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Black and White Like Smoke

by

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ABSTRACT

The novel **Black and White Like Smoke** is the story of Percy, a woman coming to terms with an ambivalent nature that resists categorization. While she loves the city, she works in isolation from April through August. While she is in love with a woman, she is entertaining the idea of life with a man. And while her friends think that she needs to make up her mind about her sexuality, her response is that “maybe she does, but how can she decide, when none of the names fit, when nothing, not even *bisexual*, describes how she feels about herself? Lesbians know. Straight people know. If bisexuals know, then she's not that, either.”

Set at a remote northern firetower, this is a story that moves between Percy's past and present, highlighting contradictions that, ultimately, allow her find peace with the fact that sometimes “there's only the ambiguity of the moment.”

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PREFACE

One memorable moment of my adult life occurred when an acquaintance divulged her lesbian identity to me. Above the steady thump of a very loud bass which underscored the beat of dance music, she raised her voice. “In case you haven’t figured it out,” she said, “I’m a lesbian.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “I’m bisexual.”

The way she recoiled, a bystander might have thought that I had just slapped her. The smile left her face. Her eyes narrowed. “Bisexuals can’t be trusted,” she said, then turned her back as if the matter were closed.

Until that evening, I had perceived my bisexuality as a kind of genetic or psychological gift. Whatever had caused my bisexuality, and I certainly hadn’t questioned the origins of my sexual makeup, I felt unlimited by the constraints of either heterosexuality or homosexuality. In my mind, I was a truly balanced individual; my desire, and thus my love, since I seldom differentiated between the two, was based on mutual attraction and interest, unhindered by gender. In a moment, that particular fiction of self was altered forever.

When I began writing this novel, I wanted to create a character who would not perceive herself as marginalized. Feeling unfairly perceived by both heterosexuals and homosexuals, I wanted to prove that bisexuality is not a place marker between two binary identities—alternately heterosexual and homosexual—but an *un*oriented site, an ambiguous state that encompasses all any individual can be, resisting categorization. I also

wanted to address binaries in general, and to avoid writing them into my text wherever possible. I thought I could break with patriarchal tradition and create what I called linguistic imbrications, an overlapping of words and images that would replace frequent binary constructions or, at the very least, bring the constructions into question. In addressing identity, I succeeded far less well than I would have liked. In my attempts to avoid binaries, I failed miserably.

I was also interested in giving voice to a working class woman's point of view, and in this task I believe I succeeded somewhat more than with my other objectives. From my perspective, the novel's strength lies in the characterization of the protagonist, Percy, who brought home to me the truth in Judith Butler's theory that power "acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting" (*The Psychic* 14). Percy illustrates this concept of identity well.

Subordinated by her bisexuality, by men, by her lover Marlea, by her mother, and especially by the very environment she challenges, she finds agency only to reiterate similar acts that place her in a position of subordination, over and over, acts which, ironically, ultimately shape her into the powerful, questioning character she is.

I began writing, then, with a definition of bisexuality derived from Hélène Cixous, who opposes the "classic conception of bisexuality, which, squashed under the emblem of castration fear and along with the fantasy of a 'total' being (though composed of two halves), would do away with the difference..." (254). Cixous refers, instead, to something she terms an "*other bisexuality*" defined as "each one's location in self...of the presence—

variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex, and, from this ‘self-permission,’ multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body” (254). This definition refuses any attempt to meld together two halves, refuses to erase differences, but seeks to encourage the recognition and celebration of all parts of ourselves with all parts of our bodies. Or, as Toril Moi succinctly states, Cixous’ bisexuality is “multiple, variable, and ever-changing” (109), a bisexuality which addresses Butler’s concept of identity in *Bodies That Matter*, a text that helped to shape my own understanding of identity as something that is not innate, but that is materialized or produced over time through a series of performative acts.

Although Butler doesn’t directly address bisexuality, the arguments she raises in the chapter “Critically Queer” (*Bodies* 223), can be extended to include bisexuality, particularly her discussion of the “performative.” As she asserts, “If a performative provisionally succeeds...then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*” (227). It is not by one act, then, or one naming, that Percy feels herself subordinated or “othered,” but by a series of such actions which accumulate to build her sense of being both inside and outside societal norms. The “performatives” I have shown to have acted on Percy appear as parental authority, societal disapproval—both heterosexual and homosexual—and, often, the behaviour of men, with whom she has primarily unsatisfactory relations.

Even so, she does not merely move between hetero and homoerotic attachments. She “can’t argue that she ever feels more straight than lesbian, regardless of how others treat her or who she’s with. Nor does she feel like she’s half and half—as if she’s half cream and half milk, merely waiting to see which part will rise to the top” (46–47). She is not alternately lesbian and straight, but remains always aware both of her attraction to men and of the bond she shares with her female lover, even when their attachment is no longer sexual. As Percy puts it, “Gilmore will understand how Marlea fits into her life—however she fits in the future. He’ll see how tightly tied they are...” (49). This thinking may be naïve, but it serves to illustrate the complexity of Percy’s identity, that she cannot simply repress her attachment to Marlea—her homosexual self—in order to favour the part of herself that seeks intimacy with a man—her heterosexual self. She has not two separate selves or identities, but one which spans a wide range of human (not only “feminine”) needs and desires, some of which make her feel “othered” and some of which allow her to feel varying degrees of acceptance.

If, however, I managed to negotiate, even partially, the spaces between heterosexual and homosexual identity, I succeeded far less in my attempt to avoid using binary-laden language. The sentence immediately prior to this one is yet another reminder that however much I wanted to move toward linguistic ambivalence and to avoid words that polarize, I was, and am, limited by a need to name that which creates the problematic, thus reiterating and reinstating that which I seek to eradicate.

As Cixous has rightly noted, binary structures—hierarchical dualities—set up word couples, only to create the death of one aspect of the couple. Cixous asserts that “the

movement by which each opposition is set up to produce meaning is the movement by which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time a war breaks out. Death is always at work” (91). She proposes, further, that what is destroyed in this culture is, without fail, that which is female or, by extrapolation, “other.” I wanted no part of this metaphorical killing, but wished to convey meaning without choosing words already laden with hierarchical significance.

When Judith Butler addresses accountability in language, primarily concerning hate speech, she questions whether “a static notion of ‘social structure’ is reduplicated in hate speech, or whether such structures suffer deconstruction through being reiterated, repeated, and rearticulated” (*Excitable* 19). Her purpose is to question whether there might be some “repetition that might disjoin the speech act from its supporting conventions such that its repetition confounds rather than consolidates its injurious efficacy” (20). When I began writing, I believed that this “disjoining” should be possible, and I wished to make a contribution that would do more than simply reinvoke the effects of subjugating patriarchal conventions. Butler is clear that we should accept responsibility for the language we use when she argues that

The one who utters hate speech is responsible for the manner in which such speech is repeated, for reinvigorating such speech, for reestablishing contexts of hate and injury. The responsibility of the speaker does not consist of remaking language *ex nihilo*, but rather of negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker’s speech. (*Excitable* 27)

From that passage and others like it, I extrapolated that, as with hate speech, the negative connotations, or name-calling, of the insidious binary weights each word even before it is uttered; the binary interpellates—or marks—through a whole history of pitting one term against, not merely beside, another. Therefore, just as the person who reiterates the pain and violence of hate speech is responsible for “reinvigorating such speech,” I feel a sense of accountability, that I must remain aware of the prior interpellations caused by language and must at least attempt to avoid “reinvigorating” linguistic hierarchies.

I feel that accountability, yet as I worked with my text, I recognized binaries in practically everything I wrote: city/forest; man/woman; relaxation/tension; heterosexual/homosexual; acceptance/criticism; population/isolation. Each “couple,” then, bears the weight of hierarchical and preexisting connotations. To illustrate the weight of just one of these word couples, Sherry Ortner writes convincingly of the nature/culture dichotomy, which she argues explains the “universal devaluation of women” (71). She argues that

...woman is being identified with—or if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is “nature” in the most generalized sense...every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products). (72-73)

Ortner expands this thesis to argue that because women are seen as being “*closer to nature than men*” (due to their physiology, social roles, and psychic structure), they are

perceived as “representing a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are” (73). In other words, “Since it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman were considered part of nature, then culture would find it ‘natural’ to subordinate, not to say oppress, them” (73). Aware of Ortner’s position, I wished to avoid writing a text that would preserve the gap between nature and culture. Yet my story is about a woman who spends part of the year in the city (culture), and the remainder in the forest (nature), and these settings *are* vastly different. I couldn’t very well avoid that—nor should I, according to Cixous—but my attempts to address these binaries and blur their boundaries struck me, in the end, as ineffectual. Percy carves walking sticks in the city, and she brings culture (a computer and a telephone) to the forest, but I would hardly say that this constitutes much of a shift. I wanted to locate the reader in a place of ambivalence that would fill the space between two edges, thus blurring the boundaries, yet, for the most part, that resonant ambivalence eluded me, could not be captured and set neatly upon the page, perhaps precisely because ambivalence *is* elusive.

One exception to that elusiveness is in the title of my novel, which may be perceived as at least a partial illustration of what I wished to accomplish. Within the context of Percy’s story, the words “Black and White Like Smoke” seek to shift reader expectations as the binaries—black and white—become imbricated through our knowledge that smoke is not often strictly black or white, but rather some shade of grey. An understanding of this overlap tends to blur the demarcation which normally separates the words “black” and “white,” and the reader who recognizes this blurring may be momentarily alerted—however unconsciously—to the fact that a linguistic alteration has

occurred. This small success encouraged me, even after I realized that it would be next to impossible to avoid binary constructions, and I believed I that I would be able to create more of these subtle shifts. Instead, the more I wrote, and rewrote, the more I felt bound and restricted by a vocabulary that seemed increasingly filled with antonyms. If, as Butler purports, “autonomy in speech, to the extent that it exists, is conditioned by a radical and originary dependency on a language whose historicity exceeds in all directions the history of the speaking subject” (*Excitable* 28), I was bound in two ways. Not only was I limited by a system of signs that refused to allow me to celebrate the ambivalence I desired—thus detracting from the intended effect—but I was also bound by the history of the words I chose, many of which emphasize maleness and focus on hierarchies I preferred to eliminate—which, in effect, loaded my text with *more* meaning than I intended. Perhaps it is only there, in those contradictions, that ambivalence can be found.

I also attempted to evade binaries through the overall structure of the narrative. As an alternative to the customary scene/summary format, which I saw as yet another oppositional structure—with scene being construed as having primary importance (as, for example, when editors regularly admonish writers to “show; don’t tell”)—I wanted to write, like Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, primarily scenes, writing them in the present tense because I hoped that this technique, which presents most of the story in real-time, would more closely approximate the way Percy lives and relives each moment, whether past, present, or future. Virginia Woolf addresses this concept of narrative better than I can when she writes,

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms....Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall. (106-107)

Or, to rephrase according to Phyllis Bentley: “Life is not lived in a summary, but in a continual flow of changing single perceptions” (35). It is this continual flow of “changing single perceptions” that I attempted to capture, and in this way, I make some movement toward understanding language the way I think Julia Kristeva perceives it, as a “complex signifying *process* rather than a monolithic *system*” (Moi 152). However frustrated I became in my attempts to force language to do what I intended, the signifying process with which I am left does, after all, bring me closer to the heterogeneity I sought to express. The work attempts to create a particular set of meanings, and it partially succeeds, partially fails. Contradictions abound, not because I consciously orchestrated them, but because meaning—both that which I intended and that which I did not—was and is *generated*, through signifiers, through process, through technique, through reading, and especially through absences of which I may not even be cognizant.

Finally, I am also aware that Percy may be read as a “female intruder” or “outsider” character. In writing about Edith Wharton’s characters, Carol Wershoven defines a female intruder as a “woman who is in some way outside of her society; she is different from other women, whether because of her background or lack of social status or because she has violated some social taboo” (14). Percy fits this description on all counts;

she is bisexual, unmarried, lives much of the year in isolation, and has a working class background. She does not easily “fit in” anywhere. Even so, I don’t see her as “outside” some imaginary realm so much as ambivalently “inside.”

While reading Toril Moi, I was struck by Julia Kristeva’s position on marginality and subversion, particularly with her emphasis on positionality and how “what is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies” (Moi 166). A detailed example makes this clear:

...if patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the *limit* or borderline of that order. From a phallogentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. (Moi 167)

This is exactly Percy’s position, except that I see her as occupying all of the “frontiers” up to and overlapping the limits that are delineated by the binaries she links together. In this way, she is neither inside nor outside but only not yet fully cognizant of the differences that make her one and whole. She may seem “outside” normal behaviour to those who wish to dissociate from her, as when heterosexuals perceive her as receding and merging with homosexuality, or when homosexuals see her as merging with heterosexuality, but neither perspective “corresponds to any essential truth” (Moi 167), regardless of who

wishes it so. Percy's position is aggregate and collective, both here and there and elsewhere as well. She is only outside when she allows herself to be othered by someone else's perception. When she finally accepts the heterogeneous nature of self, stops trying to be who she is not, she acts more freely than she has in the past, as when she gives in and deliberately paints her shoes (126), or screams out the cupola window (130), exhibiting both the "self-permission" and the "multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire" to which Cixous refers (Cixous 254). With this new self-permission, comes freedom to move beyond her troubled partnership with Marlea, not into some new state of coupledness, but into a fresh awareness of her own needs. She stops trying to force herself to be like others, or worse, better than others, stops, also, trying to convince others to change for her, and says, simply: *"It turns out I'm as conservative as anyone: male or female, I want security. I want forever...I've been wrong to insist that you choose between Andrew and me. I know you can't choose, and as much as that hurts, I'm finally able to accept that even in this yes and no, black and white world, not all decisions are possible."* She stops trying to isolate parts of herself and embraces an aggregate nature inclusive of the many contradictions which make up a self.

In the writing of this novel, then, I've come to see that neither language nor identity can be cut and pasted into a static position that will create some desired effect. When my acquaintance cracked my view of myself as a "truly balanced individual," she renamed me, participating in an act of subjugation that, ironically, also allowed me to reject her naming and move toward an understanding that language and identity are subject to a continuous process of change that is both outside and within my control.

Through language, I am constituted as a subject, subjugated, marked, and shaped in a particular way, yet through language I also shape, and reshape, and fracture that which seeks to subjugate me. In the writing of this novel, I both succeeded and failed; in that contradiction lies the very ambivalence I sought.

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BLACK AND WHITE LIKE SMOKE

Percy Turner hunches over her keyboard, composing e-mail to a man she has never seen. Sitting in the radio room at Envy River Tower, eyes glued to the screen, she taps out a few words, reads, rereads. Deletes. She runs fingers over her cheekbone, up down, the thin skin stretching and bunching while she weighs and discards, taps and deletes again. She can't tell him that her scalp tingles every time she hears his voice. No, she must introduce herself, pique his interest.

May 25, she keys into the upper left corner of her screen. Then, *Dear Gilmore*. Percy smiles at that. She's never known anyone named Gilmore, unless she can count Clyde Gilmour of "Gilmour's Albums," a program she occasionally hears on CBC radio. She hopes her Gilmore, and she does already think of him as hers, is not as long-in-the-world as the CBC variety, but she has no way of knowing his age—only that he still climbs a hundred-foot tower, and that he's either young enough or smart enough to program a computer.

I hope you don't mind that I filched your e-mail address when you gave it out on the radio. Although we haven't talked, I hear you several times a day.

I'm attracted to voices—much more here than anywhere else—and yours compels me to write. I can't explain, except that your voice enters my ears and settles in my body like music.

Fair enough. For Percy, there's an indescribable pull to each word that Gilmore says. She can't explain, only knows that she feels, as much as hears, distinct and variable notes resonating in her spine for several seconds after he speaks. The resulting goosebumps are the reason she writes.

Still, Percy hesitates. Maybe she shouldn't give so much away. Who knows what kind of trouble she invites, saying something so provocative to a complete stranger?

Then again, how much trouble can he be? It's not like he can drop in unannounced, or follow her home, park down the street, watch her windows in the dark. He's safe. Miles away safe. And what more does she have to offer, out here, than words? Setting her chin slightly, she adds:

In fact, voice takes on a whole new significance at a tower, don't you think?

What Percy means is that everything takes on a new significance at the firetower. Newspapers and groceries, flown in once a month, are gifts. Gifts she has to buy herself, but she prefers to think of them as presents from benevolent forestry workers who may, if she's been grateful enough in the past, remember to buy part of her fruit ripe, some green, some turning, so that she need not gobble everything at once before it rots.

Have you been doing towers long? This is my seventh year, and I like the work and the solitude—although the aloneness can get a bit much. I don't like climbing the ladder five or six times a day, either, but I suppose it's one way to keep my muscles tight.

I just wanted to let you know that you have a neighbor on the Internet. If you write back, I'll respond same day. How on that?

How on that? Percy hesitates over the phrase. However useful this question is on the radio, she's not sure that it works here. She moves the curser up, then deletes. She'd rather be too earnest than ridiculous.

Sincerely, Percy Turner (668)

That Gilmore knows her by name, Percy doesn't doubt. There was a time when each towerperson could hear ten or twelve others, but a newer, more site-specific system has isolated each tower. When there are only four or five voices within hearing range, everyone knows to whom they belong. She imagines that he listens to her with equal interest, even believes that she'd feel nothing for him if he wasn't at least as interested in her as she is in him. Still, a hint of modesty can't hurt.

This Gilmore, he'll like modesty. Others call him on the radio to ask questions about computers, complicated questions he answers in a calm, matter-of-fact way, responding with solutions that have made him the resident expert. Sometimes he says, I don't know. I'll have to think about that one, or Let me see if I can find something in one of my books. Decent, humble Gilmore. No need to pretend he knows more than he does. What you see is what you get, or so Percy wants to believe.

He'll write, Percy says.

Her voice, aloud like that, startles her. Until she spoke, only the whirl of the computer fan and the gentle putt putt of the generator, muted by the engine shed, broke the stillness. She shrinks a little at the sound, resettles into her own silence.

He may hesitate, she thinks, may feel unsure of her intentions, but he'll be flattered; he'll embrace the chance for communication, for more than can be said on a district radio. Anyone would.

Percy first heard Gilmore when he opened Weldon Tower on April 23rd, two days after she had settled in at Envy River.

Four-five, this is six-four-nine with an opening message.

Six-four-nine, this is four-five. Go ahead.

To XMB four-five. Message number one. On April twenty-third at fourteen-twenty, Weldon Tower is officially open for the 1996 fire season. Propane at nine-five percent. Onan generator set—propane—reading 14393 decimal two-five. Signed, Gilmore Graham. How on that?

This morning, after more than a month of listening, she caught herself drumming her fingers on the desk as she waited through the others for Gilmore to report his morning weather. She smiled when she noticed, the silly smile of someone ready to fall in love with a stranger. And all because of what? The sound of morning weather off Gilmore Graham's tongue?

Four-five, this is six-four-nine with the morning weather. Max temp 16 degrees, that's one-six, minimum seven, sky broken, visibility three-five kilometres in haze, dry bulb one-two degrees, wet bulb one-zero. Wind from the southeast at 15 kilometres, gusting three-five, rain zero decimal 4 millimetres; clouds high two, middle three. Remarks thunder PM.

Is voice to ear what pheromones are to nose? Are there certain wavelengths that make Percy's nerve endings swell and rub together, that release endorphins or signal an increase in sensory pleasure? This, Percy thinks, is something she should know. She does a quick spell-check and saves her letter to Gilmore. She has achieved the right tone, she thinks, somewhere between sincerity and suggestiveness. He'll want to believe that she does nothing but fantasize about his voice, so musical that it draws attention, yet he won't

be certain of her intent. After all, tower-people are known for their idiosyncracies. Percy plugs her cell phone into the computer and double-clicks on Dial. In less than two minutes she has connected with the server and transferred her message into the system.

She pushes away from the desk and stands to pull a chain dangling from a ceiling bulb. In another month it will not get dark at all.

So long as the generator runs, so long as electricity flows and her cell phone holds a charge, Percy can use her computer, make and receive calls, fax, e-mail, even hook up to the World Wide Web if she wants to. Onto this forested site, where the toilet is still an outhouse and water runs from a tap on the rain barrel below the eaves, she has imported an electronic microcosm that will break her isolation.

Percy throws a jacket over her sweater, makes a quick trip to the outhouse while there is still enough light to find her way without a flashlight. When she returns, chilled and shaking, she lowers a dipper into a bucket of rainwater and partly fills a mug. She takes a sip, then wets her toothbrush. Will the ranger think to bring a few pails of water with her service tomorrow? With such dry weather, her rainwater won't last much longer. She brushes her teeth, flosses, then cleans the brush in the mug and dumps milky water down the sink. She turns, touches the kettle on the stove—still warm—and pours enough water in a washbowl to dunk her washcloth. Tomorrow, before the helicopter arrives, she will shower.

For now she dresses in a flannel nightshirt and clean socks, then lights the oil lamp that rests on a crate beside her bed. She pads back to the office to switch off the generator, comes back, slips into bed and arranges the mosquito net around her.

Like all forestry cabins, this one is a modest, wall-boarded space, long ago designed to be inexpensively practical rather than attractive. It's a space that appeals to her because she has no need to judge it satisfactory or not. When she arrives, she can't ask to see another room, can't say, I'll think about it or, perhaps I'll come back later. Like it or not, this is what she gets for the duration, for every season she chooses to return to Envy River.

The main part of the cabin is as sparsely furnished as when she first arrived. Odds and ends have a way of accumulating over each summer but, for now, a table and three wooden chairs dominate the room. A narrow cot against the wall sits in for a sofa, and one inexpensive canvas deck chair functions as a place to read. Scattered on shelves and pinned to the walls are the rocks, mosses, and dried plants she has collected on walks—she would take no comfort in the grungy history of more stately discards. Better plain wood and natural artifacts than germs, she thinks, having no desire to sit among layers of chomping dust mites and other people's dead skin. The bedroom offers ample closet space, a sunny window, and what turns out to be a comfortable double bed. She's grateful for the desk in the office, for propane heat, a few outlets powered by the generator.

As she lies waiting for sleep, Percy scrambles through her head wondering whether she should she have told Gilmore more about herself. That she enjoys walks in the woods—albeit with a can of Bear Scare strapped to her waist—or that she reads Sandra Birdsell and Matt Cohen, that she *loves* reading Nancy Huston and Barbara Gowdy? Should he know that she carves odd-looking figures from hardwood, even manages to sell a few? Should she have mentioned the walking sticks? Or her age?

But why would he be intrigued by a backwash of facts? Percy wants him intrigued. She wants him, in his cabin so much like hers, to go to bed thinking about Percy at Envy River Tower, wants him to get up and listen for her voice on the radio as she listens for his, curious, without knowing too much.

Percy and Gilmore. Percy moves the names past her lips. Gilmore and Percy and Marlea and Andrew. For the first time in several hours, Percy thinks of Marlea. Percy and Marlea. Marlea and Andrew. She pushes the names aside.

Anyway, the letter is gone—too late to change a thing. Last year, before the cell phone and e-mail, Percy would have sent the letter to Gilmore by helicopter. She would have folded the letter in three, careful that the top fold contained the salutation, not the close. The complimentary close, as she was taught in school. Percy can't remember being taught that the complimentary close had another name, but what if she wrote an angry note? Fuck you, she might write, Your former friend, Percy Turner. Would that, she wonders, still comprise a complimentary close? At any rate, she would slide the letter into its envelope, address it to Gilmore's tower, and lick the flap. Done. The helicopter would take the letter and Percy would wait. A month later, the helicopter would return, and she would be waiting still.

Percy Turner and Marlea Dunn meet when the Dunns move their trailer into stall 13, the weed-encroached space next to the Turners, of stall 12, in Wes's Trailer Court. In 1966, trailers still resemble long, rippled railway cars. They are not yet called mobile homes or prefabricated houses, but are simply trailers—corrugated sheet metal riveted to a

rectangular frame. For *People on the Go*, as brochures of the time state, although few of the people Percy know go anywhere. Similarly, there is little about Wes's Trailer Court that will evolve into a nineteen-eighties Park or Mobile Estate.

Thirty-some-odd trailers, aligned in double rows, share a weary plot of land with a public Laundromat. One tree grows near the entrance to the trailer court—a deceptive suggestion of what might, but does not, grow within. The tree provides a small patch of shade for adults and teens who lie belly down, as if they wish to protect what remains of their undersides. Children climb the branches and nearly everyone, adult or child, carves into the bark. Names, initials, and poorly inscribed symbols invite more. There are peace symbols, life symbols, and fuck you symbols. You too, they seem to say, can contribute to the history of your neighborhood. Most people chip away because they lack anything better to do than wait.

In the spring, Percy's mother brightens their trailer by planting pansies below the trailer hitch. These grow inside a carefully tended semi-circle of stubby wire fence until they wilt in the heat, overshadowed by geraniums—blood-red flowers on coarse stalks that last the entire summer. Percy tends the pansies daily, tells them that they can do it, they can survive, then touches the deep purple and yellow petals with a sense of awe. Such a thin, delicate stem bending under the weight of each head. Next to them, the geraniums look like weeds.

She earns a crafts badge in *Pioneer Girls* by constructing a miniature of her family's trailer from a Velveeta Cheese box: 1 ½ inches at the front for the kitchen, 2 ½

inches for the living room, then three bedrooms and a bathroom narrowed by the width of the hall. She wraps the whole thing in tinfoil and paints it white with a red lightning bolt angled across one side. The red and purple stars she licks and pastes on the front are disproportionate, but she wants to include the flowers, as much to please her mother as to maintain the integrity of her copy. A model of the Dunn's trailer would be identical except for the bolt of colour.

Percy tries to reconstruct the furniture as well, but when she shows the first miniature to her mother—a red velvet couch made from covered cardboard, complete with a plain grey blanket to hide long tears in the cushions—Mrs. Turner slaps Percy's hand away.

When you want to buy us another, that's the day you poke fun at this one, d'you hear?

Percy drops the tiny couch to the floor.

Pick it up. Let me see it again. Margaret's fingers are rough and sore-looking as she extends her hand.

With her eyes on her mother, Percy squats, retrieves the miniature. It's old, she says. I just meant it to be old. She crumples the piece as if to say: It's too late. You can't be sorry when it's too late. It wasn't very good anyway, she says aloud, then walks past her mother, out the door, over to Marlea's.

She has been up for three hours, has showered and baked and straightened and swept. Now the radio squawks as the pilot calls headquarters.

Four-five, this is MCJ.

MCJ, this is four-five; go ahead.

Check us on short final for Envy River Tower.

That's copied. Short final for Envy River Tower. Four-five clear.

MCJ.

Timid at the best of times, the groundhog that lives under Percy's cabin races for the opening below the step. Whack, thump. The thick brown tail disappears. Grass shudders and flattens for yards around, the underside of each blade quivering silver as the helicopter hovers, finally settles. The pilot will take a minute to shut the engine down, so Percy stays inside, checks her reflection in the mirror once more. Her cheeks are flushed; her hair and eyes shine. When the blades slow to a lazy circling, the pilot and a forest ranger jump to the ground and begin to unload—several boxes of groceries, gas for the lawnmower, parcels, mail. Percy meets them at the helicopter.

We'll get these things, the ranger says. He's dressed in forestry attire, streaks of perspiration run from sideburns to jawline. From beneath the brown cap a drop runs down an escaping bristle of hair and Percy watches it fall, sees the darker spot where it lands on the ranger's tan, crested sleeve. She has never understood why their clothes are polyester, or why the cut of the brown slacks is so tight, the shirt so fitted. No wonder they all sweat so much.

Here's your mail, the ranger says. He's old for a ranger, middle-aged and slow-moving, not in such a rush as some of the younger ones.

Percy grabs the bag. Hey! Some good stuff along with the bills. Thanks!

She walks between the ranger and the pilot, absorbed in her bundle of mail. She fumbles with parcels from friends on other towers, a too-thick flip of bills, four or five personal letters—two from Marlea—and a couple of postcards. Even her acquaintances respond to loneliness.

Have you had any smokes yet?

Percy doesn't answer immediately, but after a few seconds her head jerks up and she looks from one to the other. Smokes? Did you ask if I'd seen any smokes?

The two men laugh. We know better than to think we can compete with your mail, the ranger says.

Percy giggles as if what he has said is extraordinarily witty. Don't worry, you compete. You're human, aren't you?

Anything that moves, eh?

I thought it was anything that's warm, wet, and moves, says the pilot. He blushes as he speaks.

The ranger hoots his pleasure. Anything that's warm, wet, and moves. Good one. It works for me.

At home, Percy walks away from such crude innuendo. Here, she giggles again. She's used to this kind of talk. Some of the guys in forestry think that all tower-women go out of their minds with desire. Sometimes she feels that she will.

Give me your hand, she says to the young man.

The ranger pulls his arms close to his sides and shakes his head.

No, really, just give me your hand.

Will it hurt? He stops by the propane tank to rest the box he carries, makes a show of winking at the pilot, then extends his hand.

Percy sets her mail on the ground, clamps her fingers around his wrist. Quickly, before he knows what to expect, she spits a frothy, white wad into his palm.

The ranger's jaw drops. The pilot blinks. Percy laughs out loud.

What the hell? The ranger holds his hand, palm up, away from his body. He swivels his head as if there might be someone else who can offer an explanation. From the expression on his face an observer might think his hand contains something more than a quarter teaspoon of Percy Turner's saliva.

It's warm, Percy says. It's wet. And, if you jiggle your hand a bit, it even moves. Doesn't it work for you?

The ranger stops rotating his head and a tentative smile bends his lips. He shakes his hand, looks into it, then thrusts it toward Percy. That's disgusting. What am I supposed to do with this?

Percy doubles over with laughter, then straightens and angles her shoulder toward him, trying to control herself. You should see your face. Her laughter continues in raspy gasps. It's called spit. She wipes her eyes. The stuff you swallow when you kiss. Here, wipe it on my jacket.

He wipes the bulk of it on her sleeve, then slides his palm down his thigh until he's satisfied that his hand is dry. Then he laughs with her. That's disgusting, he says again.

Percy grins. Like what you said wasn't?

At the water barrel, the ranger turns the spigot, rinses both hands and dries them on his trousers before he follows Percy and the pilot into the cabin.

Percy opens the refrigerator, hardly looks at the contents, then closes the door without taking anything from inside. She puts coffee mugs on the table, goes back for spoons. At the counter, she looks around the room, her eyes unfocused, darting, then pours coffee and offers banana bread. I feel like my mother, she says. Do you guys need cream or sugar?

Sugar for me.

Percy puts a small jar of sugar on the table, then throws her hands in the air. Spoons, she says. You need spoons. I thought I was over there for a reason.

At last, she sits. Her cabin, normally so quiet and still, feels like chaos and her body will not rest. While she chatters, she watches the men chew, picks at her own slice until it is nothing more than a pile of crumbs.

She shoves more banana bread at them as soon as they finish. Here. Have some more. It'll go stale.

The ranger takes another piece. He eyes the napkin Percy has placed beside his plate and nods. Cloth serviettes, he says. Nice.

Yes. Civilized, don't you think? Another giggle escapes her. They're easy to wash.

They watch her as she talks and laughs, just this side of crying. She can't cry.

Everything, anything, is reason to laugh—if only she can stay balanced on this edge. Lean this way and she will giggle or hoot. Let go for a second and she fears her mouth will open wider and wider until the hinges of her jaw break and her skull splits. The spigots holding back will open wide and viscous liquids will bubble into the room, ooze over the table into their laps and on out the door past the tower, through the woods, much worse than spit in the ranger's hand. Nothing has happened yet, but she must maintain this balance between holding on and letting go until they leave. Hurry up and leave, she thinks.

Her mouth spews words all on its own. Shut *up*, she says to herself. Just shut up.

The men smile, sometimes even laugh, but when she stops talking, they are quiet.

I'm really babbling, aren't I? she asks. She wants reassurance that they see beyond this giddiness to someone calm, more like them—sensible.

The ranger shrugs. We're used to it, aren't we Vic?

Vic raises an eyebrow but Percy doesn't give him a chance to speak.

It's weird out here. I go so long without talking to anyone, then you guys come and I can't shut up. I hear myself babbling and giggling, but I can't stop. She pushes her hair back from her forehead only to have it flop forward again. At least I stop when you leave.

The ranger folds his napkin into a small square and sets it beside his plate. A look of concern settles into his eyes, changes him from a boy to a mature adult in an instant. You're not going to try to escape again, are you?

Percy laughs out loud. God. That was years ago. I couldn't walk for days after. She laughs again. No, you don't have to worry about me going anywhere.

He sits back in his chair. All right, then. Anyway—you know what they say: It's OK to talk to yourself, so long as you don't start answering back.

The way I talk, there's no room to answer back.

Vic checks his watch. As if on cue, the ranger looks at his own and pushes back from the table. We'd like to stay longer, he says, but we've got three more towers.

When they lift off, she feels momentary relief. As soon as they disappear behind the trees, her throat opens. Head in hands, she sits on a tree stump until the sobs die on their own. Her jaw remains hinged and, except for the tears, her body fluids intact. She has fresh fruit and vegetables. She has mail.

On the day they move next door, Percy watches the big truck back the Dunn's trailer into its spot. A girl about her own age edges up to her.

Marlea has a wide heart-shaped face with eyes so watery and expressive they might belong to a cocker-spaniel.

Hi, she says. I'm Marlea Dunn and I'm nine years old. My eyes aren't one colour. Only one person in a thousand has eyes that are different colours. My Dad says it means I'm going to be famous. Yours are yellow.

Amber, Percy says. Some people have amber eyes. She squints at Marlea, waits to be challenged, then says, I can fold my tongue in half while it sticks out. Percy

demonstrates by flipping the front half of her tongue toward the back of her mouth. With her tongue still folded, she forces the veiny underside past her lips.

Marlea studies Percy's tongue. Percy can see that the raw ugliness of her ability impresses Marlea, who tries to imitate the act but can't hold the fold without clamping it between her front teeth.

I bet there aren't many people who can do that, Marlea says.

Percy's shoulders relax. I know. D'you want to see my rocks?

She introduces Marlea to her brother Bobby, and to Annette, who lives a couple of rows over and is only eight. Until Percy meets Marlea, Annette is her best friend, but Annette has psoriasis and picks pieces of skin off her scalp. She looks at each piece as if it holds a special secret, then pops it in her mouth.

After the Dunns move in, Percy spends all her time with Marlea. They only call Annette when they need three people to skip long-rope or to play elastics, and even then they aren't nice about needing her.

One two three, pickin' at your head. Four five six, findin' somethin' dead. Percy and Marlea sing as they jump.

One day, when Annette can no longer stand their taunts, she grabs her end of the plastic rope and swings into the air, flails her arms until the hard handle connects with Percy's back, makes red welts on Marlea's bare legs.

Marlea's dad rides up just in time to hear Marlea scream. He skids his bicycle to a stop beside them the way Bobby or any one of the local boys might, close to their bodies, ready to reach out and grab them, although what he chooses to catch is the skipping rope in mid-air. Whoa, here. What's going on?

The instant Marlea sees her father her watery eyes overflow and spill in streaks down her cheeks. She holds out one leg, swollen welts crisscrossing her calf and thigh.

Ray Dunn circles Marlea with his free arm and she buries her face in his shirt. He tugs on the skipping rope to get Annette's attention. Annette, he says.

She looks as if she will swing again, given half a chance, but raises sullen eyes to his. They deserved to get hit, she said.

Nobody deserves to get hit, Mr. Dunn says. He gives Marlea a gentle squeeze. Nobody deserves to be treated badly, do they Marlea?

Marlea shakes her head.

D'you agree, Percy?

Percy has been slowly edging away. Now she nods.

Mr. Dunn doesn't smile, but his expression is kind. Even when you don't like someone, there's no point making their life worse.

Percy wants to get away, to go home and avoid Mr. Dunn's sympathetic eyes. Her own mother or father would have made her apologize to Annette by now, would have

ordered her home, strapped her and sent to her bedroom to think about the consequences of being unkind.

Annette yanks her rope from Mr. Dunn's hand. They started it.

And it wasn't fair, was it? Anybody would have got angry.

Annette's eyes are suspicious. She says nothing.

He nods solemnly, just as if Annette had spoken. What do you want to do about that? Do you want to say something while you've got the chance?

Like what?

I don't know.

Annette begins to wrap the skipping rope around her arm. I just want them to stop being mean...

That sounds fair, Mr. Dunn says. He reaches into his pocket.

Can I go now? Annette asks.

Mr. Dunn smiles. You could have gone any time you liked. He pulls his hand out of his pocket. Annette.

She turns.

He flips a coin in the air. Get yourself an ice cream.

Annette's reflexes are good; her hand snaps out for the catch. Once a month her parents give her a ten cent allowance. A shy smile replaces the look of sullen distrust. When Mr. Dunn winks, she turns away.

Marlea's father lifts Marlea onto the crossbar of his bicycle, and motions for Percy to come along. You two can earn that quarter by helping me wash my truck, he says. Then we'll go get our own ice cream.

Her vegetables are not frozen, as they sometimes are, but look healthy and even fresh, considering two days, sometimes three, pass between the time of purchase and their delivery to her tower. Tonight offers limitless possibilities: snowpeas, tomatoes, cucumber, zucchini. Later in the month she will be limited to potatoes, onions, cabbage, carrots, or sprouts grown in the cupboard.

Percy finds the ice-packed bucket. Inside, several layers of newspaper protect a small tub of *Legend* Triple Chocolate ice cream. The ice cream is smooth and rich, devoid of the crystals that form when ice cream thaws and is refrozen, telling her that someone took care to place the container on ice immediately. She makes a mental note to ask after the ranger who bought her groceries, then takes another spoonful.

One by one, Percy counts off the items she ordered. There is no block of Swiss cheese, no cilantro, and no parsley to go with the bulgur, which means no tabouli salad to take up the tower when the hazard is high, but she'll work around these items. It's difficult to eat the way she would at home, fresh vegetables, ethnic dishes, inventive salads. She

often resorts to the menu of her childhood—sandwiches, stews, meat and potatoes. No matter. Her refrigerator is full, her craving for fruit is realized and, for today, her freezer contains ice cream.

Percy turns her attention back to the mail. When she first saw the letters from Marlea, her breath caught in her throat, her fingers trembled. Now she treats the envelopes like overdue bills, pushes them aside as if she has no interest in them. She reads the postcards from her friends, savours each of the other letters, reading slowly, laughing as the authors must have intended her to laugh.

She checks her watch and does a double-take. Several hours have passed since her last tower check. She stuffs Marlea's letters in her back pocket, grabs her gloves and runs to the bottom of the tower. As fast as she can, she climbs, metal and cables rattling and banging. As she climbs, she counts the rungs, 23, 24, 25...85, 86, 87, 88....

In the cupola, her chest heaves with the effort of the climb. She surveys the area around the tower with bare eyes—a full 360 degree turn. Nothing but treetops for as far as she can see. There are a few shiny patches, distant lakes and swamps looking more like barren spots than actual lakes but, for the most part, only green, in as many shades as one can imagine. Percy relaxes, takes a drink of water from the thermos she keeps in the cupola, then repeats the 360 degree turn with binoculars.

A white dot in the east stops her breath altogether. Damn. Can't be. She lowers the binoculars and the dot disappears, raises them and there it is again. Smoke. Not brownish road dust, not a puff of pollen, but smoke curling skyward just this side of the

far ridge, about 25 kilometres to the east. Percy takes deep breaths to regain her voice—the climb always loosens things up, leaves her rattling and croaking as if she's never quit smoking. She swings the scope on the firefinder until she locates the tiny curl of smoke.

Speaking to herself, Percy practices the call. Four-five this is six-six-eight. She clears her throat, tries to sound less clogged. Four-five. Four-five. Four-five. This is six-six-eight. Six-six-eight. Got a smoke here. Got a SMOKE here. She forces her voice lower. Got a smoke. Got a smoke. Shit. She coughs, clears her throat, tries again. Gotta gotta gotta smoke. Got a smoke here. Finally, her voice holds.

Bearings in degrees mark the brass ring below the scope. Percy jots on a slip of paper. 93 degrees, 40 minutes. Approximately 25 kilometres. Time: 14:38. She fumbles through the drawer for the actual smoke report form. She spots one pink corner and pulls a pad free from a clutter of maps, tape, napkins, pins. As she does, she notices the permanent smoke record. Trying not to waste time, she runs a string out on her map. Shit, she says, then drops the string to check her conversion chart. The map is scaled in inches, four miles to an inch, and she hasn't a clue. Miles, kilometres—neither of them mean anything to her anymore. When people ask, she tells them the time. How far is it? I don't know, about 45 minutes from here. But that won't work at the tower. She has markers above all the windows—Gulf flare, 15 kilometres. Bare spot, 8. Far ridge, 25. But how many inches in 25 kilometres? She runs her finger down the chart. Three and three quarter inches equal 24 kilometres. Jesus. She measures three and three quarter inches, adds one

line on the ruler. There. She notes the approximate section, township, and range, flips through the permanent record. Nothing. She keys the handset on her radio.

Six-four-nine, this is six-six-eight. Percy peers through the binoculars, waits for a response, then tries again.

Six-four-nine this is six-six-eight. Are you by Gilmore?

Six-six-eight, this is six-four-nine.

I've got a smoke here. Can you give me a cross, or are you on the ground?

I'm up, but I don't see anything. What's your bearing?

Nine-three degrees, four-zero minutes, possibly in the southwest of 23, 32-9 west of the fifth.

OK. Give me a sec, Percy. I'll get back to you.

Sounds good. Clear to you. XMA four-five, this is XMC six-six-eight.

Six-six-eight, this is dispatch. I caught that. How far out is it?

I'm guessing about 25 kilometres, but I might be off a bit. If Gilmore can give me a cross I can pin it down. Do you want me to pass a smoke message now, or should I wait?

No. Get it in as soon as you can.

OK...I looked for a permit, but I don't remember anything out there, and the permanent log doesn't show anything.

Could be some bear hunters got careless. What's it doing?

It's still pretty small—maybe point zero-one or zero-two hectares; it's light grey, drifting a bit. I can't see the base, but it's definitely bigger than it was five minutes ago.

OK. Keep an eye on it. Dispatch clear.

Six-six-eight.

Six-six-eight, this is six-four-nine.

Go ahead, Gilmore.

I don't know, Percy, I can't see anything. He speaks quickly. Everyone listening knows that if this turns out to be an unattended fire, the winds are high enough to fan the flames from a minor fire into an inferno in only a few hours.

Damn. Percy keys her mike. *OK, Gilmore. Let me know if anything changes. Six-six-eight.*

The duty officer at headquarters cuts in. *Six-six-eight, this is dispatch.*

Dispatch, six-six-eight.

We're going to go with that location you gave Gilmore. Do you still have the smoke in sight?

Affirmative.

What's it doing now?

Percy holds the binoculars to her eyes with one hand, the mike to her mouth with the other. *It's definitely bigger.*

What about the colour? Has it changed at all?

It might be a little darker, but pretty much the same.

What are your winds doing?

Percy sticks her head out a window to check the anemometer cups. They're spinning wildly. The weather vane points north, and the treetops are swaying. Again she keys the mike. *I'd say the wind is from the south at about three-five kilometres.*

That's copied. Pass us a smoke message as soon as possible and let me know if anything changes. We'll get someone out there right away. Dispatch clear.

Again there is no break before another tower calls. *Six-six-eight this is eight-four-five.*

The voice is unfamiliar—Percy can't put a name or tower to the call sign. *Eight-four-five, this is six-six-eight.*

He is slow, loud and stammering. *Yeah... I think I see something to the southwest...I'm not saying it's your smoke; I couldn't say for sure...there's a ridge...but you can check it out if you want. It might be a cloud. But it...it might be your smoke.*

Jesus, Percy thinks. I don't have time for this. She fills blanks on the smoke message, trying to place the voice. She looks at the map, where she has written the call

signs of all the surrounding towers. Eight-four-five is not listed. No sense wasting time.

Uh, which tower is this, again, please?

Six-six-eight, this is eight-four-five. Yeah...this is Dave at...Deer Lake Tower.

Deer Lake Tower! Percy snorts. The guy's 200 kilometres away—with normal reception, she wouldn't even hear him. She tries to sound cheerful. Yeah, Dave, thanks, but this smoke is pretty small yet. I don't think you'd be able to see it, actually. But thanks, anyway.

His voice is louder, more stilted. *This smoke ...I'm...this smoke I'm seeing is not small. My bearing is 210 degrees and 13 minutes. No. That...should be...210 degrees and eight...No. Stand by.*

For christ sake, Percy thinks. She looks around as if there might be someone to share her exasperation.

Six-six-eight, this is six-four-nine. I've got a bearing on your smoke.

Go ahead, Gilmore.

My bearing on that is one-four-three degrees, one-five minutes. That'd put it about where you thought. Probably northwest of 23, 32-9.

Yes! Percy says aloud. Then, into the mike. *Great! Thanks Gil. Appreciate that. Dispatch, did you catch Gil's cross?*

Affirmative. We got that. Are you ready with your smoke message?

That's affirmative. Stand by one, please.

Six-six-eight, this is eight-four-five.

Jesus! Can't dispatch hear this guy? Somebody should tell him to get the hell off the radio. Percy's voice is brusque. *Eight-four-five; go ahead.*

Yeah...this might be another smoke I see...but...

Percy huffs and moves from one leg to the other as she waits for him to continue his sentence. He could stammer all day long, but she can say nothing until he releases the key on his mike. Get off the fucking radio, she yells out the window.

...well, anyway, it's kind of far to tell. I better let you go...I guess you got the luck today. Eight-four-five, clear.

Fuck off, Percy says. Then, politely, into the mike. *OK, eight-four-five. Thanks for your help. Six-six-eight, clear.*

She turns to the map, grasps the string attached to the centre of the spot marked Weldon Tower, pulls it taut until it crosses the string she ran along her own bearing. Where they cross is the location of the fire. She checks the numbers and jots them on the smoke report. The radio blares non-stop. Helicopter MCJ is only a few minutes south of the location. They have the smoke in sight and will fly over to check it out. That's luck. Percy waits for a break in radio traffic, then calls headquarters.

Dispatch, this is six-six-eight with my smoke report.

Go ahead, Percy.

OK. To XMA four-five from Envy River Tower, today's date at this time. Number one is smoke number one. Number two is one-four-five-five. Number three, nine-three degrees, four-zero minutes. Number four, small. Number five, light grey. Six, light column. Seven, drifting high...

Percy runs through the required information: smoke number, time spotted, bearing, base visible or not, colour of smoke, size of column and whether it is drifting or rising straight up, approximate location, cross bearing and from which tower the cross bearing was received. When she finishes, she watches through her binoculars and waits.

Gilmore sounded friendly and helpful. Has he received her message? Nothing in his voice suggests that he has, but then again, how would she know?

Except for the times when he loops an arm over her shoulder and says, Put one here, Squeak, Percy chooses to stay out of her father's way. At those times, he points to his cheek and she kisses it and rests her face against his for a moment. Then he squeezes her shoulder and says, You're a good kid.

Percy's mom sends a warning look to Percy, as if to say, he's in a good mood, don't spoil it, and pats him on the arm as he walks by. She pats him on the arm or the hand on other days, too, even when he grumbles all the way from the back door to his Lazy-boy in front of the television. That sonofabitch... he says, and recalls some story about

someone at work who has really pissed him off this time. Usually, Percy goes to her bedroom or lurks beside the refrigerator as Margaret fixes a cup of tea and sets it on a tray beside her husband. He looks up and says Thanks, dear, and that is the way they communicate, with little pats and grumbles until it is time to eat or to go to bed.

Percy doesn't joke with her parents the way she does with Mr. and Mrs. Dunn, but she likes it that whenever Marlea speaks of her father Marlea seems to grow bigger and more animated.

My dad works for himself, Marlea tells Percy. Mom says he's never short of work because he's so good. A good welder is hard to find, she says. That's why he's always the first to be asked back.

Your dad is the best, Percy says.

Marlea turns pink then and hugs Percy. You're the best friend I've ever had, she says.

According to Percy's father, working for himself means that Ray Dunn can blow money left and right. An example of this, says Mr. Turner, is the big blue bus the Dunns rarely use. Useless, he says. Damn useless how it sits there all summer.

But every Friday evening after homework—math, always math, and usually a bit of reading or some science questions at the back of a chapter—Marlea and Percy lock themselves in the bus. Percy scrabbles out of pants and T-shirt, rummages in an IGA bag for the limp pajamas she totes, tugs them on, and hoists herself onto the top bunk. There

she can rest her chin on the edge of the mattress and watch as Marlea undresses for bed. Marlea doesn't object to Percy gaping at her, but carries on as if she were doing any old thing. She turns her T-shirt right side out and hangs it on a nail pounded into the wall, then squares into proper posture and raises both hands behind her back to undo the hooks of her bra. Sometimes Percy's hands get sweaty and she rubs them on her pajamas, other times she's oblivious to anything but the white lace of Marlea's bra stretching taut before it relaxes against her chest. Percy doesn't understand why Marlea's bra remains white white while her own panties and undershirts turn grey so quickly, but that's Marlea. Everything she wears looks fresh. The bra doesn't fall until Marlea hunches her shoulders and shrugs loose, but when she does, her breasts—her entire upper body—look supple and polished. Her flesh stretches smooth and strong like Percy's, is inscribed with tan lines similar to Percy's, yet Marlea's body has become womanly alone.

In September of the year they are both 13, Marlea and Percy sit across from one another on the bottom bunk of the bus. In the heat, they have stripped to their undies, and Marlea leans against the wall at the head of the bed; Percy leans against the one at the foot. The stiff sleeping bag on which they sit spread-legged rustles with every movement, and from between Percy's legs wafts the wet-pillow odour of damp nylon panties—three for \$1.99 at Robinson's Department Store. After one wash they lose all body and become nearly transparent so that, from the back, the crack in Percy's butt shows as a shadowy arc. Her pubic hairs have grown in four or five at a time, not curly but kinky-straight, beginning with a few strands between her legs, then inching upward toward her belly,

clearly visible through the limp nylon. Visible enough that Susan Martin notices as Percy changes for gym class.

That's an interesting idea, Susan says. Panties made from plastic wrap.

Percy flushes. Yeah, she says. I keep a spare pair wrapped around my sandwich.

She looks to Marlea, but Marlea is busy in her locker. A chorus of girls exchange glances and titter. Percy strips and stands under the shower, where the water streaming down her face is just that—water. She hates Susan Martin. She hates her straight, pointy nose, hates her long polished fingernails, even hates her braces because although food sticks in them now, Percy knows that someday Susan will have perfect little white corn kernel teeth while her own will remain irregular. Percy hates Susan's unlimited supply of soft, fashionable clothing, her pretty, lacy underwear, and she especially resents that everything she hates about Susan makes her popular while Percy sits at her desk too afraid to raise her hand because, if she does, all anyone will see are the wet patches under her arms, the patches in stark contrast with the dryer fabric of her cheap cheap, but well-ironed, blouse. Percy will not allow Susan Martin to see her cry.

The next week, rather than change in front of the other girls, Percy avoids Marlea and arrives early. She sits in a toilet cubicle made unpleasant by the fumes of a commercial deodorizer caged high on the wall. Inside the locked grid a new green block has begun to dissolve. So new that the corners are not yet rounded, the deodorizer perspires tiny drops of chemical sweat. Percy cups her hands over her nose and mouth, imagines green drops in the air, green drops accumulating on her nose hairs as she breathes, stalactites growing

from her tonsils, dripping green down her throat. Percy considers the necessity of the lock that keeps the smelly, sweaty chunk dissolving on the wall. Who, she wonders, would steal a deodorizer?

Breathing in and out through her fingers, she waits for the other girls to change into their gym shorts, listens to their chatter, listens for Marlea, but hears, above the voices of the other girls, Susan Martin.

Where's Percy today? Stocking up on sandwich wrap?

Percy holds her breath, waiting for the response. Some of the girls laugh, then Susan speaks again. You don't really like her, do you?

There is a pause, then Marlea answers, her voice dull and hesitant. Yeah. I don't know...

What does Marlea mean she doesn't know?

When she can no longer hear voices, Percy, stomach burning with unspoken rage, checks in each toilet stall. In the change area, she has no trouble recognizing the neat pile of clothing that can only belong to Susan Martin. She lifts the smart red slacks from the pile and shakes them out. Because she thinks she will never own a pair so new and expensive, Percy sneers at the cuffs on the bottom. Church pants, she thinks, although she wouldn't be allowed to wear anything but a dress to church. She bunches the red crotch into a small puff of fabric, returns to a cubicle and, her heart thumping with nastiness, lowers her jeans. She looks at the puff in her hand. A geranium. Deep red, and dry. When

Percy has finished with the pretty geranium, she will dry the pants under the hand-blower and that bitch Susan Martin can wonder all day why she smells of urine. Better yet, everyone else can wonder. Percy savours the thought of whispers in the hall, of odd looks and tittering girls.

Except suddenly, the whole plan seems pointless. She can't swallow, her head aches, and now the predictable burning in her stomach jabs like a hot nail. Soon it will be a knife, but she will not cry. Percy pees a steady stream into the toilet and pulls her pants up. She folds Susan's pants along the crease. I am not the devil. No matter what they say, I'm not the devil. Percy puts the slacks back where she found them.

On the bunk with Marlea, Percy doesn't worry about the transparency of her panties. Her legs are just long enough that she can press the soles of Marlea's feet comfortably. Every few seconds Marlea scrunches Percy's toes and Percy either scrunches back or presses her heels tight against Marlea's. All ten toes polished pink. Rose Petal Enamel, says the tiny label on the bottom of the bottle, and Percy likes how heavy and thick the enamel feels when her toes click against the walls of the bus. Marlea's mother has not yet missed this colour from a drawer of half-used bottles. Not that she'll mind when she does notice. If Marlea wants something, Mrs. Dunn invariably hands it over. Percy and Marlea never snoop through Mrs. Turner's drawers and loot them the way they do Mrs. Dunn's. At Percy's place, the girls don't even cross into the master bedroom.

Why? asks Marlea. Why can't we just look?

Percy feels her mother's eyes on her even when she knows that she will be gone for hours.

I don't want to, says Percy. She'll know. I don't know how, but she knows.

Mrs. Turner's watchful sternness makes her seem altogether more suspicious than Marlea's mother. At the Dunns' the radio plays in the kitchen while TV programs go unwatched in the living room. Mrs. Dunn moves up and down the length of the trailer, swaying to music as she folds a towel, pausing in front of the TV on her way past.

Look at this, she says. Can you believe it?

On the TV screen might be a cartoon, The Ed Sullivan Show, or Maxwell Smart talking into his shoe. Mrs. Dunn doesn't discriminate between television programs—almost every show has something to offer if you're open to it, she says.

In contrast, at the Turners' trailer, silence is truly broken. It shatters when Percy slams the door on her way in—something she must do in order for the latch to catch and not give way later. Silence creaks and tears as she moves from her bedroom to the kitchen where the sound of the fan in the refrigerator is deafening as she searches for a snack her mother won't miss.

Have a piece of bread, Margaret says, when she hears the refrigerator door open. You don't want to spoil your supper.

Percy finds it eerie that she can pass the entire length of the trailer from bathroom to kitchen without seeing her mother along the way, and then, poof, there she is behind her at the refrigerator, adding, And set the table while you're here.

Every chance she gets, Percy escapes to the old blue bus with Marlea.

In contrast to the plastic brightness of their toenails, the girls' skin is tanned and lustrous. Percy watches as Marlea's breasts lift on an intake of air, fall back on a long exhalation. She looks at her own chest and strokes the swelling around her nipples. Where Marlea's breasts are nicely rounded, hers scarcely protrude.

Feel this, Percy says. Did yours get a hard lump when they started to grow?

Marlea strains forward to reach Percy's nipple. She manipulates it with one finger. Does it hurt?

Only if I bump them.

I remember that. If you bump them too hard they get crushed and don't grow.

Percy nearly chokes. She has been sucking on a pebble—a small, flat oval she found in the river and stores in her mouth to prevent its transformation from emerald to mere gravel by the simple process of drying. She coughs and hacks a couple of times, then pulls the stone from her mouth.

She recalls the rough, concrete walls of the school stairwell and hears the teacher's raised voice: Careful, now. Walk, don't run. And NO PUSHING, Robert.

One hundred and twenty students from the third floor pushing and shoving as they try to escape the ear-aching clamour of an unexpected fire drill. Percy recalls the searing pain of Patsy's elbow connecting with her right breast as they reach the second-floor landing, the track-hardened back of a grade nine boy she slams into at the bottom.

Are mine broken? She stares wide-eyed at Marlea, waits for a verdict.

Marlea forms four fingers into a pliant pad and gently rotates each of Percy's nipples. Hot fingerprints remain on one breast when she moves to the other. No, she says, deciding at last, but you've got to be careful.

Percy nods. She pops the pebble back into her mouth. Marlea always knows more than she does. When Marlea's examination causes Percy's nipples to pucker, Marlea withdraws, then settles only her index finger on the tip of one. The heat from her finger flattens the pucker into a round, puffy sphere. With ever-so-soft strokes, Marlea draws tentative spokes outward from the centre of Percy's aureola. Percy feels as if she is breathing through a hot, wet cloth; the bus is suddenly too quiet for the noise of her shallow, panting breath. Tiny rivulets escape her armpits.

Let me feel yours, Percy says.

As gingerly as Marlea touched hers, Percy pushes on one nipple. It springs back as soon as she stops applying pressure. Marlea's nipples are bigger than Percy's and they shine a faint pink that barely contrasts with the surrounding skin. Percy slides her palm under Marlea's breast and lifts the entire soft weight. Marlea's nipple shrinks to the size of a pale raspberry. Once again Percy gasps for air, but no oxygen reaches her lungs. She will

die right there, gasping for breath, unless she removes her hand from Marlea's breast. Her diaphragm moves in and out to a wild, frightened beat, lungs refuse to cooperate. She pulls her hand back and slumps against the wall. Then, when she risks a look, her first impression is that Marlea's green eye is greener than ever. Percy opens her mouth. She wants to say, Let's go make footprints in the dust. Instead, she faints.

Percy keeps her binoculars focused on the smoke. They've found it, which is what counts. Her adrenaline begins to subside and she feels a strong desire to be held.

Dispatch, this is MCJ. Percy recognizes the voice of the ranger.

Go ahead, Allan.

Check us over the fire; looks like we've got a stand of birch burning pretty fast.

The good news is that we're nearly on top of a lake.

Have you had a chance to do an assessment? I need to know how big she is and what kind of men and equipment we're talking.

Yeah, she looks to be about decimal zero five hectares, but the wind's pushing things to the north. So long as the wind holds, looks like she'll burn right into the lake.

Sounds good Al; what's happening east west?

Like I said, so long as the wind doesn't change, we'll be OK. There's not much fuel on either side, a cut-block and a thin stand of black spruce, so far as I can tell.

Does Vic have his bucket on board?

That's affirmative. We can start dropping water behind it and along the east west perimeter, but we're going to need a squad, a couple of pumps, and 1500 feet of hose if you've got it.

That's copied. I'll take your initial assessment report ASAP.

Affirmative. Stand by one.

So much for a quiet evening, Percy thinks, listening to the outside speaker on her way down the ladder. Now that they've found the smoke, she's not needed in the cupola, but the men will work well into the night, if not all night, and she will relay messages for the firefighters on the ground. Like them, she won't get much sleep.

I hope you're all right. I'm sure you know that I've been sending you messages on e-mail, but since you haven't responded, I'm using snail mail as well. Percy, I know our last evening together was a disaster, but this lack of communication isn't right. We need to talk. Please don't be stubborn.

I know you won't want to hear this, but Andrew noticed that I am more withdrawn than usual and has suggested that we go to Victoria for a week. I'm telling you so that you won't worry if you don't immediately hear from me when you respond. Of course, by the time you receive this letter, I might be back at home, but just in case, you'll know what's up.

I feel odd writing to you when I don't know where we stand. Although, as I said before you left, I believe a change is in order, I hope we can soon clear the air and find a

way through the mess we've generated. We mean far too much to each other to let this anger drag on.

Putting that one aside, Percy reads the second letter through twice.

Andrew and I did, after all, go to Victoria. I'm here now. The city is lovely, of course, and the visit with my parents is as pleasant as usual. They send their love and say they hope you and I will come for a visit in the fall, with or without Andrew. I know they miss you, as do I. I hope you won't forget that. Even if we're just friends, which might be wise at this point, you are with me every second, will always be.

Because we have still not spoken, I will keep this short. Please telephone me, or at least e-mail as soon as you get this. If anything, I miss you more, regret our last evening more. We really must talk, don't you think? Love, Marlea

Percy walks outside and sits on the step, letters in hand. She hears the sound of a woodpecker in the distance, then the buzz of a fly. She watches an ant cross the step beside her foot and disappear. So this is how Marlea will play their relationship: I miss you *but*. Friendly, chatty. A friend in the city.

She does not feel up to chatty little messages from Marlea, vignettes of day-to-day life with Andrew. Rage would suit her much better. Such superficiality stuns her, leaves her with no defense, only the certain knowledge that all these years have made no difference. Marlea is still Marlea. Percy still Percy.

She stands and kicks a stone, then spots the groundhog and screams at it. I'm going through a divorce and no one cares. No one even knows, she says. Do you hear me? She picks a rock from the ground and throws it at the spot where the groundhog froze before disappearing. She kicks another stone, then a tuft of grass. A vole scurries past her toe. To hell with it, she says. She's out of my life. Out! For good.

She throws Marlea's letters into the garbage, stuffs them under the banana peel, the empty ice cream container oozing chocolate goo. So that's it, then. Marlea has chosen after all. And so has Percy. She'd like to make Marlea breakfast as Andrew does, pour more coffee or tease Marlea out of morning doldrums, but she wants to do this every day, not only when Marlea and Andrew allow her to play the role of unhappy mistress tolerated by doting husband.

Just thinking about the way Marlea applauds Andrew makes Percy fume. How doting would he be if she were a man? Considerably less, Percy thinks. A man might pose a real threat, while she—a mere woman—is tolerated.

I can't believe you told him we used a dildo, Percy says. She rolls toward the wall, shaking Marlea away.

He asked, that's all, says Marlea. I didn't think you'd care.

I care because to him a dildo is still a substitute penis, something less, not just an occasional toy.

I don't know—

You think he looks at a dildo and doesn't think penis? Give me a break. It's probably never entered his head that you can have sex without a cock. What would we *do* for god's sake?

Percy knows, too, that if she could up the ante financially, Andrew would not be so confident. The logic of lack, she thinks. In too many eyes the equation is the same: no penis, no money, no power. If only everyone else could think of Marlea and Percy, rather than Marlea and Andrew; maybe she'd feel comfortable thinking of herself as a lesbian, rather than a bisexual.

Like a lesbian, she desires women and rages about homophobia. Like a heterosexual, she desires men and takes certain privileges for granted when she is with one—the small welcoming smiles, good seating arrangements, unwarranted acceptance, trust. Yet she can't argue that she ever feels more straight than lesbian, regardless of how others treat her or who she's with. Nor does she feel like she's half and half—as if she's half cream and half milk, merely waiting to see which part will rise to the top.

You're just sitting on the fence, Peter says. You'll make up your mind one way or the other. Bisexuality is only a transition.

Gays are just as bad as lesbians, she says. Everybody seems to think I need to make up my mind.

Maybe she does, but how can she know, when none of the names fit, when nothing, not even *bisexual*, describes how she feels about herself? Lesbians know. Straight people know. If bisexuals know, then she's not that, either.

You're never going to make up your mind, Percy says, the night before she leaves for the tower. She is matter of fact, beyond anger, to some still place inside herself where disappointment and distrust has flattened into a rage so deep it resembles calm.

Marlea looks pitiful, then, so weak—as if she is the one who has waited for commitment and has received only watered-down sharing—that Percy retracts her words. For once, she allows herself to cry, makes herself vulnerable while Marlea refuses to comfort her.

It's not a matter of choosing, Marlea says. Although her body is sturdy and strong with well-defined muscles running the length of it, she somehow appears frail and limp in Percy's bed. Why won't you understand? I don't want to give up what I have with Andrew any more than I want to give up what I have with you, and Andrew doesn't ask me to. Only you insist.

He doesn't have to insist. Can't you understand, for once, how it feels to know that Andrew always comes first?

Her sobs sound dry, poorly acted. In one form or another, Percy and Marlea have played this scene too many times.

Marlea's body regains its shape. She no longer looks frail and weak, an exhausted victim, but is spring-loaded, ready to fight. Her voice slices into Percy. Andrew is the one who should be angry. I'm his wife. She glares at Percy. He never demands.

Of course he doesn't. He's always understanding and perfect.

He is. I never have to go through this with him—

No. But you don't have orgasms either. That's what I'm for. He gets to be a husband; I'm a fuck-friend! I want a life with you, Marlea, not just sex.

Oh great! says Marlea. Now I'm just using you—

What then? What else if I have no right—

Andrew never badgers me to choose—

Why should he? What does he lack besides a bit of time that he's just as happy to spend with his buddies?

Don't even start on that. Marlea clutches the sheet to her body and struggles out of bed. Don't say anymore. You've said enough. I've had it.

Percy sits up. You've had it? She motions to the pile of clothes Marlea now holds. You've had it and now you're going to leave? On the word *leave*, her voice rises. She shakes her fist at Marlea, forces words through clenched teeth. Her fist slams into the wall. Go, then. Back to Andrew. Back to home base.

When she is twenty-five Percy puts her fist through a window while Marlea stands still and pale. Percy pulls her hand back to examine it, first the back, then the palm, as well as up her arm. Not a scratch.

Maybe you're invincible, Marlea says. She turns and smashes her own hand through a corresponding pane of glass.

Blood streams from her knuckles and runs down into the white cotton cuff of her shirt. She breaks out in a sweat, then shrugs and lowers herself to the floor.

Percy nods. Or unsusceptible to the law of probabilities, she says.

Gilmore will understand how Marlea fits into her life—however she fits in the future. He'll see how tightly tied they are even better than Andrew, who tolerates, but doesn't really accept. Gilmore will welcome Percy home, his warm, tanned arms pinning her to his chest. In bed, those arms will encircle her while she tugs gently on the hair that curls there—black hair, probably, and curly. Or will his arms be pale and freckled, covered with blonde hair, or red? Dark, she thinks. She will wind her arms around his and push into his warm body. He will push back and hold her tighter. Darling, he will say, and she will feel the fluffy hair on his chest, on the inside of one leg as he hooks it over hers. They will speak in soft tones and she will take comfort from his confidence.

You're right, Percy will say.

She doesn't care what he will be right about, or that she is normally more inclined to argue than acquiesce; she finds reassurance in the belief that if Gilmore will only hold her, all the wrong choices she makes now, all the guilt and indecision, will melt away.

Percy's mother sees every man as a potential husband for Percy. Months after Percy told Dwayne to pack his duffel bag and move on, Percy's mother still asks, Have you seen Dwayne?

We still bump into each other once in a while, Mom.

Are you going to work things out?

Percy stifles an urge to swear. What she hears is that any man is better than Marlea. Mom, she says, the man is a loser. A little boy. I'm not going to raise a thirty-six-year-old child and I don't want to work things out. Ever. OK?

You're not young enough to be so fussy. You'll end up with nobody.

Nobody is better than Dwayne. Trust me.

You'll find out. Anybody is better than nobody.

Even Marlea?

A look of fear crosses her mother's face. She compresses her lips and turns to the television.

Percy transforms into someone cool and stiff. She is afraid that if she doesn't hold on tight, she might start smashing things. Not outside objects like the television and the Jesus head that lights up from the inside, but her own body, which feels like so much glass ready to break. She might snap one index finger at the knuckle. Here, Mom, have a bauble. Slap her palm against the wall and watch the rest of the hand shatter. She could whack her head, a big glass globe, on the door frame to create an impressive spectacle, eyeballs under the couch, glass shards stuck in carpet, in curtains. Watch out for the glass; Percy lost her head today.

Mrs. Turner rises and pushes the knob on the television. In the sudden return to silence she moves toward the kitchen. Do you want ginger ale with your pie? Or just water?

When she ignores his messages, first an apology, then others saying he'd like to talk, Dwayne gives up on the telephone and sends small gifts by courier: six thin stalks of lavender wound tightly together with a strip of satin ribbon, one clear round of amber hanging by a thread, thin slices of orange dried until they resemble stained glass. She lays the lavender on a small table, admires the amber and orange slices, and refuses to acknowledge any of them, as if she wants to keep them separate from the giver. He doesn't call, and for that, she appreciates him.

At age fifteen, Percy grows tired of protecting her virginity like some trophy that is supposed to give her status, but does not. In health class, while most of her friends giggle and try to feel each other up in the dark, she listens to what the scratchy film voice says about ovaries, about testicles. The drawings are pink, like the one pinned to the wall in the doctor's office, and seem entirely unrelated to her body. She sneaks free pamphlets from the drugstore into her school textbooks, reads every word about diaphragms, condoms made from latex and sheep gut, about jellies, and pills. Then, cutting each pamphlet into quarter-inch vertical strips, Percy shreds these documents with scissors to ensure that her mother can't piece her intentions together. She decides that the pill is the safest contraceptive—for preventing pregnancy at least—and sets up an appointment with Dr. Hill.

And what do you want to see Dr. Hill about? the receptionist asks. Percy's throat dries up. She can't answer, doesn't want to speak. What if she hadn't telephoned, but walked into the clinic and talked to the receptionist in person? She would have died.

Miss? Do you wish to make an appointment?

Percy struggles to move her tongue in her mouth. I want to talk about the pill, she says.

Are you using contraceptives now?

Yes, Percy lies.

You can see Dr. Hill at 10:45 on Thursday.

The appointment is during school hours, but Percy will not ask for a different time. Thank-you, she whispers.

Dr. Hill does an internal examination, Percy's first.

Slide your butt down a bit more. No, more than that. Come on, right down to the end. Thattagirl, don't be shy.

Percy's buttocks are even with the edge of the examining table, practically even with the stirrups which hold her feet steady on both sides of the table. Her legs, now folded like wings, flop easily as Dr. Hill pushes them open wider. He sits on a low stool and rolls forward.

Percy remembers the inside of the Christmas turkey she readied for dressing, how she rinsed the cavity under the tap according to her mother's direction. Her throat tightens around the lump that has formed. If she opens her mouth and feels inside, she knows what she'll find—a white paper bag filled with bloody turkey gizzard. And the heart.

The mere thought chokes her. She opens her mouth wide and catches at the edge of the little white bag, pulls until she feels it move. Another tug and it slides out just as the speculum slides in. She twists and drops the bag to the floor.

Relax, Dr. Hill says. This might be a bit chilly, but it won't hurt.

The metal speculum doesn't hurt, exactly, as it pushes on the walls of her vagina, but she feels the bite of the swab with a sharp intake of breath.

She wants to flap her wings and catch his head between her thighs, his head that is down there somewhere, if only she could see through the sheet over her knees. The sheet separates her from the bottom half of her body so that she feels like a peep-theatre for the doctor. He sounds perky enough. Thatta girl. Don't be shy.

Percy's legs react quickly. Like springs pushed too far back, they release all at once and snap shut, clamp Dr. Hill's head between her thighs. She feels the vibration of his screams on her vulva as she reaches down and stretches her labia over his ears. His voice, now muffled by her flesh, is no longer authoritative and unconcerned. With his nose pressed against her clitoris he speaks into her vagina like a megaphone, the sounds amplified into her chest. Let me out of here. Next time I'll warm the speculum. I'll drop the sheet and keep your legs closer together. I promise.

How're you doing, Priscilla?

Percy feels Dr. Hill pull the instrument out. Her vagina closes with a slippery pop. Her hands are icy wet, her face red. I'm OK, but it's Percy. My name is Percy.

Brad is a smooth-faced, gentle boy who writes poems to Percy and copies her homework after school. On an old couch in his parent's basement, he feels her developing breasts, sucks on them until they hurt, and groans more than seems normal, even to Percy,

who often feels like groaning when she's close to Marlea. When Brad slides his chapped fingers inside her panties, she's ready.

I want to do it, she says. Her stomach feels tight and, inside her socks, her toes are damp and cold.

The way Brad's eyes widen, she might have just handed him a hundred dollar bill. His mouth gapes, speechless, until he gets himself together enough to stammer, You...do? You want to do it?

Percy nods.

Wow, Brad says. He pushes his hair back, stands, and slides his zipper down in one clean move. He stands before Percy clad only in bright white undershorts.

Percy sees that his legs are freckled, discovers that the newness of his underwear causes her to like him more. She has imagined him in underwear similar to her brother's, faded Stanfields attached to his hips with stretched elastic. Brad's underwear fits snugly, is pouchy in front but extends as she watches. He grabs Percy's bell bottoms at the ankles and pulls. Percy lifts her hips and pushes both jeans and her own new panties, bought secretly and especially for the occasion, below her buttocks. He pulls again, tosses both items to the floor. They've talked about this moment, agreed that they wouldn't rush, would wait until everything felt right. Confronted with so much skin all at once, Brad's hands hover over her, graze her shoulders and breasts, then move quickly to spread her legs. He pushes his underwear down, aims his penis, and prods until he finds his way inside.

Are you OK? he asks. He glances at her face then back down at his penis, visible, then not.

Percy nods, bright-eyed, eager to get on with whatever is next. She didn't expect the entry to be so easy. Except for when he pulls a few pubic hairs, Brad's penis doesn't hurt her at all. She tries moving her hips with his. Their bodies connect only from waist to knee. He accelerates the rhythm. Bam, bam, bam—he slaps against her thighs. She watches, interested, as his face contorts.

Close your eyes, he says.

Brad's face contorts more. Percy watches as his mouth hangs open. His hips go into a spasm; a shudder runs through his body, a long groan, and he flops on top of her.

She waits. After a minute or two, just as Percy is about to push his weight aside, Brad lifts himself onto his elbows and kisses her.

That was so good, he says.

Percy taps the top of the clock for quiet and closes her eyes again. She doesn't want to wake, wants to stay in her dreams where decision is suspended. Whether events take a turn for better or worse is of little consequence when each effect passes with barely a memory left behind. But the space between conscious and unconscious narrows and Percy becomes aware that if she dares to lie still for even a minute more she will be under until she hears the other towers passing morning weather. She kicks aside the covers and flails at the mosquito netting.

Couldn't the manufacturer have thought to use red thread on the opening edges? To have sewn in a strip of colourful cotton tape, for christ sake? She bats at the spot where the opening should be, finally locates an edge and slides her legs over the side of the bed. Her body sags, her neck hangs hooked and unresponsive as she faces the floor. But it's cold and she forces her knees to push off, reaches out to grope for the chair that holds her clothes. The room is bright with morning sun, but her eyelids object.

Every night Percy considers setting the alarm to go off five or ten minutes earlier so she won't need to rush, but every night she decides that the extra sleep is crucial to her well-being, will somehow help her wake more easily. She bends close to peer at the clock. 7:20. Yesterday's jeans hitched and zipped. Socks. She looks in the mirror on the wall. A lusty curve has developed at her waist. She lifts her arms and watches as the T-shirt slides to her breasts, catches until she wriggles and the fabric snatches her body from view. She lifts the shirt up again, over her breasts. She likes her breasts, likes the muscles that define the ball of her belly. Marlea always tells Percy that her body is beautiful. But what about Gilmore? Will he compare her far-from-thin frame to past lovers, younger women, women in magazines, on billboards, all of them size 7 to 10? Percy drops the T-shirt. Her hair is a mess of wild red curls. She locks strands behind her ears and lets the rest hang.

Rubber boots sit by the door. Although the grass is short, dew this early in the season is heavy, good breeding ground for mosquitos. The clearing around her cabin is green, strikingly green, and she's required to keep it trim. A previous occupant left a relevant *Non Sequiter* comic strip taped to Percy's refrigerator door. The strip shows the sun relentless in the sky while a horned devil stands behind some poor clod with a

lawnmower. The devil opens his arms in an expansive gesture as if to say: Here it is! and the one with the mower looks out over an endless field of grass. The caption reads, The Most Plausible Conception of Hell. Penciled in is the appropriate firetower and Envy River sign. When Percy first lands at Envy River Tower, she estimates the size of her clearing at three acres.

More like seven or eight, the ranger says.

She gapes. And I have to cut it all? With a push mower?

Only if you want to keep the bugs down, the ranger says.

Percy prefers patios. She prefers interlocking brick with electric bug zappers and benches strategically placed near beds of low maintenance flowers and shrubs. But Envy River Tower is not the city, and she soon discovers that pushing the lawnmower offers its own rewards. Not merely the exercise, which, when she drips in summer heat, still allows her to believe that her hips will melt perfectly, one drop at a time, but the sense of accomplishment she feels as each neat swathe lines up against the next.

In her boots and a warm jacket, Percy steps outside. No doddling up the tower this morning. She grabs a rung and moves as quickly as she can. Her hands are leather-gloved to protect her palms from the bite of angle iron, yet even with gloves her hands have calloused after only a few weeks. 100 rungs. 100 feet. At the top of the ladder she pushes the trap door open above her head and drags herself into the cupola, checks the sky for clouds. She divides the sky into tenths. Six parts clouded. Four parts reflect an almost painful blue, too bright for Percy's still blurry eyes. She pulls her notebook from a pocket and scribbles. Two parts high cloud, three parts middle, and one part cumulous. High two,

middle three, CU one. She scans the horizon and jots in the notebook again, visibility: 25 kilometres in haze. Percy checks the time. Damn. She wants to omit the smoke observation, but there's no point. If she neglects her duties now, she'll feel guilty and anxious later, will have to make an extra trip up in order to reassure herself that the whole forest isn't on fire. Maybe I can skip the 10:00 check, she thinks. She forces herself to slow down, to survey the whole 360 degrees of protected area with binoculars held steady. No smoke. Back down the ladder. 7:40. The first call, on the outside speaker, comes through as she checks the rain gauge.

All stations, this is XMA four-five by for the morning weather. Go ahead seven-four-six.

Percy scribbles. 0.4 millimetres of rain. Only a shower yesterday afternoon, not nearly enough to make a difference in her rain barrel. She can't resist kicking through the grass all the way over to the Stevenson Screen. Dew makes her boots shiny and wet. She unhooks the door and lowers it. Maximum temperature yesterday: eight. Minimum temperature: three. At least it stayed above zero. She flips a switch to set the fan going and closes the door so air will circulate unhindered as the forced breeze passes through the slatted wood, cools a strip of wet gauze on the wet bulb. The difference between wet bulb and dry bulb decide humidity. She tips her head back and stares up. Attached to a pole eighty feet up the tower, anemometer cups spin at high speed. The wind must be blowing at 20 kilometres or better, but Percy will know exactly when she checks the electronic read-out inside the cabin. The weather vane points North.

Any idiot could do this, but this is her job. Part of it. She opens the door to the Stevenson Screen. Wet bulb three point five, dry bulb an even four degrees. She switches off the fan and half-walks, half-runs to the cabin. Two more stations to report before hers. Inside or out, she hears the same towers every morning.

What a cushy job, friends in the city gush. What do you do all day?

I don't know. I work. Then I read, write, carve. Mow the lawn, sand, paint. Repair things, check equipment, listen for the radio; watch for smoke 50 hours a day. I work more hours than I'm paid, but it's all the same. Only thing that changes is the weather.

Must have lots of time to think.

Plenty of time to think.

Inside, Percy checks the anemometer read-out. Wind 23, gusting 40. All of this she transfers to another sheet so she can read the figures off in the correct order. From a set of tables she determines the relative humidity. RH - 93. She totals the numbers for wind, rain, the various temperatures, and writes the figure under Grand Total just as Gilmore begins his weather.

Tower calling order is always the same, and although they are separated by at least fifty miles, Percy's report follows Gilmore's. This morning, as he speaks, she reaches for the radio, sets her fingertips lightly on top of the speaker.

No precip, he says. Clouds high two, middle one.

With each phrase, she feels his voice vibrate, his presence evident in her hand. She imagines her fingers lightly at rest on his throat, his vocal cords oscillating beneath her

touch. The radio feels warm, brings the image to life. Does the vibration differ with each voice?

Six-six-eight this is four-five for the morning weather.

Four-five, this is six-six-eight.

As she reports, Percy holds the mike in her right hand; her left she leaves on the radio. Different. The vibrations are distinctly different. She smiles at the radio as if it were not only talking but breathing. He has received her e-mail, she is sure. At this moment, he's listening, wondering.

He'll respond. After all, she kept it light enough.

She wants nothing more than to go back to bed, but the radio will bleep on and off with bits and pieces of forestry command for the rest of the day and well into the evening. Each squawk interrupts as she listens just long enough to determine that the message is not for her.

Percy makes another dash outside to fill the kettle with water from the rain barrel. While she waits for hot water, she brushes her teeth at the kitchen sink, ladles a half glass of water from a bucket and rinses toothpaste down the drain. A small lump of paste gobs in the sink so she smears it with her finger and uses another splash to rinse. Careful with the water. Each splash leaves the bucket that much emptier and still no heavy rain.

At school, Percy and Marlea make hushed plans to confuse the teacher. When they agree to change names for the day, Marlea answers when Percy is called upon, and

Percy speaks up when Marlea is asked for a response. They think they are ever-so-clever, but Mrs. Goertzen catches on quickly.

Her eyes narrow, she calls on each of them a few times, and then she returns the weekly math quiz.

Marlea, she says.

Percy holds out her hand for the paper.

Good work, she says. 98. That's the highest in the class.

Unused to approval, Percy blushes.

A few minutes later, when Mrs. Goertzen calls Percy, Marlea raises her hand.

Mrs. Goertzen approaches. She holds the paper back a moment, then presses her lips together and shakes her head. The one raised eyebrow seems to say, It's hopeless, but what can I do? Aloud, she says, And you, young lady, you can do better than 53.

Being accustomed to praise, criticism for Marlea, even criticism by proxy, hurts. Her eyes, naturally flooding, brim over with tears. When others in the class titter, Percy's eyes fill in sympathy. She doesn't mind that her own work needs improvement, but Marlea always has the right answers.

Percy leaps from her desk. She grabs her own quiz from Miss Noble and thrusts Marlea's at her. She clenches her fists and glares at the class. It's not funny, she yells. It's just not funny.

Percy runs into the hall, stopping for one surprised moment before walking straight to the main office. She faces the secretary. I need to be expelled, she says.

Mrs. Fisk looks as neat as her desk, everything in its place, no untidy wrinkles or stray hairs getting in the way. To Percy she looks like someone in a magazine, someone with no feelings, only a small smile drawn on with lipstick.

Mrs. Fisk raises her perfect brown eyebrows. She looks at the principal's door and then back to Percy. Maybe you should talk Mr. Blackburn, she says.

Percy waits while Mrs. Fisk disappears into the principal's private office. She hears whispering and some muffled rustles, then Mrs. Fisk returns, motioning with her head for Percy to follow. Tap tap. Mrs. Fisk's heels break the silence. Her mouth opens and closes without losing its smile. Mr. Blackburn wants to see you, she says. Tap, tap.

She leads Percy into the office and puts her hand on a wooden stacking chair. Percy slides into it.

Mrs. Fisk squeezes Percy's shoulder. Don't let him eat you, she says. She winks at Percy and laughs so that her round little mouth displays a wide set of crooked teeth.

Percy stares at Mr. Blackburn, wondering why she ever opened her mouth in the first place.

Mr. Blackburn peers back. His eyes are lively. So tell me, he says, why do you think I should expell you?

This is not what Percy expected at all. She picks at her thumb until the silence is more frightening than the question, then tries to explain. When Bobby yelled at his teacher, she says, you expelled him. And my Mom had to talk to you before he could come back.

But you are not your brother, Mr. Blackburn says.

Percy blinks.

Wouldn't you rather that I speak to your teacher? Get her to let you off the hook this once?

Percy can only nod. Why does it matter that she is not Bobby, and why has she not been strapped with the wide leather strap Bobby told her about? She feels fuzzy, like she has gotten a fever and is not really here at all.

I can do that, Mr. Blackburn says, if you promise nothing like this will happen again.

Percy nods one more time.

Mr. Blackburn rises. Percy does too. She resolves to not look at Mrs. Fisk as she leaves, fearing that her face will have cracked open like a broken Barbie doll and might now, like her laughter, look frightening and messy. Mr. Blackburn reassures Percy with a smile and places his hand on her back as they move toward the door. For just a moment, Percy likes him more than she fears him. For just a moment, he reminds her of Marlea's father.

In the bedroom, she knots the mosquito net above the bed and pulls layers of quilts straight and tight. When she feels satisfied that each corner of the top cover sits at about the same height from the floor, she turns away. Midstep, she stops and looks back. Everything so neat and tidy. She returns to the bed, scoops all the blankets into the air. With a grunt, she releases them and lets them fall where they will.

Leaving the bed unmade is suggestion #2 in a book called *Too Perfect for Love*. There are other suggestions, and Percy has tried a number of them: Do you consciously put the toilet paper on the roll so that the paper feeds either over or under? Place the roll in the holder without checking. Do you wash dishes after every meal? Leave them unwashed for an entire day. Do you always wear deodorant? Try not wearing it and notice the difference. Soon, according to the authors, Percy will recognize that her life will not fall apart if every detail does not follow exactly as she would like. She will relax and learn to weed the important from the unimportant so that the tightness in her neck will ease. She will laugh more, annoy her partner less.

The bedroom is small, two feet of space on either side and at the foot of the bed. The heap on the mattress makes the room seem smaller still. Deliberately, Percy turns her back and enters the kitchen.

With the bedroom out of the way, she grabs the corn broom and starts on the worn and defiled carpet. Nowhere in the book does it suggest that she learn to tolerate a dirty floor. Every year, she asks for the removal of the carpet, for simple linoleum she can wash

and wax, sweep clean. Every year she returns to the same reddish-brown layer of indoor/outdoor immovable filth. She wears shoes to the edge of her bed and immediately after getting out of the shower—would rather stand barefoot outside than in.

Everything takes longer at the tower. Her friends call it simple living. Unrefined, she says, but not simple.

Now that Percy has done tidying up, she would like to take a shower, to walk into the washroom, turn on the taps, adjust the water and step into the spray. That would be simple, but there is no washroom. The water she's been heating is warm, so Percy props the shower-bag in the sink and attempts to pour without spilling. Damn, she says, when a tablespoon or two runs into the sink. When the kettle is empty, Percy carries the the shower-bag outside and hangs it on a hook.

Marlea and Percy, nuzzled together.

Tell me again why this doesn't work for you, the way it is?

Percy pushes Marlea to the edge of the bed. Get out of here. How many years have we gone over this, anyway? You're just lucky I've never been able to find anyone I want half as much.

Marlea rolls back, speaks softly as she traces a line down Percy's jaw. I talked to Mom and Dad the other day. They asked who's coming for Christmas, you or Andrew.

Or both of us.

Marlea nuzzles close again. That's what I like best. Both of you.

I know, Percy says. She flops on her back. You'd think it would be easier by now, but none of us is content. I just want you to myself, Andrew resents that, and you're always trying to keep us both happy. It's bloody exhausting.

When the warm water trickles over her head, off her shoulders and down her torso, Percy feels a surge of pleasure—her first today. Because the morning air is still cool, bugs are few. The temptation is strong to let the trickle flow unhindered, to warm her goose bumps, but she turns the nozzle shut, soaps in the cold air, then rinses briefly. Her breasts strain away from her body, ache for touch. She imagines herself an amoebae, flesh rounding out and hunching up, spreading itself ahead of her fingers.

She tries Gilmore's name on her tongue, inserts him whole into her fantasy. Touch me, she says. Touch me, Gilmore. His warm fingers on cold breasts lifting, nipples hard wrinkles tucked into his sudsy palms. Hands sliding confidently to waist, slippery over hips. Callused hands, big, wet luffa hands sponging up and down her legs, into the small of her back. Percy balances on the sides of her feet, widens the space between her thighs. Amoebae body arched like a capital A, one big blob of flesh around luffa hands so careful between her legs.

Percy arching her body against Marlea's. I wish I could find someone to love as much as I love you, she says. All Dwayne does is spend hours on the toilet reading the TV guide. I'm not kidding; sometimes three, four times a day. I can't escape him. It's not that he hangs over me like a bad odour. He *is* a bad odour.

Her hair holds soap like a sponge and there is very little warm water left. She sighs and slaps a mosquito, its proboscis buried deep in her shoulder. A splat of blood and she flicks the mosquito into the air. No way there's enough warm water to rinse the suds from her hair, a half litre left, at best. Her skin looks fresh plucked, stretched taut over a proliferation of bumps.

Might as well go all the way, she thinks, and freeze my skull as well. She lifts the lid on the rain barrel and scoops a small pot of cold water, bends her neck and dumps the water over her head. Too cold. Pain shoots through eyes. My eyes, god damn. She stamps her feet. Icy fingers test a strand of hair for the telltale squeak. No suds. Close enough.

Percy logs on daily, sometimes two or three times a day, looking for Gilmore's reply. Today, when she enters her password and is rewarded with: *Two new messages for pturner*, she knows intuitively that one of them is from Gilmore. She executes the receive commands twice before her fingers and her mind work in tandem.

His message scrolls by as the transfer is made. She doesn't attempt to read, not even the last lines that come to rest on the screen, but waits until the printer rolls the page into her hands, a permanent copy of what she hopes are intimate details.

Date: 02 Jun 1996 08:52:06

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: pleased to meet you

Percy Turner,

I'm happy you copied my address and, by all means, let's get to know each other.

I've heard you on the radio, as well. Interesting name, I thought, since I'm sensitive to such things. All my life I've been asked about mine: Is that Graham or Gilmore? And then there's the matter of my middle name: Audrey, if you can believe it. My grandfather's name. I remember the look on my mother's face when I carved my initials into a pumpkin, one fall when I was about 14. GAG, she said. Her eyes went wide and she stared at me with such a look. I'll never forget it.

So I'm glad you wrote. I was surprised...not too many people with e-mail out here... I notice voices, too, and yours is an interesting mix of gentleness and determination. Or so I imagine, Percy Turner.

Percy blinks at the page. That's it? She turns to the screen and scrolls to the beginning of the message. 1230 characters or bytes or whatever the hell the number stands for, including the headers. Percy searches for her response, but feels nothing she can name. This surprises her, as if she has encountered a blank screen where she expected to find a complicated document. Perhaps Gilmore is not who she thinks. He hasn't offered much of himself, that's for sure. She reads the message again. On the other hand, he does say she sounds gentle. She checks the header. Gilmore A. Graham. Apparently he's not putting her on about his initials. That's cute. Funny, even.

By the time she enters grade one, Priscilla Turner hates her name, especially when Lyle Berkeley, whose father is a doctor, chants, Prissy, Prissy, doesn't know how to dance. Prissy, Prissy, pisses in her pants.

The chant catches on, and when Miss Noble finds her crying for the third or fourth time, she hugs Percy into her soft red sweater, kisses her forehead, and sends her to the

washroom. No one tells Percy what Miss Noble says, but nobody dares use the chant again, and only the boys still call her, more simply, *Pissy*.

When she is seven, her Aunt Rachel chooses Priscilla as the flower-girl for her wedding. No one asks if she wants to be a flower-girl, but she likes how the frilly dress feels smooth and satiny over her chest, how it flounces out at the hips. If she turns circles, she can make it stand out like a spinning top.

Her job is to trail behind the bridesmaids and scatter flower petals from a silver basket. Just as she reaches the chalked X, at which she is to stop and stand without fidgeting, one of her young cousins spots her from his mother's lap and begins to squeal. Percy isn't sure whether to go back and retrieve Otto or to leave him where he is. She knows she is expected to stand stiller than a store dummy, but the more Priscilla ignores him, the more Otto squirms.

Over the music of the bridal march, he screeches and storms, his face redder and sweatier by the minute. Percy, he screams, in an unsuccessful attempt to bend his tongue around *Prissy*. I want Percy.

Aunt Rachel moves unsteadily down the aisle accompanied by her mother and father on either side. Her left hand holds her father's arm; the right grips a display of red roses, closed buds dangling on silver threads below the main bouquet. From a distance, against the whiteness of Rachel's stomach, the buds drip down the front of her gown like splotches of fresh blood.

Since no one clings to her, Rachel's mother has difficulty timing her steps with those of her daughter and her husband, who bend and dip slightly ahead of the music. Dour-faced, looking as if she's only along to clean up the spills, she follows a half step behind.

As Rachel approaches Otto, she relinquishes her grip on her father's arm and, swift and smooth for the first time, ducks behind her mother to pluck Otto from his mother's lap. She clamps him to the front of her dress. The bouquet breaks apart and tight red buds roll under her feet. Ignoring them, she falls back into step with her father.

When she reaches Priscilla, Rachel thrusts Otto away from her. Take this kid before I kill him, her face says. Priscilla grasps Otto beneath his outstretched arms and he kicks free of Rachel, sending more roses into the air. Rachel hands the dismembered bouquet to her mother.

They walk a few steps more, then stop while the pastor says, Who gives this girl to be married?

Before his wife has a chance to join in, Rachel's father answers. We do.

Aunt Rachel's mother lengthens her neck, squares her shoulders and steps past her husband to seat herself in the front pew. To anyone who doesn't know her, she looks confident and poised. Her suddenly square shoulders and purposeful seating say, You are a complete nincompoop. Get out of my way.

Percy smiles. She jostles Otto on her hip, rocks back and forth with no thought to the distraction they make. She rubs noses with Otto, they smack kisses at each other and play pat-a-cake with one hand. When he starts to whimper, she sits him on the floor and encourages him to play with the decorative bows on her new, uncomfortable shoes. After a while she slips out of both shoes and lets him chew on the polished toes. She no longer hates her name. No more Prissy, or even Priscilla. From now on, she is *Percy* Turner.

There's no pleasing you, Dwayne says. You don't like men.

I've liked enough men to know that I can.

What's that supposed to mean?

After a few minutes, when he apologizes, and Percy apologizes back, she closes her eyes and imagines that he is Marlea. Percy is open, eager, excited by the sound of Marlea's voice which she hears despite silence in the room, by the clothes she sees her wearing, by her scent, by the thoughts she shares and the words she chooses to express herself. Without preamble, Percy sinks into the flush that boils up when Marlea allows her tongue to meander along the crevice between inner and outer labia, when she kisses her there with gentle passion and then loves her vulva with such fervor that she rubs her face back and forth, back and forth, as if she can't get enough, will never get enough; as if she can breathe Percy in, soak her up through the open pores of her nose. She sinks into the flush and it boils over her, leaves her limp limp limp and grateful that Marlea can love her with such a tender mixture of violence and passion and sensitivity, that she knows exactly

the right second or millionth of a second to tighten her tongue, to pull away, to hold Percy to her while she recovers.

In her absence, Percy's fingers are Marlea's tongue, and Dwayne's arms suffice.

In the bedroom, alongside the offending pile on the bed, Percy shivers and dries, dresses for the second time. Same jeans, fresh underwear, fresh T-shirt. She cups her fingers to her mouth and blows on them, then sticks her index finger in her ear to stop the ache. Her finger is not yet warm enough to make a difference.

Nothing changes except the weather and my underwear, Percy says. She shakes her hair back and faces the mirror. Who knows the difference if you wear the same clothes 20 days in a row? Huh? Who knows?

She stares into and out from the mirror, grins. Off to one side, tucked in the frame, Marlea grins too, fingers in her mouth pulling her lips into a grotesque jack-o-lantern smirk, eyes above laughing into the camera. Because of the eyes Percy moves the photo from home to tower, from tower to home, even now.

Date: 03 Jun 1996 14:23:45

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: Hi again

Gilmore, (Do you like to be called Gilmore, or Gil?)

Hi. I'm so glad you wrote back. I had hoped you would. Having an almost real conversation will be wonderful, and I liked your first letter. The story about your mother made me laugh out loud. Are you close to her?

My mother is a bit of a puzzle to me, but perhaps that's not so uncommon.

Anyway, I'm curious about you and computers. I already know that you're amazing with them; why is that? Do you have a degree in computer science or are you just a natural?

Percy

The summer after Percy and Marlea turn fourteen, Percy's younger brother Bobby, usually with two or three friends in tow, begins to hover around the old blue bus. The bus is an eyesore—startle blue paint peeling to pumpkin, bright yellow interior—but to Percy it is a haven, and she is adamant that neither Bobby nor his friends may intrude on the time she and Marlea share in the bus. She pushes the big metal lever to lock the boys out, then double-checks the wide rubber seal to make certain there is no way Bobby can slip his arm in and pry the door open.

Even so, the boys bang on the outside and flatten their pimpled faces against any uncurtained window.

Priscilla, Bobby says, Let us in and we'll share our cigarettes.

Never! And my name is Percy.

Prissy, let us in. Come on.

Percy slides the window open. Give me a cigarette.

Bobby throws her a scornful look. When you let us in.

Percy reaches down and, quick on the up-move, hooks her fingers into Bobby's nostrils, stretches his head up until he stands on tiptoes while she glares. If you can't call me by my name, she says, you'll never get inside.

She unhooks her fingers and slides the window closed before he can retaliate. Bobby's friends fall over themselves laughing. They pull their nostrils up and stare at the sky, imitating Bobby, but he only shakes his head, rubs his nose a bit, and laughs along with them.

He likes to laugh, and often reads parts of the paper for the amusement of his friends. *Fire resistant gun for sale*, he says, miming a hunter who can't get his gun to fire. How long do you think it will take him to sell that one?

Listen to this, he says. Honda Civic, \$3500; Ford Pickup, \$2000. He goes down the list of ads. Here's the good one: Oldsmobile Cutlass: Stolen. Please return ASAP.

Nothing down, he continues. No interest. Don't pay until you get caught.

Marlea laughs hardest of all.

Percy and her brother Bobby kneel on the ground collecting worms from the flower bed to sell to the grocery store for bait. A penny a piece, and so far, the easiest place to find them is always the flower bed, regardless of how often they harvest. Behind them, Mr. Turner pads outside in his slippers. He walks to the gate where the sidewalk blocks end and stares at the Dunns' trailer, so similar to his own. After a minute or two, he turns back and acknowledges his children.

One of the reasons why I'd never own a welding truck, he says, is that damn Dunn. He's out of town more often than he's home. Percy's dad puts a hand on each of their heads. It's easy to be a hero when you've got a fat wallet. Specially when you can up and run off whenever you like.

As if to punctuate his remark, he horks a wad from his throat and spits it forcefully off to the side. Then, as if debating something within, he nods his head a few times and strides up the steps into the porch.

Date: 06 Jun 1996 20:35:26
From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>
To: pturner@direct.ca
Subject: my mother

Percy,

I didn't mean the story to be funny, but if it was, so be it. My mother is dead, and I rarely talk about her, so we'll consider the subject closed.

You asked about me and computers. I've taught myself most of what I know from books, and computers challenge me. That's about the extent of that.

Also, I prefer Gilmore, but I answer to Gil.

Gilmore

Talk to me, Dwayne, Percy says. I know you're still upset.

I'm not upset, he says. He refuses to look up.

Are you still angry about this morning?

He slaps his book down on the seat beside him. I'm *not* angry because you didn't want sex. We did have sex, only you didn't like it.

I only asked if you'd touch me differently. I didn't ask you to stop and pout for the rest of the day.

Months of angry words bitten back are coiled deep in her stomach, pulling everything tight, tight, tight, ready to unwind in a wild thrash of loose ends. Nobody is much *much* better than Dwayne.

Date: 08 Jun 1996 07:58:49

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: Excuse me?

Gilmore:

Is it just me, or was the tone of your last note distinctly curt? I didn't mean to offend you, Gilmore. What did I say, or am I imagining things? Your note made you seem like a grumpy old man. Are you? :-)

Percy

Date: 10 Jun 1996 20:35:26

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: apologies?

Dear Percy,

No, excuse _me_! I can see that I was more abrupt than I intended. Mention of my mother often evokes feelings I have yet to deal with. :'-(Still, I do welcome your letters and I apologize for my rudeness. I spend so much time alone I'm afraid my social skills may be somewhat rusty.

However, FYI, and although I have passed 50 (barely), I don't see myself as a grumpy old man. A sexy older guy is more like it. }:-)

Gil (Really, you can call me either)

Sometimes parents aren't ready for their children when they arrive. That's what Marlea's mom tells Percy and Percy believes her. Sometimes kids just have to make the best of what they've got and forgive their parents as best they can. If you don't, the hurt can eat you up from the inside out.

Percy is sixteen when she discovers with certainty that she has not imagined her parents' disappointment in her. On this hot day she wears blue jeans cut off at mid-thigh, a faded cotton blouse that shows her belly button if she stretches up, and a strip of denim tied around the loose pony-tail that holds her hair off her neck. Even with the pony-tail, strands of stray hair fall forward into her face. She knows enough to push the hair back as she goes looking for her mother.

Mom, she says, Do you have my birth certificate?

She finds her mother in the kitchen, hot iron in one hand, spray bottle in the other. Smoke curls from a cigarette in the ashtray, and a large stack of wrinkled clothes sit on the table. Margaret's face is red across the cheeks and damp. She looks up but does not smile as Percy crosses the living room toward the kitchen. Do I have what? she asks.

My birth certificate. The Burger Baron needs someone. I applied, but they told me to get a Social Insurance card. She holds out the form.

Margaret Turner sets the spray bottle on the ironing board and wipes the back of her wrist across her forehead and down one side of her face. She takes the paper, glances at the tiny print, then gives the sheet back to Percy.

I've got most of it done, Percy says, but I need the number off my birth certificate.

Margaret bites into her top lip while she thinks. What number?

I don't know. She looks at the application. The registration number.

Oh. So you want a job?

Percy glances at the pile of ironing. Uh huh. For pay. Instead of babysitting, I mean.

Be glad you can babysit. At least you've been able to help out a bit.

At first everything is fine. Unlike others for whom Percy babysits, people who sometimes leave Percy popcorn and Kool-Aid, the Millers leave mixed nuts and Pepsi, or, even better, pizza. Mr. and Mrs. Miller have a double-wide trailer and rent two stalls—which they call lots, as if they own those as well as their trailer—and live in the back row. They have a wooden wishing well, brick walkways, and plenty of low-lying shrubs. Percy knows that if she ever owns her own trailer, it will have to be like theirs.

Their son, Derek, is only three months old when Percy first babysits him, and he is almost always asleep when Percy arrives. Every half-hour or so, she peeks in his room and listens for the soft grunts he makes. The lamp on the dresser radiates just enough light to illuminate all the things she thinks should be in a baby's room—a plaid teddy bear in a wooden rocking chair; ruffled curtains that match the cushions on the rocker; a change stand stacked with fresh diapers and diaper liners, baby powder, zinc ointment, baby oil and cotton balls; and shelves brimming with toys and stuffed animals, things Derek pays little attention to now, but that will amuse him in a few months. Derek's room—the nursery, Mrs. Miller calls it—is much warmer than the rest of the trailer and humid with baby breath. Although there is not a plant in view, the room reminds Percy of an atrium she visited on a school field trip, a warm, serene place where the scent of moist earth left her feeling so happy that she kept a handful of stolen atrium dirt moistened in a jar for three years after the outing.

Whenever Derek wakes, Percy changes his diaper and sits in the rocking chair to cradle him. He blinks his eyes and slobbers warm strings that she wipes away with a soft diaper liner. He smiles at Percy now, and lately, when she strokes his head with gentle fingers, he falls asleep in her arms as quickly as if she has hypnotized him. She rocks by herself, too, and smiles to remember Derek's warm-milk odour and fuzzy-soft sleepers. The rest of the time she watches colour television and explores cupboards and drawers to see what rich people keep. Cloth placemats for starters, as well as boxes of potato chips, coloured candles, and spaghetti in a tall jar rather than a box. Mrs. Miller even has a real

vanity table with drawers and a mirror built into the corner of her bedroom. Percy knows that Mrs. Miller has to share this room, but she prefers to erase Mr. Miller's flat, elongated face with its puffy eyes. When Percy is rich, she will have just such an enormous bedroom all to herself.

On the night Percy discovers Mrs. Miller's secret, she sits on the furry stool in front of the vanity table and pretends that she is Derek's mother. She takes the little blue stopper from a bottle of Evening in Paris perfume, passes the bottle under her nose, angles her head, then returns the bottle to the centre of the doily, as if she can't decide whether the scent is exactly right for her mood. She pulls her hair back and clips pink pearl earrings on her ears before carefully examining each item in the four shallow drawers. In one drawer, a flat silver-coloured box holds brooches, beads, and bracelets—bright, jeweled things that don't tangle easily. When Percy notices a corner of paper poking out from beneath the bottom of the tin box, she lifts the box with both hands and sets it on the vanity. Left in the drawer are scraps of folded paper, an all-occasion card with Darling scrawled across the front, a wine label with writing on the back, and several letters without envelopes. Starting at the top of the pile, Percy begins to read:

Sweetheart, I will wait forever for you. Your baby is my baby. Let me love you both.

As she reads each one, Percy stacks them in order.

Dan doesn't deserve you. No man will love you as I can love you.

Until this, Percy assumes the notes are from Dan Miller. Who else would send them? And what does he mean, your baby is my baby? Percy pores over each scrap, trying to memorize them all. Wait until Marlea hears this. This is even better than the time she heard her parents fucking. Not that them fucking was such a big deal—the surprising bit was her father saying Mommy, mommy, mommy, over and over as the bed wheezed to the familiar rhythm.

She puts everything back in the vanity—important to leave everything exactly as she found it—then checks on Derek. She rolls him onto his stomach and turns his head to one side, as Mrs. Miller taught her. Then, with the telephone receiver securely wedged between her cheek and her shoulder, Percy settles on the kitchen linoleum to call Marlea.

Boy, do I have news for you, she says when Marlea answers. She waits an extra beat to stretch Marlea's interest, then continues. Mrs. Miller's got a whole pile of love letters in her drawer. As best she can, Percy recounts the contents of the letters. Neat, huh? D'you think it's the principal? I saw her in his office a few weeks ago.

You saw Mrs. Miller? She doesn't have kids in school.

I know. That's what I mean.

Maybe...but I heard my mom say she might be a lesbian.

Mrs. *Miller* might be a lesbian? Percy could tell by the way Marlea said the word lesbian that being one was not good. What's a lesbian?

A woman who does...stuff...with other women. You know, who fools around with them.

No way. How do you know that? And how can she be a lesbian if she's married and just had a baby? Besides, the notes are from a man. *No man will love you as much as me—*

What if that means no *man* will love you as much as me?

Percy falls silent. God. I see what you mean. So why does your Mom think she's a lesbian?

You know. She never wears dresses, and she built their wishing wells herself. But not only that. Somebody saw her parked in a car with a woman. Marlea waits, but Percy doesn't respond.

You know. *Parked* in a car.

Ohhh...You mean parked...What were they doing?

Marlea sounds less sure of herself. I don't know. Kissing, I guess. But the way Mom said, I think they were doing...you know, what anybody does when they park.

No way. Really? God...she doesn't seem like a lesbian to me. I like her.

Me too, so long as she doesn't try anything.

What do you mean? D'you think she likes kids? That way? Percy tries to remember if Mrs. Miller has ever acted strangely. I think it's Mr. Miller who likes kids. Girls, anyway.

By the time the Millers arrive home, Percy is asleep on the couch. The TV emits a low hum, and the multicoloured stripes of the test pattern light the living room.

Percy.

At the sound of her name, she starts awake.

Mrs. Miller's hand rests on her shoulder. We're home, honey. I didn't know we'd be so late.

Percy, sits up. That's OK. She feels fuzzy-headed. There is something she means to ask Mrs. Miller— Oh. Not ask. Percy blinks. She stares as Mrs. Miller slides her jacket off her shoulders. Even by Percy's standards, she is still young—much younger than Percy's mother, who is only thirty-six. She has an average build—nothing particularly big or small—and she wears black slacks with a simple red sweater. Her face is kind as she smiles at Percy.

Did everything go OK? Did Derek take his bottle?

I fed him and changed him, then he just slept.

OK. Thanks, sweetheart. I'll go look in on him, but see Dan; he'll pay you. Percy nods and rises to her feet. Still tired, she raises her arms and stretches. Mrs. Miller looks the same as she always has; so far as Percy can tell, there's nothing weird about her at all.

Percy is adamant. I hate babysitting, she says. Especially for the Miller's. I don't like him. He scares me.

Nobody says you've got to like them, Margaret says. You just have to do a good job so's they keep paying you.

*Date: 13 Jun 1996 07:01:24
From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>
To: Gills@agt.net
Subject: re: apologies?*

Hi Gilmore,

OK; apology accepted. Thank-you. I would have missed writing to you. It's not like I'm run off my feet with visitors.

Anyway, in case you're wondering about my age, I'm 39 years old.

I should tell you, though, I need you to decode your last message. Although I thought I was familiar with most of the emoticons, you used two I've never seen before. Ditto for FYI. Explanations, please.

Percy

*Date: 14 Jun 1996 21:15:26
From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>
To: pturner@direct.ca
Subject: emoticons*

Dear Percy,

Happily. I put myself at your service. Since you said you know most of the emoticons, I won't bore you with a list unless you ask. I used a crying face : '-(and a lewd grin: }:-) I will, QTOH, introduce you to a few shortcuts. Shorthand, if you will:

FYI = For Your Information

OTOH = On the Other Hand

IMHO = In My Humble Opinion

LOL= Laughing Out Loud

VBG= Very Big Grin

TIA= Thanks in Advance

WEG = Wicked Evil Grin

BTW = By the Way

CUL = See You Later

GMTA = Great Minds Think Alike.

A few others you may not be familiar with:

*< and > on either end of an action provides visual or other information you can't see, hear, or otherwise know without being told, as in: got your latest note <happy smile> Also, where you need to emphasize something, you can use the underline marks (_ _) or asterics (* *) to indicate italics.*

This is by no means an all-inclusive list, but it should keep us going for now.

There; I hope I didn't tell you more than you wanted to know, but now I must climb the ladder and check the forest for smoke. <He lies, maintaining the illusion that he is a conscientious worker.>

Thinking of you...

Gilmore

Percy enters the back porch and pushes the door closed until she hears the click that tells her the latch has caught. Somewhere in the trunk, her mom said. That's where she'll find the birth certificate.

Percy gasps in the heat. There is no window to open, just the trunk, the double bed covered with old chenille, a chest of wooden drawers, and a low striped camp stool. A rag rug partially covers bare wood on the floor.

The unpainted metal is so long rusted that the surface has taken on an attractive brown patina. She kneels on the rug and lifts the lid. This is the first time she has been allowed to look at the contents alone, and she checks each item before setting it aside. Black and white photos of relatives framed and wrapped in tissue paper; photo albums; baby books—first Bobby's, then hers—in a large brown envelope stuffed with other papers.

Tempted by her name scrawled on the front of the envelope in her mother's tight writing, Percy peeks inside. A doll-like child stares out from the soft green cover, its wide eyes clear, content, long lashes thick and curly, nothing like Percy's. Percy gives in to curiosity and takes her baby book from the envelope, smiling when a page falls open to a footprint, a curl of red hair. She fingers the hair to see if it is any softer than the mess on her head. The strand feels like pubic hair, hard and springy.

She grunts. Even as a baby her hair was awful. First word: Dadda. Baby gifts: yellow and black checkered teddy bear from Aunty Grace; silver spoon from Grandpa and Grandma; a silver dollar from Uncle Dave.

Percy doesn't remember ever receiving a silver dollar. She makes a mental note to ask, later, when her father is home. The entries taper off. A few weights and

measurements, one photo where she looks like an alien in grey-tones, long, skinny neck, prominent ears, then nothing.

Disgruntled, unhappy to find so little of herself documented, she slaps the covers together and slides the bottom end back into the envelope full of papers. Part way in, the papers bunch and jam.

She sets the package down and pulls the contents half-out of the envelope. Right away she reads, **MONSTER CHILD BORN TO OLDROCK COUPLE**. Percy lifts the corner of the first page to see what lies below. **PRISCILLA TURNER DEVIL'S BABY SAYS MOM.**

Percy feels the inside of her nostrils tingle painfully. Tears blur her vision. She can see from the photo in the baby book that she was not a beautiful child, but had people looked at her and seen a monster? Or was this something else? Something from one of those stupid papers her mother reads. Percy pulls yellowed newspaper clippings and letters from the envelope, a stack three inches thick.

One clipping is longer than the others and printed on glossy paper rather than newsprint. She reads that one first.

Priscilla Turner was an unwanted child. That is, she was longed for until she arrived. Only two weeks after her birth, she and her mother were pictured on the front page of *The Central Star*—an Oldrock weekly. Within days, they were featured in most major newspapers across the country.

The dictates of normal, acceptable behaviour in 1957 reserved no place for mothers to stand by the side of the only highway into town with a placard reading: TAKE THIS CHILD OF THE DEVIL. Had the story happened now, mother and daughter might have appeared on every news program in the nation and probably several talk shows as well. As it was, they only made the papers. Priscilla's mother, Margaret Murphy Turner, believed that her newborn had evil and telepathic powers.

Priscilla was only born, she said, to do the work of Satan—to destroy her mother, a devout Christian out of Satan's reach.

Already, Margaret maintained, her hands had been scorched when she lifted her daughter from her makeshift crib—she had the blisters to prove it—and hadn't she nearly choked on a mouthful of baby talk when, like any normal mother, she tried to coo words of comfort into her baby's upturned face?

Priscilla's father, Walter Turner, was quoted as saying, Margaret has finally gone off the deep end. She always was a bit wacky, but she's bonkers now for sure.

Maybe, as some of the more lurid newspapers suggested, this baby wasn't the most adorable creature ever born, but those three numbers on her little butt—marks Walter certainly wouldn't have allowed anyone to photograph—looked more like a blur of musical notes to him and, anyway, birthmarks aren't all that unusual. His Aunt Martha had a raised patch of purple on her back that you'd swear was nothing other than a giant slug, and people weren't photographing that. He knew that the abundance of wrinkles on Priscilla's face, along with the sticky-out ears combined to make her look like she'd been set in the sun to dry, but give her a few bottles of milk and she'd plump out soon enough. Having children, he said, was supposed to be one of the happier experiences in a man's life, not a freak show. So I didn't make no calendar baby, he said, that's the least of my worries.

Clearly, Walter was right about that. As he protested, How'd you like to have a wife gone crazy and a million loony-toons popping outta nowhere? How'm I

supposed to deal with that and still make a living? You tell me. And all the questions from child welfare workers to boot?

As far as this reporter can see, Priscilla was more than a little odd-looking. According to one article, those yellow eyes were not inherited from anyone in the family, however far back one checks, and the oddly abundant head of wiry red hair, when anyone dared to smooth it, did nothing to make the infant more sympathetic. Nor did her immediate strength, the way she flattened her hands against the sides of a glass baby bottle until the fill marks were imprinted on her palms, or the way she gummed the rubber nipple right off the end.

This feat in particular frightened her mother. Margaret was frail and thin, with sloped shoulders and hair the colour of natural pistachios. She nursed her baby for only three days before she screamed out in terror. When a nurse came running she found Margaret struggling to pry Priscilla's jaws apart. With her bony fingers jammed into Priscilla's mouth, Margaret pulled up with her right arm and down with her left. When finally her nipple slid free, Margaret dumped Priscilla aside and tended to her wounded breast. Either she never noticed or didn't care that the nurse had to catch Priscilla in mid-air when she rolled past the edge of the hospital bed. Get her away from me, Margaret said, and don't bring her back.

Date: 15 Jun 1996 06:45:04

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: Gills@agt.net

Subject: re:emoticons

Dear Gilmore,

*Tell me more than I wanted to know? Are you kidding? I hang on your every word.
<WEG>*

Now that I understand your previous message, I'm sorry to understand that you felt like crying; was the lewd grin a sign of recovery? As for maintaining the illusion of industriousness, may you listen and learn, for that is an art which I have nearly mastered!

What else is one to do in the face of the over-eager? Take, for example, the time when you are just down from the cupola (or are simply feeling lazy.) At any rate, you are happily on the ground when one of those 24-hour-a-day-types gets all excited about a smoke that you absolutely know is an oil flare. You try to impart this wisdom, but s/he insists that you run all the way up the tower anyway. What is more sensible than to sit in your chair, wait three minutes, then grab the mike and say: <huff, huff> Gee, all I can see is the Gulf flare, right there, as usual. <huff, huff> You know what I mean?

(Please tell me you are not a good friend or relative of the district superintendent!)

Which reminds me, do you have family? A partner? Kids?

I've got to go, but I hope you're doing OK. I'm thinking of you, too.

Percy

Date: 16 Jun 1996 07:58:23

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: more answers

Dear Percy,

I see that you have all the skills necessary to a good firetower operator, and that I may, indeed, learn much from you. But not to worry: as much as I'd like to tell you I have connections in high places, I don't. Like you, I go about my business, alone in the woods, doing what I feel makes sense, avoiding that which doesn't. As for the over-eager, I've learned to work around them. Mostly I've developed selective hearing. If I don't want to talk, I don't answer the radio. Whatever works, I tell myself. There's always time to make excuses and apologize later...

Concerning your question about family, I've been married and divorced—a couple of times(!) My children, Patrick and Alison, are 28 and 26, respectively, so hardly in the dependent stage. If anything, they are more successful than their father, by far. We're a close bunch, and I see them quite often, although not as often as I'd like, since neither of them live near me any longer.

I was only 18 when I first married, and I worked at an uninspiring job because I didn't believe I could find anything better. By 19 I was a father, and a couple of years later the father of two. We stuck with the marriage as long as we could, but by the time I was thirty, I had married again, with not much more success. Another divorce and a series of relationships later, I chose education over desire, and I found my way into university. Philosophy was my thing, for a while, as was mathematics and physics. I'm not much of a finisher, I'm told, but I consider myself fairly well rounded...

I now hire myself out as a computer consultant, and that has its moments, but being at the tower is a welcome respite. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be.

There's more, of course, to the saga of Gilmore Graham, but no sense pushing the river.

Gilmore

A few weeks before Christmas, Percy's mother overhears her on the telephone.

I'm sorry, Percy says, but I can't. I'm already babysitting that night.

What do you mean, you're already babysitting, Margaret asks when Percy hangs up. Who was that?

Mrs. Miller, Percy says. I told her I can't babysit.

You lied?

Mom. I told you. I don't like him. He scares me.

And I told you: you don't have to like them. Margaret holds the telephone out for Percy.

It is two o'clock in the morning when Mrs. Miller enters the living room. Percy is stretched out on the sofa, half asleep, a book closed in her hand.

Happy New Year, honey! Mrs. Miller looks red around the eyes, and tired, but she smiles. I saved this for you.

She holds a small cardboard box, a silver rectangle, simply decorated like a miniature coffin. Here, she says. Truffles. They came with the champagne at midnight—

Truffles? Percy says. Thanks.

When Mrs. Miller leaves to check on Derek, she opens the box and peeks inside. Her eyes widen. Four iced truffles lie nestled between layers of silver and gold foil. She replaces the lid and sets the box in the bottom of her purse.

It's awkward, waiting like this. Most people pay her as soon as they get in, so that she can leave right away, but Mrs. Miller always looks in on Derek first thing. Sometimes Mr. Miller pays her, sometimes she has to wait for Mrs. Miller to return. Either way, she's left wondering if this time they really have forgotten her.

She bends to look at a photograph of Derek sitting under the Christmas tree, then yawns and stretches, her eyes squeezed shut. They snap open as she feels the floor vibrate with the approach of Mr. Miller. Percy drops her arms to her sides.

His step is uneven as he wheezes and puffs his way across the carpet. Hey, sexy. Nice tummy you have there. His eyes bulge; they're bloodshot—too bright, even in the dim light.

C'mere, he says. Lemme see that belly button again.

He's big and bulky, like a heavy door that won't open. Percy wants to move past him, but he's too close. Behind her is the couch, so she can only sit down or remain standing, and before she can decide which to do, he circles her waist with one heavy arm and raises the front of her sweater to expose her stomach.

Look at this, he says. Yum yum yum. He makes ugly smacking noises and folds down, pretends to gobble her stomach with warm, sloppy lips.

Percy pushes against him. Don't, she says. I have to go.

Don't you want your pay? He removes his arm and steps back, a lopsided half-smile causing him to look sick as well as drunk. It's in my pocket, he says.

Percy hesitates. Which one?

He points at his front pants pocket. This one. At the top.

Percy shakes her head. You get it.

C'mon. You're no fun, it's just a game. He reaches for her hand.

She pulls against him, but he pulls harder and flattens her palm against his hip until she gives in and slides her fingers into his pocket.

I don't feel anything, she says.

Mr. Miller is no longer panting, is as still as if he has perked his ears to an unfamiliar sound. Maybe it fell lower, he says. He speaks quietly, holds his breath so that his words hang suspended in the air. Just reach in and grab it, honey. This time, when he

puts his arm around her, pulls her closer, there is no getting free. His face is only inches above hers. There's a little extra, he says.

Percy turns away and jams her hand in his pocket, reaches all the way to the bottom, where she finds a paper bill. As her fingers close around the money, she feels, as well as hears, his intake of breath. She retracts her hand and strains against his arms.

He does not release her, just allows her to move back an inch or two, his hand still hinged to her waist. Look at it, he says. What'd you get?

Percy unfolds the bill. A ten, she says. You only owe me six. Four until midnight, then double until now.

No. It's New Year's. We kept you out. You keep the ten.

Really? Despite herself, Percy smiles. Her eyes dart up to his, then quickly away. She'd be lucky to save ten dollars in a month. Well...thanks, she says.

You're welcome, missy. Do I get a little hug?

Percy can't see that she has a choice and, anyway, before she can answer, he squashes her against his body so she can feel the stiffness at his crotch like an extra bone jammed into her hip. Even with her nose crushed against his jacket, she doesn't lift her arms, just lets them hang at her sides, limp, refusing to hug back while his hands on her back spread open, move down until, just as he cups her buttocks, she pulls back, hard.

Let go, she says. Her voice is loud enough to be heard in Derek's room.

Mr. Miller releases her and steps back. There now. Don't get excited. Just wanted to give you a little hug, that's all. He pats the seat of her jeans. You keep that ten. You're a good babysitter, you are.

She bolts for the door and he follows, stands close behind her while she stuffs her feet into her shoes. When she straightens up, he's right there, winking and swaying on his feet. Happy New Year, Princess.

She slams the door behind her.

When she is seventeen, Percy drives her old Pontiac, bought for one hundred dollars, into the city after dark to pick up Bobby, who calls, words slung together in a drunken slur.

Please come get me, he says. Don't tell Mom or Dad...

On the way, her car overheats. She has no jacket, no money. A trucker stops almost immediately. Yep. Should've stopped sooner, prob'ly blown the motor now. He talks to Percy's breasts, the nipples stiff in evening air so damp she rubs her arms to keep warm. He spits a brown wad into the ditch. Can wait here all night and nothing will change. Or you can grab a ride with me to the next gas station.

Once they're on the road, he turns the interior light on and peers at her. How old are you? he asks.

I'm eighteen.

You look younger. His eyes settle on her breasts, again. Course you look mature and all. He laughs as if he has said something funny, then opens the window and spits. What'ya doing on the road so late at night?

My brother needs me to pick him up in Calgary.

Just a brother? No boyfriend? Pretty girl like you? Anyone ever tell you you're pretty?

Percy doesn't answer.

Course they do, he says. He reaches over and squeezes her knee. Don't you worry. We'll get you to your brother.

Percy smiles tentatively and leans back to watch the white lines on the highway. Out of the corner of her eye she can see the truck driver giving her occasional looks. After a few miles the silence gets to her. Thanks again, she says. I don't know why things always go wrong at the worst times.

Yep. Seems that's the way, isn't it? He looks at her breasts. Can't get over a pretty young thing like you out on the road by yourself.

Percy looks out the side window. If he tries anything, she'll grab him by the balls, show him she's no one to mess with.

After a few minutes, she can see the lights of Calgary like a dome in the distance. The tension in her neck eases, and then the truck slows, the driver edges onto the shoulder of the highway. Just have to stop a minute, he says, and clean the windows. He smiles, a false, jumpy smile, then grabs a bottle of Windex and a roll of paper towel. He washes his side window, inside and out, then comes around the front of the truck.

Percy wants to lock her door, to push the knob down, stare him in the eyes and shake her head side to side, no, don't wash this one; this one's clean enough. But how can she lock him out of his own truck?

She sits stiff and tight in her seat. Please god, she says to herself, don't let him do anything.

The driver opens the door. He takes a few swipes at the window, then sets the bottle of spray on the dash. He lowers one hip to the seat beside Marlea and puts his meaty palm on her waist, hovering over her in the dim light.

No, she says. Don't.

His hand moves up to grab her breast. I'm not going to hurt you. I just can't help myself. You're so pretty.

Percy begins to cry. Please. I only want to get to the city with no more trouble.

The trucker slides his hand out from under the bra. His face comes close. She can feel his breath as he tries to kiss her, but she turns her head to the side. He pushes her shirt up to her neck, pulls the bra over her breasts, squashes them with his beefy, callused hands. With the door open, the cab light illuminates her skin. He leans back and looks.

Get off me, she says.

He rips a piece of paper towel off the roll and thrusts it at her. No need to get all excited, he says. Can't blame a guy for trying, can you? Stop crying; I'll get you to your damn brother.

When he jumps down, Percy stifles the impulse to jump after him and run. Where will she go? What if the next guy to pick her up is worse?

She stays, and he drives in silence for several minutes, looking so angry and belligerent that Percy wishes she had stayed on the road, taken her chances with the night and other, unknown, drivers; maybe walked all the way. Finally, he glances at her, slows the truck and pulls over again.

Blew a tire, he explains.

You didn't swerve or anything, Percy says. Wouldn't I have heard something? A dangerous, heavy feeling sits in her stomach.

Not if you don't know what you're listening for.

Percy stays in her seat and looks out the window while he goes to check. Miles in the distance she sees the lights of Calgary, more than a glow in the sky now, but still too far. Her stomach churns. Is this a trick? Should she get out before he comes at her again? She opens her door and prepares to get down.

The driver materializes, just below her, beside the running board. Whoa, there, he says. You don't want to stand out here in the cold. I'll flag someone for you.

Percy hesitates. No, that's OK. I'll do it. She puts one leg down, holds onto the handle on the dash.

Suit yourself, he says from behind. Doesn't make much sense to stand out here when nobody's coming.

He's right. Percy is torn between staying, sensibly, in the truck until she sees traffic, and obeying her gut feeling—which tells her to flee as fast as she can. She stands there, unable to decide, then pulls herself back into the cab.

The truck driver is right behind her—she can feel both hot palms, fingers spread, one on each buttock. He blocks the door by standing on the running board. She could

have been on the ground by now. Could have been out in the open. What was she thinking, getting back in the truck. Stupid, she says to herself. I'm so stupid. She considers kicking him in the face, trying to get past him, but his belly is big like a small keg and pressed hard against her leg. She clutches her purse to her chest.

Damn tire, he says. Might be sleeping right here. You too, if we can't get you a ride.

Percy looks at his mouth, sloppy and wet-looking, looks toward the city. Why didn't you flag one of those? She points at tail-lights in the distance. In the mirror she sees more lights approaching. I'm only seventeen, she says. Tears start. Her voice rises. My dad is a cop. Adrenaline pumps through her system. She plants her thumbs in his eye sockets and pushes, hard. He moves backward with her thumbs and she is able to bring one knee up.

He grabs her wrists and jerks her thumbs away from his face, then yanks her forward and pushes her out the door. Get out of my truck, cunt.

Percy picks herself out of the ditch, stumbles to the back of the truck and out into the middle of the road. She waves her arms. A vehicle slows; she hears the semi-trailer grinding gears. She runs to the vehicle, sees that it is a postal truck. As she gets to it, her teeth begin to chatter, her knees give out, and she clings to the door handle.

Gilmore, Percy decides, is a person consumed more by ideas than doubts. Listening to him on the radio, she discerns a constant turn of thought beneath his thoughtful responses, recognizes mental agility in the quick redirection of questions, in the

versatility of tone. When Gilmore is pleased on the radio, he emits a pleasant rumble from his chest, like that of distant thunder before the one sharp clap of laughter escapes, an extended HAH! of surprise and pleasure, a reward, Percy thinks, for having been able to startle him with humour. Not that *she* has, yet, but she hopes to.

Date: 16 Jun 1996 23:21:56

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: family

Hey, you! Push the river.

Where do you live when you're not at the tower, if I may ask? I live in Calgary, and I have to say, I love it there. Calgary's been home for quite a few years now, and I've settled into a little condo in the heart of downtown. Somehow, that's made me very happy.

I carve, walking sticks mostly, and I often carve them on my balcony, overlooking the paths along the river. Sometimes, as I peel a bit of bark down the length of a stick, smell the sweet baby sweat of young tree, I sit there, in the sun, or perhaps in a light sprinkle of rain, and I wonder how I managed to stumble into such a satisfying life.

Other times, I run up and down a scale of lethargy that often ends with me huddled under my comforter for days, wondering who would miss me if I never crawled out.

I hope that doesn't strike you as too intimate, me telling you that when we're just getting to know each other, but I'm feeling a bit sad tonight. The late hour as much as anything, I guess, and I don't really have anyone else to tell.

I'm not, nor have I ever been, married. Nor do I have any children, something about which I have mixed feelings—an appreciation of my freedom as well as feelings of loss.

I guess you could say I'm on my way out of a long-term relationship. It's a bit complicated, but I've been off and on with a childhood sweetheart, of sorts, for most of my life. We're definitely off at the moment, and I have mixed feelings about that, as well, but I won't bore you with details.

Anyway, I'm much more interested in learning about you. The past is interesting, and puts things in perspective, but who are you now, or is that too tall an order? Do you

read? Do you play? Are you happy? I know I'm putting you on the spot, but I'm interested in how you see yourself. I keep trying to put a Gilmore picture together, but I fail. What consumes you more than anything else? Do you have a passion? Am I asking too many questions?

Percy

Percy is a half kilometer down the cutline before she really thinks about what she's doing. Getting away was easy. With 75 mm of rain, a blow torch couldn't start a fire.

She reports the weather, as usual, at 1:00 PM and adds, I'll be away from the radio for the rest of the afternoon. Let them think what they will; when it's this wet no one bothers to question. For all they know she wants to turn her radio off and go back to bed. Maybe she wants to read or meditate or play Mozart uninterrupted by the belch of radio static. More likely they imagine her writing long lonely letters, or baking bread. Imprisoned by the forest, she has nowhere to go.

Unless she pores over the map looking, as Percy had, for a way into the camp so casually pointed out by the pilot as they flew over in the spring.

The Gulf camp he said, when Percy asked. Bunch of oil guys stuck in the middle of nowhere for two weeks at a time. He circled down.

Is that a telephone booth?

Yep. Strange isn't it, booth way out here in the middle of nothing. I bet that cost them.

And a satellite dish?

Couldn't expect to get anybody out here otherwise. I don't know how you guys do it.

I don't know either, she says. It's my first time, but I'll tell you at the end of the season.

Now Percy has the directions in her pocket. Past the old airfield and down the cutline until the second one that crosses her path. East on that one until the old logging road, straight until she hits gravel, then keep going until she reaches the camp. Maybe she'll be lucky enough to hitch a ride on the gravel road. If her calculations are correct, she'll be there in about four hours. 15, maybe 16 kilometers, at best.

Through drizzle so fine it is barely a mist now, she wades forward, pushes tall grass aside, skirts pools of water, steps carefully across waterlogged muskeg. Her jeans are soaked to the waist before she gets to the other side of the old airfield, and she knows she'd be better off in lighter fabric, something that won't hold its weight quite so relentlessly, won't chafe her thighs, but she's gone too far to turn back now. Twenty minutes back to the cabin to change, then another twenty retracing her steps and she'd be forty minutes into the afternoon and only beginning where she is. Better to deal with wet jeans.

Another half kilometer down the cut-line and her socks begin to bunch. She stops once and pulls them up, careful to tuck her jeans back into rubber boots, but the socks inch down over her heel, down, down, a bit at a time until each one feels like a rock under the arch of her foot. The socks are 100% cotton, loose at the ankle to start with, already

wet and gritty. She limps over them, unsure whether to take them off or leave them as unlikely insurance against blisters that already seem inevitable.

Her umbrella, peach-coloured, one Percy wouldn't be caught dead with in Calgary, keeps her head and shoulders dry, but the grass, the young willows and baby spruce, are unavoidable. She brushes past, bends them and holds one gloved hand behind to protect herself from their whipping return, but can't escape water flung as each one soaks her with shake after shaggy shake. Her navy anorak, waterproof says the label, blackens and sticks to her body. A homemade hood, fashioned from mosquito netting, protects her from the incessant insects but also blurs her vision and makes the world surreal. Yea, as she walks through the valley of insects. Yea, as she walks through a Vaseline world. Just beyond, hundreds of mosquitoes hover and whine and mill about, drawn from the forest floor by the heat of her efforts, impatient for the smallest bite of unprotected flesh. The longer she walks, the larger the swarm.

More than an hour later, just as Percy begins to doubt the accuracy of her map, she comes to a definite intersection. Although this path, too, has grown over with grasses and tall weeds, heavy clay ruts are clearly recognizable as those belonging to a road rather than another cutline. She is at least one quarter of the way to the camp, soaked through, and her feet, when she leans against a tree to check, are an unfleshly white, wrinkled as colourless raisins. She wrings sand and muddy water from her socks and pours a small stream from each boot, unsure whether the boots leak or if the water simply leeches in from her jeans.

She risks a look at her watch, waves her arm against mosquitoes, then tucks her glove once again inside the wristband, securing the velcro fastener. Two-thirty; plenty of time. Maybe not enough to return before evening sked, but she'll call headquarters from the telephone booth, let them know that she's walked out, that she'll be back before midnight. Percy moves forward onto the road.

Because trees were once cut back to form this trail, she does not feel crowded by leaves and limbs but can see road far into the distance, as far as the long hill several kilometers off, and she walks with new vigour, tries even to run, although her feet slap inside her rubber boots and her jeans ride low and weighty on her hips. She wants to fly over the surface, outrun the bugs, but clay builds in layers on the bottom of her boots, forms soles as heavy as steel and she slows to a socket-straining trudge. On she plods, on and on, over the hill in the distance, around a long-off curve and then another and another, past a place where the road has washed away, where she measures with her umbrella the depth of the water, watches as the water rises over and fills her boots, and no longer cares—the mud, water, cold, all one, not separate annoyances, but one big obstacle. After that, for a while, she removes her boots and carries them, squeezed flat, one under each arm, thinking it will hurt less to walk barefoot than to plod along in bunched socks and boots so heavy she can hardly lift them, slap plunk, slap plunk, against near bleeding heels. But her feet, without boots, feel fleshless and icy, notice every pebble in the mud and find thistles in what looks to be nothing more than chickweed growing soft between ruts Percy now stomps through, slides into, cusses, and finally simply sits in, not caring about bears, or bugs, or the time that rolls through the afternoon all too quickly.

Finally, knowing she can die, can get eaten alive, by insects or bears, Percy picks herself off the ground and wades into a puddle where she washes the mud from her battered feet and pulls a thistle from the ball of her left. She has come too far to go back. She must go forward.

Date: Jun 17 1996 12:31:14
From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>
To: pturner@direct.ca
Subject: About all that we are...

Dear Percy,

Since you asked who I am now, perhaps I am someone who understands loneliness, although I in no way see that as a negative. I value aloneness. I crave aloneness, even when it sometimes fails me—as it seems to be failing you, at the moment. I hope you're feeling better...

I live in Windsor, Ontario, when I'm not here. I'm not sure why. And, yes, I read. Voraciously and extensively. I read philosophy. Wittgenstein, Aristotle, Epicurus, Scotus, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Bradley... I've read Kafka's diaries, his novels; Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast Trilogy—Gormenghast, Titus Groan, Titus Alone—and his short story, Mr. Pye. Gogol's Diary of a Madman is excellent; Other Worlds, by Cyrano de Bergerac, is a classic. I read spy novels, bestsellers, even the Weekly World News (Twenty-six of Bill Clinton's Senators Are Aliens)....

The long and the short of it is that I love to read, especially in an attempt to understand my surroundings. That's one of the reasons why I like the tower, it's the only place where I have more than enough time with books.

But how about you. ARE you feeling better? I like your letters, and I like your honesty, so don't worry that I'm judging you. I know what it's like out here, and you sound like you have plenty to think about.

Gil

Date: 17 Jun 1996 18:45

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: Reading

Dear Gilmore,

Yes, thanks, I'm doing all right. The sadness I mentioned has passed, although I'm still feeling a bit antsy. I don't know if this happens to you, but every year around mid June I suddenly feel very alone. It's like I have a two month limit: for two months I feel fine; I settle in, wind down after the hectic winter, get used to the tower again, and then one day, bam—I feel totally alone. I've checked my journals and it's the same every year. I think it's touch deprivation. At home, even when I don't have a lover, I have friends who always hug me.

Anyway, I'm fine, thanks, and like you, I love to read, except my list is a lot different than yours. Don't you read anything by women? Winterson, Morrison, Gallant—even Rita Mae Brown is more my style, but then fiction, in general, is more my style.

But what else can you tell me, besides books? I want more, man!

Percy

Holy shit! Percy's mouth drops. Her book falls to the grassy bank.

What? Marlea asks. She looks down at her wet swimsuit then back up at Percy.

Help me, she screams. Get them off!

I told you—

Help me!

Percy fumbles in her pockets for matches while Marlea swipes at her arms and legs. When she finds the matches, she grabs Marlea. Stop, she says. You can't brush them off. You'll make them stick harder.

Marlea begins to cry. How many are there?

One, two... She turns Marlea around. Three...four, I think. But I can get them. She lights a match and blows it out. With a sharp jabbing motion, she pokes the head of the match into the leech on Marlea's hip. The leech flinches, but stays put.

Marlea sniffs and wipes her nose with her fingers. Maybe you have to do it slower, she says.

Percy lights another match and tries again. This time she grinds the match head into the midportion of the first leech, holding it until both pointy ends curl into the match and the leech drops to the ground. One down, three to go.

Get the one on my arm next.

Percy removes that one and two more. As each one drops, she kicks it down the bank toward the river. She squats for the last one, attached to Marlea's ankle, and taps her shin. Can you spread a bit?

Marlea widens the space between her feet and stands with hands on hips. That's the last one, right?

Yup. Then you can go back in. She lights another match.

I'm *never* going back in.

Until next time. Percy presses the head of the match to the leech. When it curls, she flicks it with her finger. You're still bleeding a bit, she says. She wipes the blood with her finger and looks up, her eyes drawn to a bit of pubic hair. She tries to stifle a gasp, but Marlea hears.

What?

I think there's one more.

Where? I don't see it. Marlea twists, trying to see. If you're joking, I don't find this funny, Percy.

Percy, her eyes still on the leech, stays squatted on the ground, holding Marlea's leg to steady herself. I'm *not* joking. I think there's one sticking out of your bathing suit. Spread your legs again.

Oh...Percy...

It's halfway under your suit.

In my crotch?

Percy stands. Don't cry—I can get it. It might even fall off when you get out of your suit. With matter of fact movements, she slides the straps of Marlea's swimsuit past her shoulders and tugs on the wet elastic. Can't you at least help me, she says.

Marlea wriggles out of the wet suit and spreads her legs. Is it gone?

Percy's fingers tremble. She pulls, a little too roughly, on the flesh of Marlea's upper thigh. No. It's still there. But you're going to have to open your legs as far as you can. She aims for a look of nonchalance. I don't want to burn you.

Is it in my crotch?

I already said it's in your crotch. Percy refuses to look at Marlea. She stares single-mindedly at the leech, then stands and retrieves Marlea's towel. Here. It'd be easier if you put your knees up as if you're at the doctor's.

Marlea lies on the ground and does as she's told while Percy kneels and positions herself between Marlea's legs.

Is it still there? Marlea asks.

For christ's sake, Marlea! Percy's cheeks are flushed. She bites on her bottom lip. Just be quiet.

Percy—

Marlea. Shut up!

You don't have to be so mean! D'you think I got bloodsuckers on purpose?

The blood-engorged leech makes an ugly diagonal welt across Marlea's inner thigh. One end stretches out from between tightly coiled pubic hairs, the other is firmly attached to what Percy tries to view only as a clinical part—the labia majora of her best friend. It makes no difference why Marlea has a leech stuck to her vulva, the fact is, she does, and Percy is the only one around to remove it. Never mind the pounding in her chest, or the way her eyes refuse to limit their sight to the leech, Percy has a job to do.

Just don't move, she says. She lights a match and extinguishes it, then pulls again on Marlea's thigh, stretching the skin taut. She lowers the match and is rewarded with a prolonged sizzle. Both ends lift from Marlea's skin as the leech rolls into a protective ball.

I'm going to try and grab this one and lift it off, otherwise it might roll down and get stuck to you again.

Marlea whimpers, but Percy ignores her. Using the matchbook as tweezers, she pinches the leech between the cover and the remaining matches. She holds the leech in the

air, then throws the matchbook toward the river. An involuntary shudder runs through her body. God, she says. I hope there aren't any more.

Make sure. Marlea opens her legs as wide as she can, then pulls her knees toward her chest and rolls back on her spine, exposing as much of herself as possible. Am I OK?

Percy feels faint. She's not certain whether it is the sight of Marlea so fully exposed, or the relief of having successfully rid her of the ugly, black bloodsuckers. Nevertheless, she puts one palm on each of Marlea's thighs and examines her vulva carefully. A bruise and a few drops of blood pinpoint the spot where the leech clung. Anger she doesn't understand weighs down on Percy's hands. She pushes hard, feeling as if she could separate Marlea's legs from her torso with a quick snap.

Ow...that hurts. Marlea tries to roll forward, to pull her legs together, but Percy continues to push.

Marlea's voice rises. Percy...let go.

The flush in Percy's cheeks spreads down her neck in blotches. You told me to look; I'm looking.

You're scaring me. Let go.

Percy pushes hard, again, then pulls Marlea's legs back into a more comfortable position. She glares at Marlea. I'm still checking.

Marlea stares back for several seconds then, and when Percy refuses to break the deadlock, closes her eyes and adjusts her legs, ankles together on the towel, knees wide apart, almost touching the ground.

Until now, Percy has only seen the outside of Marlea's body—her breasts, the sleek line of leg rounding into buttock, bellybutton a shallow dimple in the long curve up from pubic hair. She has never imagined Marlea like this, rumpled labia, vagina open, insides pink and lumpy, bright before fading into dark.

Marlea lies still, no longer resisting, eyes closed—waiting.

Percy has to remind herself to breathe, to force air in and out of her diaphragm so she does not faint when she wants so badly to see and discover. She licks her finger and touches the lumpy pink flesh.

No bloodsuckers here, she says. She slides her finger in and searches inside against nodules hot and spongy, ridges, smoothness. Or here, she says, still conscious of vague, undirected anger. She pulls her finger out and puts it in her mouth. She can't place the taste—not lemon; not salt. With both hands she smooths Marlea's pubic hair off to the sides. Such pinkness, the labia firm now, extended like lips. Percy leans in, reacts without thought, lines her lips up for a kiss and presses her face between Marlea's legs.

Marlea moans softly and Percy pulls back for a second, waits until Marlea pushes her hips forward, then feels no sense of wrong, only a compulsive desire to feel and taste. She tests the nub of clitoris for resistance and feels Marlea respond. Gently she nibbles and sucks, a few flicks, then flat over the bump under her tongue. Marlea moans again and Percy flicks cautiously, then more convincingly, back and forth, back and forth. Marlea stiffens and holds, Percy continues. Back and forth on the tiny kernel of flesh while Marlea lies hot and plastic. Percy plays and strokes and looks, all the while feeling what she has never felt before, until Marlea settles back and sighs as if she can stand no more and then,

with the sigh, a quiver spreads like a ripple through Percy's lips. She plants a gentle kiss and lifts her face.

Marlea reaches for Percy and draws her up into her arms without awkwardness, as if they had done this new thing a hundred times, a million times before. They kiss, and look into each other's eyes and laugh out loud.

I think I just had my first orgasm, Marlea says.

Date: 18 Jun 1996 01:24:03

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: more

Dear Percy,

OK. I'll try to answer more of your questions. First, I approach all my interests with passion. And, in answer to another one, although I play, I often play in solitude. I enjoy good movies, and even bad ones. I enjoy walking, swimming, and watching—people, animals, insects. I like most types of music and even the occasional opera.

In the past, I enjoyed lengthy, intimate conversations with people who fascinated me, but in recent years I've become more of a recluse, and I believe I may be somewhat out of conversational practice. I tell you this because I find myself wanting to reach out again, to be a friend. Although my loneliness has no regular schedule, I do understand what you mean about feeling suddenly alone out here, even after weeks or months of that being just fine. Some days I think I'd give anything for company, and then, on the odd occasion when a hunter or forestry type finds his way in...guess what? I can hardly wait for the guy to go. It makes no sense. Maybe the loneliness is deeper, or maybe it is, like you say, more a need for touch than words. I think I understand, and I wish I could help.

Affectionately,

Gilmore

The door to the telephone booth is open. Barely able to lift her mud encrusted boots, Percy stumbles inside. Finally she has arrived. Foremost on her mind is not her swollen and blistered feet, nor her hips—which grind in pain with each movement of her leg—but the time. Evening tower sked—the final check-in for the day, the taken for granted, yes I’m still here, the bears didn’t get me and I didn’t fall down the ladder sked—is called every day at precisely 7:00 PM; Percy’s watch reads 7:35. Standing on the sides of her feet, leaning against the booth for support, she unzips the stomach pocket on her anorak. She pulls the netted hood from her head and removes her gloves, placing all three items in her front pouch. No amount of will can cause her fingers to move quickly. Every movement she makes is in slow, creaking, motion. She fumbles inside the pocket and finds the thin address book, presses it open on the telephone shelf, turns pages one by one, then runs her index finger down until she has the number right there. She holds the page flat with her left hand and reaches for the receiver with her right. She stares at the cradle that holds the receiver, at her hand hovering over the empty cradle, then registers the shiny chrome ringlet and frayed wires hanging from the side of the box.

There are three wires, a red one, a black one, and a white. Percy fixes her eyes on them, then turns her address book over on the shelf to save the page. First she holds together the bare copper ends of the red and the black wires. She listens. Nothing. She touches the white wire to the red, then red to black while stabbing the white wire at the chrome box. When nothing changes, she turns to the cradle, slaps it up and down several times, as if doing so will force a dial tone into the air, then looks down at the concrete pad upon which she stands as if the receiver might have come unplugged and need only be

found and plugged in as easily as the handset on her home model. Finally, she stands still and presses her hands to her ears in an attempt to drown the sound of mosquitoes.

The poor radio operator—Kim, Percy thinks—will wonder if she has hurt herself, if she has gotten lost or is lying in the bush somewhere, unable to get to a radio, while the duty officer will blame Kim for not asking where Percy was going when she signed out after weather, for not asking when she'd be back. Already they might have organized a search party, phoned for the helicopter to fly out to her tower and of course she won't be there, will be standing here in the telephone booth unable to move because of paralysis in her legs and the constant whine of mosquitoes burrowing into her brain. Of course there are several hours until dark and someone might think to ask here, but why, unless they see her tracks, track her like an animal, a sly devil animal, child of the devil, you're the devil, Annette shouted, you're the devil, the devil, the devil, until Percy couldn't help herself anyone would have smashed her in the mouth. Poor Annette. She didn't know that devil is only "lived" spelled backward. A dog would have been more dangerous. A god. A dog. The devil is nothing to be afraid of, even if she *were* related to one.

Date: 19 Jun 1996 00:30:18

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: Thanks

Dear Gilmore,

You do understand, I can tell. Especially the part about when someone stops in for a visit. God, the times I've felt ungrateful over that one! I've felt the same way—have been

craving company and then a pilot or someone will come and all I want is for him to leave as soon as possible. It's the superficiality, don't you think? When I'm really lonely, I want to talk about loneliness, not about the weather, and the fires down south, and how many hectares burned up north. That's like having someone scratch everywhere except right on the itch that's driving me crazy. I end up feeling angry, more than anything, and then guilty about the anger.

But maybe that's just me. I'm more sensual and emotional than intellectual, I think. The details of how things look, feel, smell, taste, sound, the emotions these senses generate, that is what I tend to recall most easily, most vividly, which is why, I suppose, I like to read, to live in my imagination. Hence all the questions I ask you. If I didn't, I would make you up all by myself.

:')-(Writing that last choked me up, for some reason. Realizing that I AM making you up, I guess, and also feeling somewhat silly about all the emotion I'm sharing right now.

I know we hardly know each other, and I know that in most circumstances this would be crazy, but will you understand if I tell you that despite all that, I wish I could lie in your arms and cry? Not for long, and not because I'm sad or miserable, but because I'm too full? Does that make sense? I don't even know what I'm full of, just that whatever it is, there is too much of it.

I appreciated your message, your support, more than I can say. Thank-you.

Next time I write, I'll get to it before midnight and maybe I'll be somewhat less melodramatic!

Percy

Date: 19 Jun 1996 23:04:43

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: the fullness of you

Dearest Percy,

...not melodramatic, only honest. Your last letter could, in part, have been a reflection of me. I was especially drawn to and deeply touched by what you said about lying in my arms and crying. I've felt exactly that when alone and lost in my thoughts of you; and, yes, I have imagined holding you, smiling, laughing, crying...

We have something, Percy—perhaps now and always undefined by words alone, but something—already you've touched me, gently entered my mind...

Every day, you hold me with your voice, your words...and, in my thoughts, I hold you back. In other words...I understand.

Percy can't breathe. She holds her ribs and rocks, neither breathing nor uttering a sound through gaping mouth. Her throat is locked, closed to the air until, finally, somehow, something opens and she chokes, emits a foghorn of sound not outward but through the roof of her mouth, chokes, and chokes, makes more sounds like an angry moose, but still can't breathe. And then Margaret is there, her face wide-eyed and pale, bigger than usual, distorted, her voice coming from far away. She looks at the papers around the trunk and she, too, gasps for air.

Percy...I forgot...

In slow motion, Margaret reaches for Percy, lowers herself to the floor beside her, but Percy doesn't feel her mother's arm around her shoulder, just keeps rocking and rocking, trying to breathe. Don't cry, Margaret says. Please don't cry.

Percy is weightless; the air feels different, is still and empty here where she need not breathe, or listen. Margaret's mouth opens and closes, but Percy can't hear because the volume is down, way down. There are tears, Margaret's tears, her face big and wet although Percy has never seen her mother cry, wants to know for sure that she is, wants to look, except that large black splotches in front of her eyes prevent her from seeing more than a few pieces at once, half a cheek, a mouth pulled crooked and wet, one dark eye

pleading, then there is nothing more to see or hear or feel, only darkness wrapping around as everything shuts, finally, finally, off.

She opens her eyes, stares at the yellowed ceiling, at small plastic daisies spaced every few feet, at brown wall board, fake wood grain all around. For a minute she thinks she is in her parent's trailer, but something is not right and the voices she hears, the grave male voice, an excited female, are not the voices of her parents. She sits and looks around. Several couches line the walls of a long room with a shuffle board, a large-screen television with *Jeopardy* smiling and flashing, sound muted.

She wants to stand, but her feet are bandaged, feel swollen, ache when she puts weight on them. Hello? she says.

When no one answers, she stands, uses the wall for support and starts down the hallway toward voices, finds them in the kitchen, the ranger eating a big plate of mashed potatoes and gravy, chicken, vegetables, a woman drinking coffee across from him. The woman jumps up when she sees Percy.

There she is, she says.

The ranger jumps up, too, pulls out a chair and motions for Percy to sit. Might as well have a seat, he says. Are you hungry?

Date: 22 Jun 1996 13:45:32

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: Fullness

Dear Gilmore,

I'm sorry it took me this long to write back, but I've been searching for the words to answer yours. I still haven't found them. I'm feeling...cautious, but I know I can't leave you waiting for a reply any longer.

My first response wasn't caution, but sheer joy. How wonderful to open my file and retrieve a letter so full of... (warmth?). Your words were a late night gift that has buoyed me up ever since. Thank-you.

You're right. We have something. I feel it too. There is magic in eliminating so many of the senses, but at the moment, I'm happy to be confined to the page. In person I would be blushing deep red. I'm blushing deep red anyway.

Date: 23 Jun 1996 21:19:11

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: caution

Dear Percy,

I was only talking to a friend, letting my feelings flow, knowing that everything I say to you is honest and real and so too will be your response.

I do, however, understand that my wrapping could be at your expense, and the possibility of a wall of caution is something I am now considering. Perhaps I was too forward, too premature in my expression. I'll reserve my intensity. My feelings won't change, but I'll express them less.

Gilmore

Date: 24 Jun 09:00:26

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: re: caution

Dear Gilmore,

No, no, NO! It hurts me to think that I may have made you feel that you should reserve your intensity and be less expressive. I like intensity.

I'm not building great walls of caution so much as I'm trying to keep at least a weak grip on reality. Getting to know you is exciting and I'm more afraid of my own imagination, of the expectations that might develop, than of your openness.

If I'm honest about all this, my thoughts are similar to yours. Knowing that you imagined me in your arms allows me to feel free, joyful, even. Then, a bit later, I counter that with: Are we already here, in only three weeks? Without ever having seen each other? I can't let this happen. I can't feel this about someone I don't know.

But what is knowing in that sense? What seems most authentic is not my usual skepticism, but these moments between us. When I was a teenager, or even a young adult, I never worried that my fantasies ran away with me. Fantasizing was an activity I indulged in purposefully. When I got older, and began looking for reasons to explain all the bad choices I made, I thought I should be more careful about loving, more cautious, certain that I wasn't just projecting my own desires. But all that caution did nothing to prevent pain. So why not imagine? Why not take pleasure in the ways you reveal yourself to me? Maybe you will be the love of my life. Maybe we will be friends. Maybe we will say good-bye at the end of the summer without ever having seen each other.

All I know is that you intrigue me.

Percy

Date: 24 Jun 1996 22:04:51

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: the intrigue continues

Dear Percy,

I read your wonderful message a few minutes ago and the smile on my face reflects all that we have between us, however large or small or lasting or...

You also got me thinking...sometimes people on the radio sound taller than they actually are. Just so you know, when we eventually meet in that far off, exotic place: of all the guys smoking fat Cuban cigars and wearing black trench coats...I'll be the not-so-tall one. Now you know...I'm not taller than I am.

I am, however, muscular and fit. I'm clean-shaven and keep my hair short (OK, maybe it's thinning just a bit); what's left is dark, not grey, and, in the right light, some people might even say I'm handsome...

Date: 25 Jun 1996 06:28:34

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: More, please

So now I'm getting up at dawn to read your messages! It's nice to have your letter in my hand (I print them out so I can take them up the tower with me) and to know that I will hear your voice in not much more than an hour. It's all I can do to keep from calling you on the radio to say good morning.

*I like having a bit more of *you* to imagine. Or maybe I should say a bit *less* of you, if you're not too sensitive about the height thing. I like it that I wouldn't have to stand on the stairs to give you a hug. I'm only 5' 4'', so you can't be any shorter than me. How tall are you? How about your weight? Belt size? Boxers or briefs? Do you wear blue jeans or sweat pants? Patent leather shoes, or Nikes? Golf shirts, western plaids, or matching pastel ensembles? Do you floss? Are your fingernails clean? Do you have teeth? <WEG>*

I have curly shoulder-length red hair—a rather wild mess, most of the time—an ample figure, full lips, strong bones, amber eyes. I smile a lot. A few freckles. Two scars. Size 32/32 blue jeans. Size 6 7/8 hat. Prefer minted floss, fine and wax-free. Hate peanuts and frosty toilet seats and no-see-ums and hornets in the cupola. Love stomping barefoot in the mud.

How do you like me so far? ;-)

Percy

The helicopter hovers overhead while a lanyard swings just beyond Percy's reach. In the past, foolishly, she has jumped, brought herself six inches closer to a cable two feet too high; today she waits, her gloved hand ready. Only an hour ago, fluffy white clouds stood in sharp relief against a vibrant blue sky. Now the air is thick and humid, the clouds dark and ready to spill. She sees the lanyard swing close and reaches for the hook on the end. Whack. Her arm retracts, fingers throbbing as if they've just been struck with a hammer. Percy jumps back, thinks quickly. She was leaning on the iron propane pig when she reached. She moves out in the open, away from the pig, and tries again. Whack. This time her whole arm feels the shock. She stumbles back, then regains her balance and runs to the cabin.

MCJ, this is six-six-eight. Her voice breaks, comes out heavy and muffled as she chokes on spontaneous tears.

Six-six-eight, this is MCJ. Sorry about that. Must have picked up some static, but I just touched it to the ground. Let's try again so I can get out of the way of this storm cell that's moving in. Looks like there's some heat in this one.

Percy is sobbing openly and can't respond. She keys the microphone twice and runs back to the pig. Thunder rumbles overhead. Her hand is cautious, ready to pull back, but this time there is no shock. She slips the hook through the cable on the pig and waits until the lanyard pulls taut. The helicopter moves south, away from the storm, with the propane pig in tow.

Percy needs to get up the tower, to record where lightning strikes, if it strikes. Instead, amazed at herself, she sits on the ground and cries.

When the first drops of rain spatter her arms, she runs for the ladder. Cold winds replace the oppressive heat, and she climbs with difficulty. Then, at the exact moment that a live orange and white current zigzags down one of four ground cables, this one not more than ten feet away from Percy, the sky cracks open with an enraged boom and empties itself upon her. Freezing, clothes and hair plastered to her body, Percy cowers fifty feet up the ladder. Her eardrums ache, her legs crumple inward. She clings to one rung and, even over the drum of rain on metal, hears herself, pathetic, whimpering. To be in the tower when lightning hits is one thing, to be part way up the ladder is quite another. She looks up, looks down, remembers that she could be zapped at the bottom, one foot on, one off, and scrambles for the top. Within seconds, faster than she has ever moved, she pushes through the trap door and collapses on the floor.

When she has recovered her strength, she stands and hastily removes her clothing, dropping everything in a soggy heap. From a shelf above one window, she pulls a light flannel blanket and cocoons herself within its corners. The heavy drumming of continuous rain on the roof drowns all other sounds, and grey sheets of water slide into the windows, driving fast-flowing rivulets through puttied seams, down into puddles on the floor. Above the puddles, Percy shivers and cries, impatient with these relentless tears.

Then, as suddenly as the drop in temperature, she recalls Marlea sitting on the floor in the hall, big wet tears sliding down her face. Percy bends over her, asks what,

what, are you all right? Fear sits heavy in her stomach, weighs her down while her head goes light from not breathing. She gasps for air, and it's Marlea's turn to console. Here, here, breathe into the bag, breathe in, breathe in. Percy sucks the bag in and out while Marlea explains about the faulty plug on the dryer, how the jolt of 220 has made her cry. I'm not hurt, she says, I'm just crying.

The lanyard, the scare on the ladder. Now Percy understands, gives in to the relief of tears, lowers her chin to her chest and howls. Lets her mouth hang open and howls. For the first time, she feels a loss that is not the loss of Marlea so much as it is the loss of her hopes and dreams.

In Percy's opinion she and Marlea were once so inseparable that even their dreams had been shared. At least it seemed so when they woke to hold each other and whisper awful fears or to laugh about the oddly outrageous inhabitants of their nightly encounters.

Once, after they had visited Marlea's grandparents, they returned to Percy's apartment to dream that they were in a plane crash. None of the survivors had teeth and everyone fought over little Hershey chocolate bars Marlea's grandmother kept in a dish on the coffee table.

That's my dream, Marlea says, when Percy recounts hers. I must have told you in the middle of the night.

You never told me anything, Percy says. She lies silent a moment. Sometimes when I hold you, I know what you're thinking, she says. Now I get to share your dreams

as well.

I like that, Marlea says, and Percy knows that she does.

Just as quickly as it started, the rain slows and ceases altogether. The sun beats on the windows, and as the temperature rises, the windows fog, the air becomes unbearably close. Howls no longer make sense in the quiet heat, and Percy pokes her feet and hands out of the blanket, rearranges the fabric so it hangs like a toga. She opens each of the cupola windows and, piece by piece, she wrings out her wet clothing. Finally she abandons the blanket altogether to stand naked in the sun.

Six-four-nine this is six-six-eight.

Percy taps her pencil on the firefinder and stares out the window. All day she has been trying not to call Gilmore. Now it is ten o'clock at night and she can't stop herself any longer. She rubs sweat from her forehead with the T-shirt she abandoned earlier in the day, swipes under one bare breast as well, then calls again.

Six-four-nine, this is six-six-eight.

Six-six-eight this is six-four-nine. Are you hot enough?

Now that he's answered, Percy has nothing to say. Her hands shake. *No kidding. Are you still in the tower?*

You mean we get to go down sometime?

Percy laughs, then remembers to key the mike so he can hear her laughter. *I think it's OK to sneak down after dark, over.*

Gee, I'm glad you told me. I've been up for two weeks without a break, over.

I hear you. It's the same thing here. She pauses and takes a deep breath. I haven't seen it like this for years. I've been up from nine in the morning to eleven at night every day this week.

Me too. My DMC'S at 60, over.

Sixty! I thought fifty was unheard of! Holy smokes. Things should start spontaneously combusting over there.

Pretty soon.

Percy recognizes this tone. She's been around long enough to know that when you want to keep a conversation going on a radio, you don't just answer, you ask questions in return, keep up your end of the bargain. She falters. *Yeah. OK. Well...maybe we'll get some lightning and it'll be worth it.*

I thought you had your share, over.

The lightning machine only showed a couple of strikes, the one direct hit and another close by.

There you go.

Percy sighs. *OK. Well. I guess I won't hold you up. I was just going a little crazy over here.* She waits for a reply, then adds, *I sent you an e-mail, by the way.*

I got it. Thanks.

She has had a whole week to convince herself that his silence was the result of a botched message, a week to talk herself into calling him on the radio, just in case. She takes a deep breath.

I won't keep you then. She knows she's not hiding her emotion well, that she sounds stiff, shaken, even. *Have a good night. Six-six-eight clear.*

Night, Percy. Six-four-nine.

Yet another hornet flies into the tower. Percy grabs the can of *Raid* and follows two inches behind the hornet, spraying a steady fog of insecticide. Die, you little fucker, she says. Die.

When the hornet finally falls to the floor, Percy leans her forehead against a window brace and the landscape dissolves into a blur of green and fading blue.

She rocks back and forth, crying into her hands. I like men, she says. Dumb fuckers. I've always liked men, but they just don't get it.

I know, Marlea says. They don't have to.

But women turn me on just as much, Percy says. Except...I only want you. We've always been together. Percy lifts her head. Andrew's picture sits beside her own on Marlea's shelf.

Oh, Percy. I don't know why everything has to be so complicated, but you shouldn't be so hard on yourself....

Percy takes another tissue, and dries her face. Do you remember when I found those papers...that devil child stuff?

Do you still think about that?

I've tried to ask Mom about it, but she won't say anything, just closes her mouth and pretends she can't hear a damn thing.

Sometimes parents don't have the answers, even if we think they should.

Yeah, but—

Marlea interrupts her with a heavy sigh. But what if she did? What kind of answer would please you thirty-two years after the fact?

Percy shakes her head. I don't know. But wouldn't you want to know why there were all these stories about you? Kids saying I was the devil—

So what?

What do you mean? Percy pulls away. Do you think I shouldn't have cared?

I just think you're never going to get the answer you want. Never; that's all.

Date: 7 Jul 1996 08:45:23
From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>
To: pturner@direct.ca
Subject: missing you

Dear Percy,

That sprinkle of rain last night washed some of the dust off my brain, and today I want to apologize. I am aware of how long it has been since I've responded to your messages, and that this has confused you. I wanted to send you a note after you called on the radio; I wanted to explain, but I wasn't ready. Can you understand that?

Date: 8 Jul 1996 21:25:34
From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>
To: gills@agt.net
Subject: explanations

Dear Gilmore,

Yes, I understand. When you want to communicate, you will. When you don't, you won't. Turn off the radio, shut down the computer, ignore all calls. That seems simple enough.

Percy

Date: 9 Jul 1996 17:50:18
From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>
To: pturner@direct.ca
Subject: OUCH!

Percy, I'm sorry I hurt you. You're not the only one who experiences mood swings out here; I hope you will try to understand.

When you mentioned making me up by yourself, I identified with that. I was making you up, turning this e-mail into an us that didn't exist. At first, I was ecstatic; here we are, locked away from everybody, and still we can feel all... this. Then the excitement caved in on itself. I went through our e-mails and realized how much I had embellished everything. It scared me—not because of the closeness we've managed, but because I was so attached to someone I'd never met. I needed to withdraw and think things through.

But I've done that now, and I know that however this works out, I want to continue getting to know you, over e-mail and the telephone, and then in person when we get out of here. I recognize that Windsor and Calgary are not neighboring cities, but I've been thinking—as a consultant, I'm not tied to one place. How would you feel about me spending some time in Calgary in the fall?

Date: 10 Jul 1996 10:12:56

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: gills@agt.net

Subject: the rain

Dear Gil,

I'd be nervous as hell. Please. Let's not go there. I admit, I was headed that route myself, a few weeks ago, but I've had time to think. Your break in our communications helped me to see that I'm not ready to rush headlong into anything. I mentioned that I was on my way out of a long-term relationship. That's enough for me to deal with at the moment. More than enough.

So, if you don't mind, I'd like to back up a bit. Talk about the rain. The fucking relief of rain after 3 weeks of 15 hour days in the tower. Whatdaya say?

Percy and Marlea have agreed to keep their friendship simple. They will be roommates, nothing more. They sit topless on a secluded bar of sand along the edge of the

Crooked River. Percy supports Marlea between her legs, arms loose around her, the heat of Marlea's breasts on her wrists. Her chin rests atop Marlea's head, and she breathes in the fruity scent of shampoo.

I wish *we* could get married, she says. What do you think everyone would say about that?

Percy! I thought we agreed.

That doesn't change how I feel. If we can't get married, I'll never marry anybody. It's not fair that only some people can. Our parents would flip.

Mine wouldn't. They already know.

They don't admit it, then. As far as they're concerned, we're still playing house. She digs her toes into the sand. Since I can't *marry* you, nobody worries. No matter what they know, we're still playing.

Marlea dribbles a handful of sand over Percy's knee. So? Who cares what everyone else thinks?

Percy wriggles backward. She pushes on Marlea's back. Move, she says. Turn around. She waits until Marlea faces her. I care, she says. I don't like being introduced as your *friend*, even if that's all we're going to be, and I don't like it that people keep trying to set me up. Worse, is when they try to set you up.

Marlea plays in the spaces between Percy's fingers, smiles lazily, flirtatiously. We confuse them, she says, looking amused, looking so much more relaxed than Percy. I

dated Bobby for two years. You dated half the boys in Oldrock. For everyone else, the situation is simple: We haven't met the right men yet.

Percy kisses Marlea on the mouth. I'm afraid you will.

Marlea only laughs. In Oldrock? You've got to be kidding?

Date: 18 Jul 1996 22:06:31

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: the bear truth

Dear Percy,

I got quite a start this morning—opened my door on a black bear, not even ten feet away, right at the bottom of my tower. Scared the hell out of me. I banged on pots and yelled and hoo hooed at it, but it didn't care. Just batted around a jerry can full of gas, bit it and whacked at it, drank the gas, I think, then ran off into the bush. Right when I was finally going to mow my lawn, too. Now I'm out of gas.

Date: 19 Jul 1996 10:36:19

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: high as a kite

I know I said I would, but I can't keep talking about the weather.

When we talked on the phone last night, I was in a state of thrill. I'm now smiling so wide the bumps on the back of my head hurt, and my ears ache. For whatever this means in the context of where we are, I know I feel love for you.

I also want to say that I'm glad you told me about Marlea, that you trust me enough. I think I understand, but I can't deny my feelings. They're real, Percy, as real as any I've had.

Date: 25 Jul 1996 23:46:23

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: something missing

Dearest Percy,

I'm interested in what you told me about your bisexuality. It is such a place of ambiguity. I tried to speak of that when I told you of my need for solitude, of how I try to balance that with my need for closeness, that one doesn't preclude the other. Is that how you feel? I'm not sure it's the same, but I want to understand. I feel closer to you in 2 months than I've felt to anyone, including my wives. I know we've never set eyes on each other, but I don't care about that. It's you, your voice on the phone, the way we laugh, the things you say to me...

Marlea pulls Percy's T-shirt over her head. The neck catches in Percy's hair, so the T-shirt stays put, a hair-band, a head-piece cascading down her back while Percy fumbles with the buttons of Marlea's shirt. She gets three or four undone, then rolls the shirt past Marlea's shoulders, leads Marlea toward the bedroom.

With the covers back, they lie facing each other. Percy's hand follows the contours of Marlea's side—under her arm, across the plain. The long valley of waist and back up sloping hip. She pulls Marlea closer, kisses her passionately, then breaks off to laugh out loud. Do you remember the time we sent six pizzas to the Millers?

Jesus, says Marlea, what made you think of that?

I'm starving, Percy says. She pulls Marlea closer. But I can wait.

Later, Percy catches her reflection in the full-length mirror. She smiles, then goes back to bed, cuddles up to Marlea and runs her palm over Marlea's stomach, flat as when she was twenty. Why is it, she says, that when I'm with you, I love my body, while the rest of the time, I feel fat and droopy?

Marlea smiles. Maybe I love your body enough for both of us, she says.

Date: 29 Jul 02:35:02

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: dreaming with my eyes open

All I can think about is the day we get out of here, when I first get to put my arms around you and tell you, in person, that I love you. I thought we could meet at the forestry office, but with all those prying eyes, I think somewhere more private would be better. I'd like to stay overnight—in separate rooms, of course—and I'd like to take you for a long, relaxed dinner somewhere nice. What do you say?

The day is warm, at 19 degrees Celsius perhaps a bit cool for the middle of August, but Percy sweats inside a mosquito jacket, long sleeved to save her arms from horseflies that would otherwise nip chunks from unprotected limbs. The jacket is made from bunched mosquito netting and covers her from knees to the top of her head,

including a loose hood that fits over her hat and protects her face. She looks like the Michelin man in khaki green.

Because of the recent rain, she is spared long hours in the tower, is required only to climb at intervals for periodic checks. Instead, she scrapes at thick scabs of old paint, swears at the person who didn't do this properly last time but only painted over, spruced up, didn't care enough to prepare carefully.

Damn, she says. Damn, damn, damn, each curse accompanied by a whack on the windowsill. What she whacks is a wire brush with a scraper attached to the end, practically useless against the thick layers of baked-on paint. She's ready to give up, paint over, herself, but that would be defeat. An edge sticks out, a piece of old paint separating from the wood, something she can slip under, so she jams the scraper against it one more time. The paint chips off, a piece the size of a quarter. She hurls the scraper to the ground, watches it bounce on stiff bristles, then gives in to the rage that has been building for days. She jumps down and kicks the brush farther, off into the long grass where she'll never find it.

I hate her, she thinks. I'll screen all my calls and never speak to her again. Not even if Andrew dumps her and she comes *begging* back. I won't answer the door, either. I won't see anyone. I'll stay home and carve and nobody will even know I'm back. It'll be just like here, only with running water. And radio reception, and take-out.

She lifts a gallon of paint out of its box, and the wide straight brush. A whisky jack hops to a higher branch, black flies and mosquitoes buzz, nothing fazes them. The lid

isn't difficult to pry off, it lifts easily, then swivels across her wrist, leaves a streak of oil-based green.

Fuck. She rubs her wrist on her hip, then remembers: *Too Perfect*. Too fucking perfect, everything just so, always neat and tidy, ordered and neurotic. No wonder Marlea's with Andrew. She dips the brush and pulls it along the front of her mosquito jacket, sucks in her breath, feels a rush of adrenaline as if she's just defaced public property, then dabs the toe of each shoe, smears those against the back of each pant leg and paints the toes again. It's my mess, and I'll make it if I want to, she says. She stares at the whisky jack, dares it to make a peep, then dips the brush again, this time running the bristles along the window frame—smooth, quick strokes over old paint, double strokes over bare wood. Not defeat, but a change of heart. The edging, close to the screen, she leaves altogether. If it starts to rot, she'll change towers, go somewhere where the person painted properly, to hell with it. Small black flies land on the paint, get stuck; she paints over them, immortalizes them in forest green.

She brushes more quickly, now, inaccurately. The old paint splotches on the siding have always bothered her. One year she tried scraping them off, to no avail; she only succeeded in adding scratch marks. Today she sees them and understands why someone would not take the time to wipe up their blunders, would not even see them as blunders, as just another part of the process, like opening the can and stirring, or not. Just another day too far into summer to care about a little extra paint on the wall.

In an hour, Percy finishes the trim on all five windows and around the door. She drags the ladder to the outhouse and in another hour finishes the top edges and the entire

door, frame and all. She dumps gasoline into an old coffee can and swishes the brush, bends the bristles back and forth on the bottom, then brushes green gasoline on the wooden step until the brush dries.

The radio beeps. The forecast. Percy sits on the step to listen.

All stations, this is four-five with the PM forecast issued Thursday, August 15th, 1996. Heavy rain continues in the east slopes and northern parks this afternoon, with the precipitation diminishing late tonight, but expected to linger in the Southeast Slopes and parks Friday as upslope conditions persist. Some clearing in the Northwest Boreal region but afternoon thundershowers and rain showers likely in most boreal zones on Friday. Cool and unsettled weather continuing on Saturday.

Moisture continues to stream into the east slopes this afternoon, producing some precipitation amounts of over 25 millimetres since this morning. The heavier rainfall will persist into the evening in the southern forecast zones. The boreal zones should see some clearing, spreading from the west to east overnight—the air mass will be humid and unstable Friday, so scattered rain showers and thundershowers can be expected to develop during the afternoon. Cloud, patches of light rain, and showers will affect the east slopes and the parks most of Friday—upsloping east winds will be maintained by a surface ridge building into northern Alberta. The pressure gradient over the province will be much weaker Friday as the deep low responsible for this major downtrend moves out of the picture.

Generally light winds are forecast for the weekend with southeast winds developing in most zones Saturday. Temperatures will slowly trend higher over the next

few days, but will generally remain below normal as an upper trough lingers over the province.

Forecast of temperature, RH, and wind for Friday afternoon and precipitation next 24 hours:

For Fort Vermilion area max temp one-eight, RH five-five, precipitation coverage two-zero percent with light rain showers, lightning Thursday low, lightning Friday moderate, trend down, large fire potential low, wind Friday northwest one-zero.

Red Earth max temp one-eight, RH six-zero, precipitation coverage sixty percent with light rain showers, lightning Thursday low, lightning Friday moderate, trend down, large fire potential low, wind Friday northwest one-zero.

Grande Prairie region max temp one-five, RH seven-zero, one hundred percent with moderate rain and rain showers, lightning Thursday low, lightning Friday moderate, trend down, fire potential low, wind Friday East one-five.

Outlook for Saturday: temperatures increasing to high teens. Continuing humid all zones with east-southeast winds of 10 to 15 kilometres per hour. Showers and cloud persisting east slopes and parks, and widely scattered afternoon thundershowers and rain showers in most boreal zones.

Outlook for Sunday: Slightly warmer with temperatures in the low 20 degree range. Southeast winds 10 to 15 kilometres per hour in most zones. Unstable and humid with scattered afternoon rain showers and thundershowers most zones, including Southeast Slopes and parks. Signature Nimchuk.

Percy likes how the radio operator signs off with Nimchuk's signature. Every day, morning and afternoon, she intones his name in the same way: her voice rises on *signature*, then after a pause, she lowers it for *Nimchuk. Signature...Nimchuk*. Very official. She unzips the hood of her jacket, leaves the unopened bucket of white paint on the step and goes inside for her gloves.

The climb up the tower is long and slow. A month ago, she would have timed herself to see how fast she could race up the ladder; now she climbs fifty feet and rests, continues on to the top and drags herself through the door. She calculates the number of times she's climbed this year. Four months, 30 days a month. Four times 30, 120; five times a day. 600. Six hundred times, at least, she's climbed this ladder and still she's ready to drop by the time she emerges into the cupola.

With the windows closed, it must be 40 degrees. She immediately lowers one of the eight panes of glass. Sweat pours off her body. She hates this job. No sane person sits in the middle of the forest for nearly half the year, climbs a fucking endless ladder even more endless times. She'll quit next year. Get a real job. Who needs this thankless, lousy waste of time? Not her. Somebody else can have it, and good riddance, too. Binoculars to eyes. Around the horizon, 360 degrees, then more slowly, zigzagging back and forth across each section of forest, the glimmer of a small lake here and there, nothing else but tree tops and clouds as far as she can see. The light, white clouds of midday have been replaced by heavier towering cumulous and she has a perverse desire to see them turn black, shoot dry sparks, ignite a fire or two. She wishes lightning would strike right beside the tower, that the whole forest would go up in flames. Maybe thrill seekers are just

people who've spent too much time alone, she thinks, who need to balance tranquillity with terror before they go out of their minds with boredom. For fifteen minutes she watches. Nothing. Except for that one false alarm, she's had nothing all season. *A Dry White Season*. Now she's thinking in book titles.

Percy lowers another window and stares off into the distance. She takes a deep breath and opens her mouth. At first the scream is low pitched, long and drawn out, merely a release. She takes another deep breath, fills her diaphragm to bursting, and tries again, this one higher and more urgent—the kind she tries to make in her dreams, when nothing comes out but a tiny whimper, the kind she's always wondered if she could produce. She sucks more air and screams again, as loud, as long as possible until her throat scrapes and hurts, then she closes the window, rests her forehead on the firefinder and stares at the floor.

The floor of the cupola is littered with dead flies, pieces of dried grass carried up on her shoes. She lifts the trapdoor and sweeps. Dust, dirt, flies, map pins—all of it out the trapdoor. Done. She closes the other window and backs down the ladder, one rung at a time. Bang rattle, the metal plays a familiar tune. 98, 99, 100. Her shiny-green toe touches the ground.

Date: 15 Aug 1996 16:10:21

From: Percy Turner <pturner@direct.ca>

To: mardunn@agt.net

Subject: hi

Dear Marlea,

Hi. I know that by now you must have given up on hearing back from me, but I've been trying to let go. Every time I think I've reconciled myself to the end of an "us," I get angry all over again. I can't say why because that part of the analysis eludes me. I get angry about everything. About nothing. Sometimes I even feel all right. I'm in "all right" mode at the moment.

Even so, sometimes I think that our relationship was not about love so much as it was about resolving problems. Don't think I'm negating our feelings; I'm not, I'm only saying that our whole relationship seemed to revolve around one problem or another—Andrew, bisexuality, parents, secrets. Other times, it all seems so simple: All I need is to stop finding fault with you and live my life as I really want to play it out. Maybe this is the year that I will. If you want to write back, I'm here for another two weeks. And only two weeks, thank christ.

Love, Percy

Date: 20 Aug 1996 20:32:24

From: Gilmore A. Graham <gills@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: soon

Dear Percy,

Only ten days left! Normally, I regret the end of summer, the closing of a tower, the return to "civilization." This year I'm wishing time away. Already I have packed most of my clothes, my computer books, all the odds and ends I can live without. I've seen our first meeting a thousand times in my mind. I'm waiting in the restaurant. You drive up. I rush outside to meet you, smile nervously; you look at me quizzically, oddly...you have spinach in your teeth, you say...

Will this summer never end?

Percy scrutinizes the cabin, unsure of where to begin the chore of packing. Caught, still, between the earlier satisfaction of aloneness and a burning desire to return to Calgary, she has been unable to remove anything except books finished over the summer, week by week tucked into a crate while the number left to read diminished. Each tiny object—a garlic braid hanging from the cupboard, postcards thumb-tacked to walls—has helped to stave off loneliness, has made her isolation less complete, almost bearable over four-and-a-half months. At a loss, now that she faces the necessity of immediate dismantling, she goes to the storage shed for boxes.

Piled one inside the other are cardboard cartons she brought from Calgary, others that arrived filled with groceries, boxes all sizes, dusty and home to whatever creature has needed them. She pulls a heavy apple box from the pile and removes the top. A furry brown spider sits motionless inside. She turns the carton upside down and bangs until the spider drops to the floor and scurries under a stack of boards. Involuntarily, she shudders.

On a camping trip with Marlea, she opens her eyes to see a bloated, hard-shelled spider swinging from the tent pole above her head. As her eyes focus, the spider drops toward her, rappelling three inches closer than before, close enough that she sees its buggy black eyes directly above her nose.

Whitewater rafting is new to them both, a break from the city, time for just the two of them—for Percy, something Marlea has never experienced with Andrew. The vinyl boat holds four others, plus a guide, and is motorized so they don't paddle, only hold on, as the entire vessel buckles and heaves. At every rapids the boat smashes into and then

climbs over each white barrier. Cold water drenches their scorched skin and, hysterical with the excitement of crashing into solid waves, she and Marlea scream and cling to yellow ropes strung through loops along each side of the boat. Only when the bucking gentles into smooth dives do they clasp cold hands and glide, awed by rock walls stretching 200 feet high on either side of the narrow river.

At night, inside the tiny nylon tent, they curl into each other and get giddy all over again.

Is something biting you? Marlea asks.

Are you kidding? A horde of somethings are fighting each other to strip me clean.

I know. We'll be nothing but shining bones in the morning.

That's how the tour keeps expenses down, Percy says. Give the tourists a ride they'll never forget, then gather their bones in the morning. Saves the trouble of scrambling eggs for 12.

But the bones rattle all the way back, Marlea says.

Percy rolls on top of Marlea. A small inconvenience. They'll sell us in the gift shop where we signed up.

They pull the sleeping bag over their heads, laugh until not knowing what is funny seems funnier still.

In the morning, Marlea rises long before Percy, who wakes eye to eye with the spider. She screams and bats it away, hears it hit the side wall of the tent with a thud that would have done justice to a marble. Unable to leave the thing alive, she flips over and beats it with her boot until it cracks and oozes yolk-like onto the plastic floor.

From outside, Marlea pokes her head through the flap. What happened?

Percy points and shudders. It almost dropped on me.

A spider? She looks at Percy as if the splat were human. Couldn't you have caught it and let it go?

Percy's eyes, puffy from too little sleep, from laughing and lovemaking, narrow to slits. Fuck off, she says. Just fuck right off.

Now she kicks each box, thumps every one before carrying it back to the cabin. Blunt-nosed rodents, voles, escape before she gets to them, quick peripheral flicks in the corner of her eye. They have begun their migration under and into the shed, are already building loose nests of dry grass she will discover and sweep clear next spring. Then, from the tower, she will look down on vole cities and suburbs exposed by melting snow and will feel awed, as always, by hundreds of metres of routes and byways joining community with community as surely as primary and secondary highways connect rural municipalities with Calgary or Edmonton.

At the moment, however, she cares less about order than about being finished. She fills boxes with whatever fits the space. Her remaining groceries, a few cans of tomatoes and chickpeas, jars of spices, packages of pasta, line the bottom of a box. On top she throws rope, clothespins, socks—then a bag of onions almost forgotten in a cupboard. So long as everything gets home, she'll find what she needs when she opens the boxes. Newer jeans and a soft cotton shirt, her "town" clothes, hang alone in the closet, ready for

morning. Everything else she stuffs into one large suitcase and wheels to the door. By eight-thirty, six boxes, her suitcase, and an assortment of soft bags are ready. The cabin stands bare and exposed, stripped of character until spring.

She climbs the tower, disconnects radio and speakers, gathers together binoculars and scope, lip balm from the drawer, a few books from a shelf above, packs all of it into her knapsack. From below the firefinder she pulls an armful of white canvas, the two giant hoods she rolled and stuffed there on her first trip up the tower in the spring. She shakes them out, smooths away wrinkles, then tosses them to the floor until, grunting, straining, she lifts the heavy iron firefinder and moves it from the base onto a stool. She slides the largest hood over the wooden base and pulls the canvas, like a stiff skirt, to the floor, then sets the firefinder, even heavier on the up movement, atop the skirt. This piece she covers with the smaller hood, tying the two round with twine so that the total effect is that of a matronly dress dummy bundled for winter. All set. She straps the pack to her stomach so that the bulk won't catch on the way down and string her up by her arms, a prisoner until set free by the next passerby. As she begins her descent, she pulls the hatch door behind her, its weight pressing on her head for one, two, three steps, until the door fits into frame and the pressure is off. One more rung, and she reaches up, hooks the padlock for the last time.

On the ground, she makes use of what little light remains. Balancing on a shaky stool, she unscrews the bottom half of the down-spout on the eavestrough, removes this length from the water barrel and sets it aside. In this way, she frees and drains both barrels and checks each one for rust. No rust, but summer buildup—dead bugs, an inch or more

of mud and asbestos from the roof, even more green slime. She's relieved. No dead mice this year. With water she has saved in a bucket, she sloshes inside each barrel. To reach the bottom, she uses an old mop, swishes the sides clean, then dumps the barrel again and rolls it over to the shed, where she bear-hugs it, a bit at a time, into its winter position inside.

Percy flips the lawnmower upside-down. Normally she cleans the underside with a wire brush, but since hers lies somewhere in the long grass, where she kicked it, she uses a handful of dead twigs, scrubs until they break, then repeats with another handful, and another, until the bottom is clean. With soap and water, she makes the outer casing new, then proceeds to the tools. Each moving part must be oiled, along with the blades of the saws, the shovel head, the hoe, the rake.

When she has finished, she returns to the cabin, where only the computer remains unpacked. Percy dials her server, logs on, and checks for e-mail. She has two new messages. She reads Gilmore's message quickly. As planned, they will meet tomorrow. She deletes his and focuses on Marlea's.

Date: 27 Aug 1996 15:18:12

From: Marlea Dunn <mardunn@agt.net>

To: pturner@direct.ca

Subject: new arrangements

Dear Percy,

You're right: I had given up on hearing from you. I thought I would have to wait until you got back to Calgary to ask you this, but maybe there's still time. I, too, have spent the summer thinking about us, perhaps more optimistically than you, and I want to make a proposition.

Do you remember how you once said you might be able to deal with our situation better if it were more equitable? I.e. if we all lived together, instead of just me and Andrew? If we built a place where we could each have our own little studio apartment—say a bed, bath, office—but still shared the main part of the house?

At the time, I thought the idea was crazy, but I've been thinking a lot lately...and talking to Andrew, who has agreed, if you will. Would you still consider an arrangement like that?

Say yes.

Love, Marlea.

Percy hunches over her keyboard, composing once again. In the nearly empty radio room, eyes glued to the screen, she taps out a few words, reads, rereads. Deletes. She expected the words to come easily. In fact, she labours over each one.

August 31, she keys into the upper left corner of her screen. Then *Dear Marlea*.

Percy smiles. Even the name, softly like this, in her head, stirs a movement inside that can only be expressed through the body, not explained, not written, only felt. No matter how often she rolls these words past her tongue, they will always contain a secret—not the messy, fearful kind she sometimes lives, but a smile-bearing secret, one just barely noticed, the enviable, “what are you thinking” kind of smile that lovers sometimes question.

It's ironic that you ask me to live with you now. Even two weeks ago, I might have said yes, but too much has changed. This year, things are different, and I can't compromise.

You're family, the best lover I ever had, my best friend; but I know, finally, that I'm no longer willing to share.

Over the summer, I've given much thought to what I'm looking for in a partner, and it turns out I'm as conservative as anyone: male or female, I want security. I want forever. I want to be with someone who can commit to me.

Marlea, I love you; I feel that we'll always be linked, but I know now that I've been wrong to insist that you choose between Andrew and me. I know you can't choose, and as much as that hurts, I'm finally able to accept that even in this yes and no, black and white world, not all decisions are possible. Sometimes there's only the ambiguity of the moment.

Please don't hate me. I'll call the minute I get settled at home.

Love, Percy

In the morning, Percy awakes before the alarm rings, springs from bed and looks first out the window. Her worst fear is fog, but there is nothing to delay the helicopter, just clear, safe skies. She stuffs her sheets and comforter, her pillows, into a heavy black garbage bag, then turns the mattress on its side—no cozy home for mice between box spring and mattress if she can help it—then fills the kettle with water and lights the burner under it. Still in the ragged old clothes of the evening before, she eats a bowl of cereal already on the counter, dumps the remaining milk outside and tosses the carton in the burn barrel for later.

Even on her last day, the morning weather must be reported, so she hurries, jots quickly, checks the trees to estimate wind speed. Seven kilometres from the east, maybe. She doesn't care, only wants to get her part over with, store the few remaining items—the thermometers and rain gauge—and forget about the weather for the rest of the year.

When Gilmore's voice comes through the speakers, her pulse jumps, but she does not rest her fingertips on the radio speaker—in only a few hours they will meet. His voice is familiar to her now, elicits a warm, secure feeling that has grown over the summer in

proportion to the tidbits of his life that she has stockpiled in memory, both hers and her computer's, making him someone she knows and cares for, no longer a stranger. She knows the texture of the hair on his chest, that he will get shivers if she touches the small of his back, but she knows these details guarantee nothing.

A large stack of printed e-mail is ready for the burn barrel, a revealing catalogue of details no one but he must know she has read. Thousands, millions, of words have passed between them, surprisingly fast by e-mail, soft and seductive over the cell phone. From these details, she knows what to say when she sees him for the first time. From experience, from meeting other tower people, she also knows that nothing, not even those first words, will exist as she has imagined. Their carefully planned greetings will escape them, or fall flat; neither he nor she will look anything like the other has imagined, and their mannerisms, their idiosyncracies, now visible, instead of fondly and blindly accepted, may cause them to recoil. Only their voices will remain unaltered.

After weather, she feels free, and unlike most mornings, refreshed. She showers, slips into the clothes specially set aside for today, then boards the windows on the cabin and shed. She closes the propane valves and lets the burners on the stove extinguish by themselves while she turns the refrigerator and furnace knobs to off.

Now she collects the final bits of garbage from inside the cabin and shed, including the old clothes of last night and this morning. All of them—the old T-shirt cut short and sleeveless, a V snipped into the once-round neck; baggy slacks torn and stained; underwear; socks; smelly, grass-stained running shoes—all of these, she douses in gasoline and tosses into the garbage barrel. She reads through a couple of the e-mail messages

from Gilmore, pauses for a minute, tempted to keep them, especially the ones she knows she has deleted from her computer, then tosses the bundle on top of the clothes. Except for these items, the barrel is empty, the previous contents dumped and buried.

Percy stands back and tosses in a match. A great whoof of sound engulfs the barrel. Licks of fire reach through air holes, and a runner escapes through a crack near the bottom of the barrel. Must be time for a new one. She'll remember to ask. She stomps on the flame; her leather boot extinguishes it easily. Flames are like that, she thinks—extinguishable. No harm done, any number of them, unless the fire takes hold, burns into the ground, smolders and seethes for months, sometimes years. Now that'd be a fire.

It is early afternoon and Percy is free at last from the obligations of Envy River Tower. In the hour since she was deposited into the field behind the ranger station, she has signed off on the paper work and loaded her car. Now she sits inside the vehicle in near dark. She cranks the rear view mirror until she can see her reflection. She is free to leave, and her face is grey with tension. With an impatient twist of the wiper switch, sunlight edges in and a summer's worth of dust slides back and forth across the windshield. She brushes enough silt from the rear and side windows that she can see through them, then backs out of the compound and drives downtown, negotiating each of two four-way stops cautiously, fearfully.

Every spring, when she arrives, the town is inconsequential, a few stores, a few cars, a blink and it's gone. Now, the same set of streets, a similar set of cars, causes her

palms to sweat, her leg to shake on the gas pedal. She waits too long at the flashing red light before turning left, and the honk of an impatient driver causes her to release the clutch too quickly. She jerks and lurches through the intersection. Swearing, she foregoes her intended car wash and drives directly to the Aurora Motor Inn.

Smoking or non-smoking, the desk clerk asks.

Percy stares. She has heard and comprehended but somehow the answer spins just beyond her tongue.

The clerk waits. Non-smoking? he asks.

Percy nods, then sighs with the relief of a response, any response, and feels as if she has just said something clever. Please, she manages, and smiles.

She wants, also, to ask if a Mr. Gilmore Graham has registered, but she signs her name, accepts the key, and then, while she silently formulates the question, prepares to push it past her lips, the clerk turns away. Without speaking, she retires to the safety of her room.

By the next afternoon, Percy has adjusted to the constant sound and motion of social activity. She drives confidently and stops, as every year, to visit her parents. They are in their sixties now, the same as she remembers, yet different. Slower to slide the chair out at the table, quieter while they eat, content to let her fill in the spaces while they nod and chew in silence. Yet, after pie, after ginger ale, her father goes back to the television

and her mother stays at the table, lights another cigarette, and looks off into the corner of the ceiling the way she has ever since Percy can remember.

Did you meet anyone? Margaret asks.

Did I meet anyone? Percy shakes her head. I always meet people.

You know what I mean.

No, I didn't *meet anyone*. I'm thinking that it's kind of nice to be by myself, actually. Percy pauses. Unsure how to change the subject, how to phrase her question in a non-threatening way, she finally just blurts the words into the kitchen. Did you want me? she asks.

Margaret sits straighter. Did I want you? She draws on her cigarette, then squints at Percy. Of course I did. What a question.

Then I need to know. About what happened when I was born, I mean. All the times I've asked, all you've ever said is that *sometimes things happen*, or that *the Lord moves in mysterious ways*. That's not good enough anymore. She moves her face in front of her mother's. Look at me. I'm a middle-aged woman; I want to know what happened when I was a baby.

Margaret bites her lip, stubs the cigarette into the ashtray. Don't start on me again—

Mom—I *need* to know. Percy's eyes fill with tears.

Margaret reaches for Percy's pie plate, stacks it on her own, along with her husband's—the good china stacked three deep—and stands. Her eyes avoid Percy's.

Can't we leave that behind us? The words are barely audible, more a plea to some kitchen god than a question directed at Percy.

Percy watches her mother's eyes, yellowed whites watery now, like Marlea's, and tired. She slaps the table. No, we can't. Goddammit! She pushes back from the table and takes the dishes away from her mother. Give me these, they can wait until later. She sets the stack of plates in the sink and turns back, not sitting, but standing over her mother under fluorescent bulbs that make the kitchen abnormally bright. Margaret's skin looks sallow, tinged with nicotine, lips vertically lined. Eyes, cheeks, mouth all droop lower under the weight of Percy's unwavering stare.

Maybe I shouldn't of done anything at all, Margaret says, finally. Just had you and got by like we did with Bobby. She motions impatiently toward a chair across the table. Sit down, she says. I'm not some kid you need to stand guard over.

I just did the best I could with what we had, that's all. She purses her lips, pulls them together in a look that says: this is none of your business, but Percy merely lowers herself into a chair and waits.

It's nothing like you think. There's no big story to tell. We were just the same as everybody else, too poor to be having babies when we could hardly feed ourselves. I hadn't meant to have you but once I knew you were coming there wasn't much to do, not like now, where you can just say you're not ready and get fixed any time you like—

If you're talking about abortions, maybe it should be like that, but they aren't that easy—

I wouldn't have done that anyway. I was hoping you'd be a girl. I always wanted a girl, but we could hardly feed Bobby, let alone another one, so I got thinking about Moses—

Moses in the Bible?

Of course Moses. I remembered how much better things were for him, being stuck in the bullrushes the way he was. And of course your dad said there was no way we were giving you away, which isn't what I meant at all. We had a big fight and that was all he'd hear about that.

Percy stares.

Her mother taps another cigarette on the table, then lights it. It's just that when I finally had you, that was a time, let me tell you. Fifteen hours and they still had to yank you out with big pliers.

Forceps.

Margaret shoots Percy a look. Of course forceps. D'you think I don't know anything?

Sorry, Percy says.

Yeah. Well then they gave me so many drugs I didn't know my own name let alone what I was saying; all different things came out. Things I'd thought, not what I meant—

About me being a child of the devil?

Margaret blows smoke at the ceiling. I don't know. People made a lot of things up—

Mom, I read about it. You stood on the side of the road with a sign that said Take This Child of the Devil!

The doctor said that was a breakdown.

Percy remembers the shiny paper on which she'd read the headline. Nowhere did it mention a breakdown. She sighs. How'd you get from Moses to the Devil?

Margaret leaves her chair, goes to the sink and begins running water, twisting the checkered cloth in the sink. I told you, I don't know. I don't remember. All's I know is that everything got outta hand. All I wanted was to make things better, get people seeing that it isn't easy trying to raise kids with no money and welfare making you beg for extra—even with your dad doing the best he could. It wasn't his fault. They make you feel like scum. Like you should be sick or dead before you need anything. And then everything just got all out of hand.

With the reporters, you mean?

There was reporters and welfare people and people trying to take you away and doctors saying I was crazy and other people giving me more drugs and people saying I should be in the hospital and others saying no I can't be. Even the free diapers and stuff weren't really free—

So people gave you things? Is that what you wanted?

Stores and other places. Big companies. Diapers. Formula, mostly. Some gift certificates. They all felt sorry for you—

Did you *want* to keep me?

Margaret jerks straight. Of course I wanted to keep you. All my life I wanted a girl. She doesn't look at Percy, just works the cloth with both hands, wrings it, folds it in half, then in half again. Finally she tosses it in the sink and puts her elbows on the counter, holds her head in her hands, dry, bony fingers in thin white hair.

Percy edges closer; drawn by the silent, shaking body, she cups her hand around a surprisingly frail shoulder and guides her mother back to a chair at the table. Never in her life has Percy put her arm around her mother. She pulls Margaret's hands from her face and holds them. I only want to understand, Mom, that's all. I don't want to hurt you.

When Percy loosens her grip, Margaret slides her hands free, pats Percy a few times, then fumbles in her sleeve until she finds a used tissue.

I know I don't tell you, she says. She looks away from Percy, down into her lap, as if she might find a script there. What I mean is...you're my daughter, and I love you. I

love both you kids. She stares at Percy, unhappy, defiant. It seems to Percy that her mother feels guilty, wants forgiveness without having to ask.

She hears Marlea's voice. *What kind of answer would please you after all these years?* Percy pushes her hair back, tries once more.

So you thought you'd put me in a basket and get me taken to the king. She pauses. Instead, you sold out to the devil, and all he did was make your life hell, is that it?

It wasn't that bad...

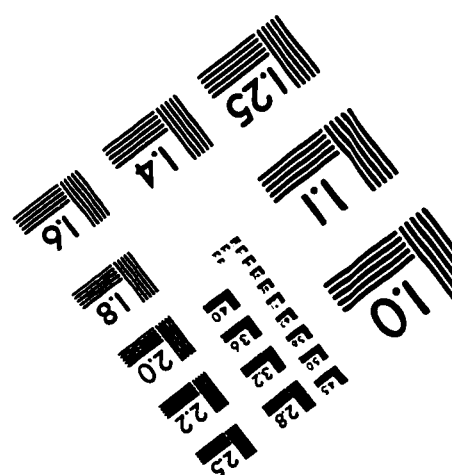
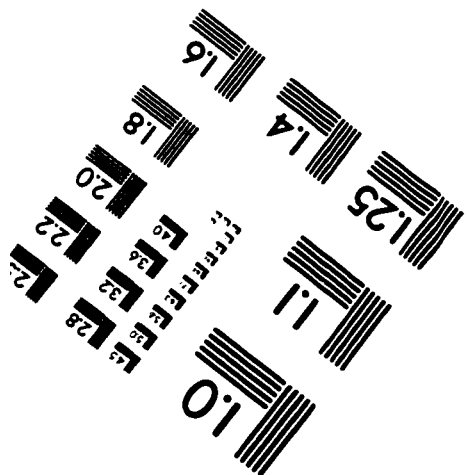
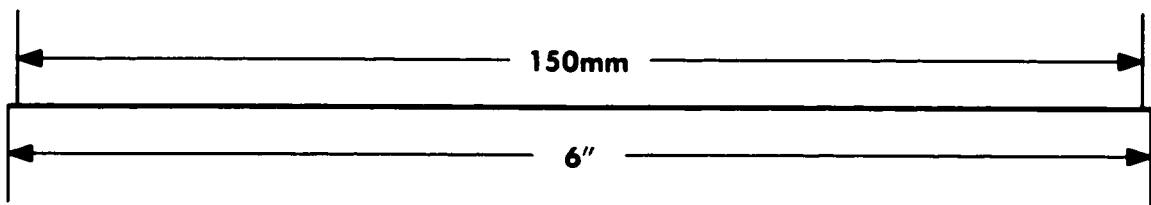
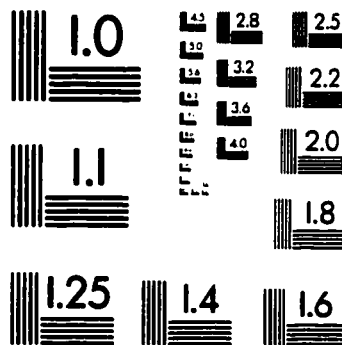
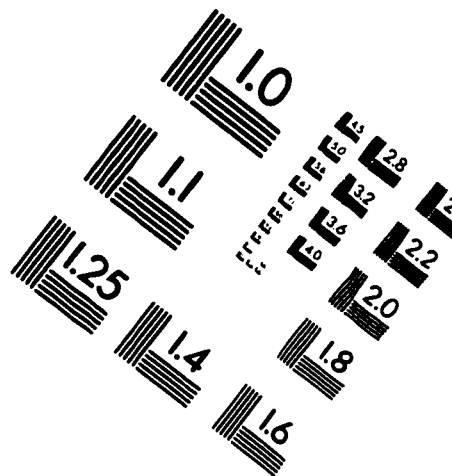
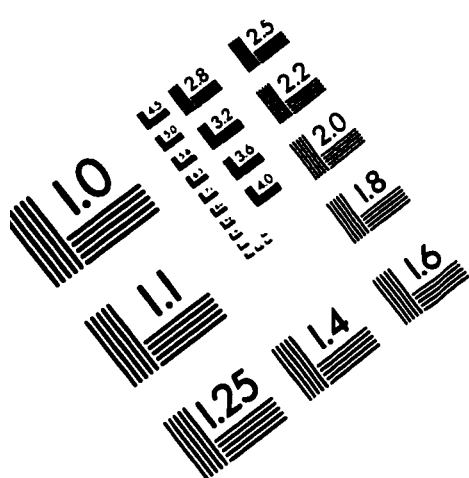
Percy waits; when nothing more is forthcoming, she pushes her chair away from the table, smiles, blinks tears from her eyes. Glad to hear it, she says, All in all, mine's not that bad either. Not bad at all.

Back on Highway 2, the sun glows like embers in the west. To the east, frayed clouds barely wet cropped fields; between the two, impressive cumulonimbus— anvils flat atop billowing mounds—discharge forks of lightning in the distance. Lightning PM, she thinks, thirty, forty kilometers off. She catches herself then, sets the radio to CBC 1010. The best of Gzowsky, with Sheila Rogers filling in. It's not the sky that matters now, but the pulse of the city gaining strength inside, a swift gestation which will make her, nevertheless, only an awkward urbanite, a coupler between city and small town.

In the advancing dusk, she hums to herself, repeats a childhood rhyme: *Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.* The fall equinox is

near; in her mind she already sees leaves break free—they know when to give in—swirl to the ground, crackle underfoot on riverside paths where she will soon walk, cold hands covering ears, coat gathered and bunched at the neck, until one morning when everywhere rich, lusty colour whites out, cool and simple until spring spreads the palimpsest of an erased landscape open yet again.

IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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