours. She woke up again lazily, stretched, went downstairs, made coffee, and watched some bad TV. She could hear the couple next door fighting, the girl's voice an animal-wild screech.

"Fuck you, you fuckin' bastard! I hate you! I hate you!"

There was the rumbling bass of his voice.

"I fuckin' buy all the groceries all the time. You fuckin' do it once and you don't even buy the real Cheez Whiz, you buy that fuckin' fake kind."

More rumbling.

"I can't get a fuckin' job. I'm going to my mom's."

The adjoining wall shuddered as she stomped out of the house. Susan put down her all-dressed chips (breakfast), slipped to her knees on her oversized couch, and looked through the cracks of her plastic blind. The next-door girl, plump in jeans and tank top, shrugged into her too-tight jean jacket, a cigarette in her mouth. She turned and her long brown hair whipped into her tilted brown eyes. She obviously had no idea how beautiful she was, and she never would, thought Susan, who had always made the most of her own uninspiring little face, mostly by staying a little underweight (though that was now over). Maybe when the girl became an old woman with a yellowing perm she would come across a picture of herself in her youth and wonder at her beauty. Now, her face was veiled in a horrible expression, mouth curled and eyes deepened, a face that had been picking fights since infancy. Susan and she had waited for the bus together on occasion, never speaking. Her eyes briefly met Susan's and Susan idiotically ducked.

There was a knock on the door. Oh my God, she was about to have a screaming harpy at her door telling her to mind her own fuckin' business. Susan wrapped herself in her battered blue robe and crossed her arms over her breasts, then went to the door and opened it a crack. Standing there with a smile on his face was the guy from next door.

He was wearing sweatpants and what looked like a rubber tank top. His hands were under his armpits and he was rocking a little on his heels. He smiled at Susan, an ingratiating smile that did not suit his face: high, wide cheekbones, a down-turned mouth, and bad black eyes.

"Hey," he said. "I'm Larry? I live next door?"

"Yeah," said Susan. "Hi."

"We got a skunk problem," he said. Susan had never seen eyes so black.

Susan and Larry scouted the property and decided the skunk was coming in under Larry's porch and digging across under the concrete base of her porch.

"I mean, I could shoot the little fucker, but all I have is a BB gun," said Larry.

They decided the best course of action was to have Susan call the Humane Society and find out what to do.

Susan went back in the house and called the Humane Society. They had a prerecorded message. It was insanely cheerful: "You have reached the information line for skunks living on your property!"

Susan repeated the instructional message four times. It seemed overwhelming. She looked at the list she had made: flashlight, radio, cayenne pepper, galvanized steel mesh or hardware cloth. What the hell was "hardware cloth"? She did not look forward to telling Larry about the procedure. He would probably just want to throw a grenade down there. She got dressed in an oversized T-shirt and her increasingly too-small jeans and went over to Larry's. His porch was sagging. On it sat two plastic white chairs with permanent grey streaks. Even the window was crooked. A Union Jack flag served as the curtain. She knocked on the door and his shadowy bulk appeared.

"So I called the Humane Society," she said.

"Hey," he said. "Wanna beer?"

It was 2 P.M. on a Monday afternoon. "O.K.," she said. She tried but couldn't get a look into the house as Larry retreated, then came back out on the porch with two beers knuckled in one hand.

"Have a seat," he said expansively. Susan sat down. The chair's arm was snapped through and she popped backward for a second.

"Oh shit," said Larry. "Let me switch chairs." Susan protested then jumped up as he grasped her chair and athletically lifted it with one arm while switching it with his own.

"You got the bum chair," he said. "Heh heh heh."

Susan tried to laugh with him. It came out a little giddy and desperate. She felt like an uptight cartoon schoolteacher.

They sat for a moment staring at the parking lot across the street. June's first breeze wafted by. For that moment Susan felt comfortable, even happy, sitting on a porch with the neighbour. She was drinking a beer at two in the afternoon and didn't care. Then slowly a waft of skunk floated by. Once she'd identified it, it was impossible to ignore.

"Fuck, can you smell that?" asked Larry.

"Yeah."

"It must have just fucking moved here," he said.

She explained to Larry what they had to do. He was nonplussed.

"I got a couple of extra radios," he said. "I'll go to the hardware store on my bike and get the steel mesh. You get that cayenne stuff."

That afternoon, she and Larry worked. They found the one entrance hole in the dirt by his porch. Larry seemed to know what to do and began to insert the mesh around the perimeter of the porch right away, so the skunk couldn't get out anywhere else. It was strange squatting inches beside him as he grunted and sweated, Susan's nose sometimes in the black spray of his armpit hair, obeying his "Hold this" and "Pass me that." She was terrified of her hands slipping at a crucial moment, and when she crouched, the neck of her T-shirt gaped open, flashing a view of everything down to her soft belly. She also stunk, not having showered after the boozy party of the previous night.

Was the skunk worried? Did it hear all the scraping and muttered conversation? Did she curl her babies closer to her? Did she know this was the end? That would be impossible. To survive as serenely as she did she could not have the anticipation of a god, only that of a rodent. Sedated by her nursing kits, who were beginning to spray involuntarily with their infant lack of control, she waited until an inner trigger told her to go get food. It could be days.

Susan threw the cayenne pepper into the hole. Larry got out a bright yellow boom box. "Waterproof," he said. "We'll play some metal."

"It says talk radio is better," said Susan.

"Fuck, we may as well play some CDs and have a party," he said.

On went the Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Tragically Hip, and Our Lady Peace. Larry played them loud. Susan hated this music. Her tastes were a bit

more twee than high-school hard rock, which sounded like children's music to her, with its corny crescendos and bad lyrics, like the first poetry efforts of a very slow teenager with an overdeveloped sense of drama. Susan dutifully listened to whatever darling of the indie scene was playing at the hipster bar where she used to meet her friends. She was used to music drenched in irony, with coy references to Beatle-esque movements. Larry's music reminded her of a time in a musty basement when she had a crush on her best friend's older brother. She caught herself nodding her head to one of the classics and stopped. "Oh my God, I was almost headbanging!" she thought.

When people coming home from work shot them dirty looks, Larry would raise his beer and say, "Sorry, man, got a skunk down there," or "Skunk, man," or "Doin' a little exterminating." The person would smile immediately and say things like, "Well don't send him over to me. I just got rid of mine," or "Hey, you can come to my house next!" Susan, who hadn't experienced anything akin to camaraderie in about seven years, began to feel an unfamiliar lightness in her chest. It reminded her of doing ecstasy.

By 7 P.M. Larry was roasting wienies on a rusted hibachi and had invited a couple of friends over: Peter, a sandy-haired seedy-looking guy, and Mark, a very short, muscular bald man who was overly solicitous toward Susan. She couldn't figure out why.

When it got dark she realized they needed a light to shine in the skunk hole. All Larry had was a lava lamp. He placed it reverently by the hole.

Larry went on another beer run. By eleven they were all having loud, earnest conversations. Susan felt comfortable enough (read: drunk) to voice her opinions on classic rock to the bald guy, who was confounded. "Man, that's just not right," he said, shaking his head. Larry shocked Susan by displaying a casual knowledge of all the twee bands. It turned out he'd been a roadie/dealer to half of them. He even claimed to have gotten a blow job from Courtney Love.

Susan definitely had to work the next day, so she finally crawled to her bed at about 1 A.M. She left the boys on the porch listening to "Stairway to Heaven" and exhorting the skunk to climb it. She wiggled out of her jeans and fell on her bed in her T-shirt. Problem was, her bedroom window looked out on the street and she could still hear the music. It was loud. She closed the window, put some Kleenex in her ears, and passed out. In a pre-sleep fog Susan thought she heard yelling and swearing, but it soon mingled with a mangled dream about a dance in a cave and then blackness.

She awoke at six, choking on skunk stench, opened her window, and looked out. The blaster was still in place, tuned to the plummy voices of a morning show. The clear, bassy sounds were obscene in the June dew. Smog had yet to collect over the city. It was a sweet, pure morning, innocent—like it was every morning—of what a foul, exhausting day it would turn out to be. A crack baby of a day. Beer bottles stood guard on the porch next door. They must have poked the skunk out and it had sprayed. Great. She dressed blearily and went

downstairs. The smell was worse in her living room near the porch. Her eyes stung and her stomach roiled. She decided to take a shower and head off somewhere for breakfast.

Leaving, she turned the radio off. It had obviously done its job.

The skunk actually hadn't left. She and her babies were annoyed by the stomping on the porch and the music blasting into their den like firehoses. They were delighted when the radio was turned off. Spooked mother skunk would probably not leave the den for a while to get food. Now she had an idea that something wasn't right.

Marta looked up before Susan had even entered her office.

"What is that smell?' she demanded, as Susan entered.

Susan's mouth pursed and her head cocked in an expression of guilelessness that drove Marta mad.

"You mean you can smell it?" asked Susan. "The cab driver didn't say anything."

Susan knew she was taking too many cabs and she immediately looked guilty, making Marta even more exasperated. Susan's hair was wet and rumpled and her skin was red and blotchy from the beer. She was wearing a wool plaid skirt with a purple sleeveless blouse. It was so hard to decide what to wear in the spring. Goosebumps dotted her arms like Cream of Wheat. Marta's magenta lips compressed.

"Please sit down, Susan," she said in her level, barely accented speech. "Are you feeling better?"

"Oh yeah," replied Susan, forgetting for a second she had called in sick the day before.

"I'm afraid you have been absent a little too much lately and have been coming in late from lunch too often," said Marta.

"Oh yeah, I sometimes get caught up in a book at lunch. Sorry," smiled Susan.

"Well," said Marta, "it is important that we can rely on each other here. What if the minister asked for one of your projects while you were gone? He expects you to be here and I expect you to be here. . . . What is that smell?!"

"Ohm, well," said Susan, "it's a skunk."

"A skunk?"

"Yeah, there was one under my porch and my next door neighbour tried to chase it out last night and it sprayed."

"You are going to have to go home immediately and change," said Marta.

"All my clothes must smell the same," said Susan.

Marta inhaled through her teeth. "Is the release done?"

"Yeah," said Susan.

"Go home," said Marta. "I am officially warning you and putting you on probation for consistent tardiness. If in the next month you do not "clean up your act" (she said it in quotations, like she was parroting the latest teen expression) you will be fired and given a two-week severance package."

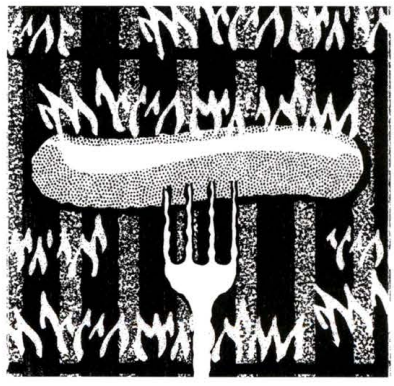
"Two weeks' free money!" was Susan's first thought. Lately, thinking ahead was not her forte.

"Would you say you laid me off, so I could get unemployment?" she asked.

"No, I cannot do that," said Marta with satisfaction. "That would be untrue."

Susan had a brief, sickening realization of how awful people could be. It's a wonder there aren't more murders, she thought, looking at Marta in her cheap lipstick, about to destroy her life. It's a wonder.

Susan was about to take the subway home but realized she was probably too stinky. Besides, she had no money. Well, she had two dollars and eighty-three cents. So, she trudged for forty minutes along a one-mile stretch of a four-lane street lined with office towers, then over the bridge and up the major thoroughfare to her home. She was surprised how long it took and how little there was to see. Her knees, unaccustomed to movement, began to ache. No job. Sore body. Debt. Hungover. Being forced to walk. "Why, that's poverty!" thought Susan. "So this is how it happens." She remembered she had no booze at home. Four days from payday (possibly her last payday) and broke, she had squandered her last few bucks on yesterday's beer and the cab to work. She turned up her path. Larry was mortaring a concrete block over the skunk hole. It looked awful. Her first thought was whether or not Larry had beer.



"Hey," she said.

"Hey, man," replied Larry.

"Skunk sprayed last night," she said.

"Oh yeah," he said, "I'm going to sleep in the backyard tonight."

Susan pictured Larry's backyard. Weeds, sorry-ass balding grass, rusted tins.

"Um, we don't know if it's gone yet," Susan said, gesturing at the concrete block. "You might be sealing it in. We have to do the newspaper thing and see if it's left."

Crouched with one arm over his knee, he looked up at her.

"Fuck, man, after last night, it's gone." He winked. "Turned off the radio on its way out."

"I dunno," she said.

She stood there awkwardly for a second. Larry went back to sweeping the putty knife over the sides of the concrete block. Susan walked to her door and went in. She pictured the skunk trapped under her porch and felt an empathic moment of sheer panic. No, it's gone. It must be gone. The skunk smell was still pretty bad in her living room. She went upstairs. It was bad there, too. She went around the house and opened all the windows. She sat on her grimy bed. She couldn't sleep here. She would have to crash at a friend's house. She called three friends. Either no one was at home or they were screening their calls. Well, she would have to sleep in her room or maybe drag her mattress to the kitchen floor in the back of the house.

She got up and ripped the sheets off the bed. She tried to grab the slippery wide side of the mattress. A fingernail immediately bent back.

"Fuck!" screamed Susan as she kicked the bed. Edging her shoulder under the mattress, she managed to hoist it onto its side on the floor. It wobbled for a minute before majestically falling away and crashing into her dresser.

"You O.K.?" It was Larry's voice, just feet away under her bedroom window.

Susan skittered over to her window, dodging the mattress and slipping on books. "Uh, yeah. Just trying to move my mattress. I can't sleep up here."

"You want any help?"

Susan looked around her room. It was sprinkled with inside-out pants and dirty underwear. Her mattress had several faint constellations of old bloodstains on it.

"No, it's really light," she said. "That's O.K."

She hefted the mattress onto its tall side and leaned it toward the door of her room where it fell satisfactory onto its long side. "There," she said.

She slid the mattress down the small hallway to the top of the stairs. She figured she might as well just let it slide down. It bumped down satisfyingly, knocking over the end table beside her front door. Keepsakes and pennies flew. No big deal, thought Susan. She hopped down the stairs. There was a knock on her door. It was Larry.

"You need any help here?" he asked through the screen. "Oh, come on. Let me get this."

He came in and grabbed one end of the slumped mattress, trapping Susan against the wall with it.

"Hang on," he said, and twitched it straight. He snapped his head back, sniffing.

"Fuck, it's bad in here."

"Yeah, well, it's right under my living room, really," said Susan.

Larry expertly dragged the mattress down the hall to her kitchen. In his element. Give some men a task at hand and that's the only time they seem to fit, thought Susan. He looked perfectly respectable, even nice, helping her out. This was his department, like sealing off the base of the house. Fred had always looked flustered when he was painting or moving furniture.

Larry got to the kitchen and Susan, looking at the oily dust bunnies clawing from under the fridge, and the sticky soda stains on the floor, changed her mind.

"You know what?" she said. "Let's take it out to the back porch."

"Yeah?"

"I think I better sleep outside too."

"Yeah, you better," he said.

After Larry left, Susan couldn't sit in her living room, drink, and watch TV as per usual, so she decided to clean up instead. By the time it was dark she had done all her laundry. She had also swept up her porch, raked the backyard, and hung a line for her wet clothes. She scoured her kitchen floor, did her dishes, cleared up her bedroom, and swept. She brought her alarm clock down to the porch so she could get to work on time. She really couldn't be late again now. Although it was an unusually muggy day for June and the insects were blooming, the nights were still cool. She made up her bed on the porch and piled every blanket and her old, torn sleeping bag on top. During all this work she had a flicker of worry about the skunk. If it was still there, how long would it take to die?

"Do you really think it's gone?' Susan asked Larry forlornly over the fence. It was midnight, and he had dragged his TV outside to watch a late show. Snuggled under her blankets she had been listening to cheap comedians' voices and smiling when Larry barked with laughter. He had just turned off the TV. He hadn't heard her.

"I don't think it's gone," she whispered.

That night, the skunk's triggers told her to leave. Sniffing at the concrete

wall she shook her head. She started to dig. Nothing. Everywhere she dug there were barriers. She circled the den, ignoring the kits who were crying for milk. She dug for hours, her claws tearing on the steel mesh Larry had lain down the perimeter of the porch. She rested, panting. Thirsty. Ears flat.

On the second night she was weak, spraying in her distress as she circled and then stopped and then circled and dug. One of her kits had stopped moving. Soon she would stop moving too.

A noise. Hammering. Sharp acrid human smell. Human sound. The skunk huddled herself into the darkest, flattest corner of her earthen cave. Her head swayed. Suddenly light.

Larry was indulgent about Susan's need to rip away the concrete block, even though he had spent a whole afternoon closing up the hole.

"You're one fucked-up lady," he laughed, but not in a mean way. Hey, chicks are like that, he shrugged. They chiselled the block out of the entranceway and he let her put newspaper over the hole. If the newspaper was dislodged that meant the skunk had left, explained Susan. The next morning, it was. More newspaper was put over the hole. After three days it remained where it was. The skunk had not come back. Proof.

That morning Larry found Susan lying on the ground. She had been on her way to work when she felt the need to lie on the ground and look into the skunk hole, the same way she'd lain on her kitchen floor sometimes. The hole still stank, but it was empty, she was sure. They could seal it up again. For a second she thought about the trapped animal, and her heart thumped into the ground and her nails dug convulsively into the earth. She was late for work again, and she was grinding dirt into her clothes. She knew she would be given her notice today.

Larry lay down beside her, his face on the ground next to hers. They breathed into each other for a few seconds. He raised his hand and ran a finger down the side of her face. "There, you see? It's O.K. She's gone," he said. "She's not dead." ⊳⊂

Mary-Lou Zeitoun lives in Dufferin Grove. Her first novel, 13, was published in 2002 by Porcupine's Quill.

TADDLE CREEK RECOMMENDS

Taddle Creek does not publish book reviews. However, the following books were recently written by contributors to the magazine, and are, thus, highly recommended. (• indicates books containing work originally published in Taddle Creek.)

• *Spine,* by K. I. Press (Gaspereau, 2004; $18.95). A simply stunning book of poetry, in both content and design, K. I. Press's second collection, *Spine,* is even more accomplished and enjoyable than her first. Along with a mix of "girly" fixations, such as *Anne of Green Gables, Jane Eyre,* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* there are several poems dedicated to—if you can believe it—typography. This is the book of poetry *Taddle Creek* has been waiting its whole life for.

Hello, I'm Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity, by Hal Niedzviecki (Penguin, 2004; $25). Hal Niedzviecki—the *real* Naomi Klein—has an early mid-life crisis all over the pages of *Hello, I'm Special,* a look at the fall (i.e., public acceptance) of the nonconformist. Unlike Klein's second book (what was it called again?), *Hello, I'm Special* isn't a rehashing of Niedzviecki's first alt-culture textbook, 2000's *We Want Some Too,* nor should it necessarily be considered a follow-up. *Hello, I'm Special* breaks new ground for Niedzviecki, who examines how the mass market co-opted his easygoing slacker image, leaving him a man out of time.

An Opening Act of Unspeakable Evil, by Jim Munroe (No Media Kings, 2004; $20). Jim Munroe takes a detour—though not too far—from the world of sci-fi in his latest novel, *An Opening Act of Unspeakable Evil,* the tale of two roommates caught up in a trilogy of horror: the occult, heavy metal, and go-go dancing. Most frightening of all, the story is spit like fire through a hell mouth via the embodiment of true terror: a personal blog. (Evil!)

Here Is My Street, This Tree I Planted, by Jonathan Bennett (ECW, 2004; $16.95). Jonathan Bennett's poetry debut, *Here Is My Street, This Tree I Planted,* invokes a striking poetic language in constructing the urban and natural landscapes of Canadian and Australian culture. Bennett roots his reader firmly in location in order to explore familiar themes of displacement, identity, and "home." The transition of locale offers further considerations of these constructs as shifting esoteric spaces we occupy. Beyond the lyrical language, regard for form, and cultural insight of this collection is the humour, tragedy, and aesthetic triumph that furnish both everyday life and good poetry.

Drinking Songs, by Elissa Joy (Pas de Chance, 2004; $15). With titles like "On the Eve of My Divorce," "I Thought You Might Be the Father of My Children," and "Wench," the poems in *Drinking Songs* quickly live up to the collection's name, evoking the hurtin' songs of a Johnny Cash or a Loretta Lynn. The poems themselves are only vaguely hurtin', written in Elissa Joy's usual sparse style—not that that's a bad thing by any means. One is tempted to say Joy is long overdue for a major collection, but it's doubtful a bigger press would do her work the justice Pas de Chance does with its always original and intriguing designs.

• *The Way of the Whore,* by Tamara Faith Berger (Gutter, 2004; $17.95). Tamara Faith Berger's second novel, *The Way of the Whore,* compels, challenges, and titillates through a modern retelling of the story of Mary of Egypt. Part porn, part tale of strength and survival, *The Way of the Whore* immerses the reader in the life of Mira, a smart girl blessed with major sexuality, who finds her own way in a world of strip clubs and johns.

• *Meet Me in the Parking Lot,* by Alexandra Leggat (Insomniac, 2004; $19.95). Alexandra Leggat's latest collection of short stories, *Meet Me in the Parking Lot,* is a richly compelling book linked by the thematic use of the automobile. Yet the car in these stories is more than just metaphor—it is also setting, character, and narrative force, driving a chilling and psychologically unsettling set of tales that examine troubled humans making troubled choices. Expectations in *Meet Me in the Parking Lot* are twisted, and twisted gracefully, by a redemptive voice.


PEOPLE AROUND HERE · DAVE LAPP ·
JET LUEL
SO THE CLASS HASN'T EVEN STARTED YET...
... AND SHE'S ON THE MODEL STAND, 'STRETCHING' TOTALLY NAKED, NO ATTEMPT AT ALL TO DO ANY-THING IN PRIVATE... RIGHT OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF EVERYTHING, PEOPLE RUNNING AROUND TRYING TO SET UP FOR CLASS... NOT REALLY PAYING ATTENTION... YOU SIMPLY TURN AND SEE SOME-THING YOU DIDN'T EXPECT!
DOESN'T SHE WEAR A ROBE OR SOMETHING?
NO! IT'S BRUTAL! YOU'VE ONLY A MOMENT TO PROCESS THE INFO IT'S GUT WRENCHING... LOOK AWAY FAST!... IT'S NOT ABOUT 'HER'...
YOU HAVE TO PROTECT YOURSELF... LOOK AWAY FOR YOUR OWN SAKE ...TOO MUCH INFORMATION IN A FLASH!
YOU'VE GOT ALL THESE PEOPLE TRYING DESPERATELY TO NOT LOOK AT SOMETHING, IT'S VERY AWKWARD.
AH...
UM...
GACK...
ER...
PLUS SHE'S GOT THESE BIG WHITE GLASSES... THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT ONE PIECE OF 'CLOTHING' MAKES IT SEEM... PERVERTED.
IT'S LIKE THIS OTHER MODEL WHO WOULD JUST LEAVE HIS SOCKS ON. SOMETHING ABOUT IT SEEMED PERVERTED... SEEDY.
OH, AND THERE WAS THIS OTHER MODEL WHO HAD JUST FINISHED A LONG POSE AND SAID...
OH MY BACK... IT'S EITHER THE POSE OR THE FACT THAT MY BOY-FRIEND FUCKED ME ON THE WASH-ING MACHINE LAST NIGHT!
PEOPLE PRETENDED TO HAVE NOT HEARD, BUT YOU CAN SEE IT IN THEIR EYES, THEY'RE 'WEIRDED OUT'!
LIKE IN ENGLAND THEY SEPARATE TRAINS INTO CELLPHONE FREE CARS... PEOPLE HAVE CONVER-SATIONS AND THERE'S AN UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU'RE 'CONVERSING', BUT A CELLPHONE OVER-HEARD IS ONE WAY... LIKE A TEEN SAYING 'HE DID WHAT?!' YOU MAY JUST BE OVERHEARING, BUT YOU WANT TO KNOW, WHAT DID HE DO?!
THIS IS DIF-FERENT... IT'S AN 'ARTISTIC' ENVIRONMENT.
OKAY, BUT HOW ABOUT THIS ONE GUY WHO WAS DOWN ON ALL FOURS WITH HIS BACKSIDE TO THE CLASS?
THERE'S ONLY ONE TIME YOU WOULD DO THAT TO A WHOLE CROWD!
PEOPLE EXPECT 'CHAR-ACTERS' OR QUIRKINESS, FREEDOM OF EXPRES-SION, RIGHT?
I KNOW, BUT C'MON, TRY TO SHOW A LITTLE DECORUM!


DRINK
STEAM WHISTLE
PILSNER
THE Good Beer FOLKS!
REWARD YOURSELF!
STEAM WHISTLE
CANADA'S PREMIUM PILSNER
Bière 341ml 5% alc./vol.
STEAM WHISTLE BREWING
CANADA'S PREMIUM PILSNER