Half a kilometre ahead of us, I see a car's tail lights glowing at an odd angle. As we draw nearer, I understand why. The car has flipped over into the ditch and the roof is crushed in on the driver's side. Clothes lie scattered over the highway.

"Oh no!" Sonia exclaims in a horrified whisper.

Quickly, I pull over onto the shoulder and beam our headlights at the upturned car. The doors are flung wide open, the trunk is unhinged, and one of the rear tires spins impotently. Flames burn where the missing front axle should be.

"Someone's inside!" Sonia shouts.

An arm dangles lifelessly from the driver's side. I run to the overturned car and find a man jammed into the seat. Blood covers his face, the steering wheel pushes into his chest, the crushed roof bends his neck forward. Beside him, a woman hangs limply from her seatbelt like a broken marionette. Shattered glass is everywhere. I notice folk music: the car radio is still playing, the sound obscene in the nightmarish setting. Conscious of the flames, I manage to reach inside and turn off the ignition.

"*Monsieur!*" I shout and gently nudge the man's shoulder. He doesn't respond.

"*Madame! Madame!*" I yell at the woman next to him. A low moan emerges from her as I hurry to the passenger's side and crouch on one knee. Her eyelids flutter rapidly; only the whites of her eyes show. The front of her blouse is blood-stained. I struggle to undo her seatbelt, and broken glass digs into my knee. Then I remember: never move an injured person. I get up and rush back to our car to call an ambulance. Sonia is already hurrying towards me, cellphone in hand.

"…and about five kilometres from the route 241 turnoff," she is saying breathlessly into the phone.

"Two people!" I tell her. "Bleeding badly. And flames. What do we do?" I feel my own blood thumping violently in my temples.

Sonia relays the information into the phone, then hurries to the passenger side. I follow. The red stain on the woman's blouse is spreading alarmingly.

"See if the man has a pulse," Sonia instructs, motioning with her chin. With one hand she holds the phone to her ear; the other rests against the woman's neck. I run to the driver's side of the car.

"Well?" Sonia calls, seconds later.

"He has a pulse!" I yell.

"Is he breathing?" she hollers.

I get as close as I can to the man's mouth and try to listen. "I can't tell…."

"I smell gas!" Sonia screams suddenly.

I smell it too. Through the shattered rear window, I see a small puddle of something reflected in our headlights.

"Get them out!" Sonia yells.

"But they're injured," I protest. "We could make things worse."

"Emergency said, because of the flames, we have to get them out now!" Sonia sounds slightly hysterical.

She unclips the woman's seatbelt. The woman falls awkwardly, headfirst, onto the roof beneath her. I worry about her neck. Will she be paralyzed? As Sonia pulls her from the wreck, I struggle to free the man. His seatbelt comes undone, but the steering wheel still pins him to his seat. Anxiously, I glance at the growing puddle of gasoline.

"***Richard!***" Sonia screams. Her voice sounds far away.

My heart races. Are the flames getting more intense? Is the fire getting bigger? Spreading? Panic-stricken, I abandon my gentleness and yank harder at the man's arm. I still can't budge him. Desperate now, I look wildly around me and spot a knob on the side of the seat. I crank it and the seat moves back. My breath comes in hard gulps as I pull the driver from the wreck and drag him towards Sonia and the unconscious woman.

At last, safely away from the car and the flames, I lay the man on his back and check his breathing again. This time I hear him; he is making sick, gurgling sounds.

Beside me, Sonia, who is starting to hyperventilate, applies pressure to the woman's chest. The woman's blouse is now soaked with blood.

"Do you need help?" I ask, as I cast anxious glances at the wreck, where the flames are now a small fire.

"There's some glass in her chest. A big piece. Do I pull it out?" Sonia is now panting.

"Yes," I say, thinking Sonia is asking me. Then I realize her question is for the person at the other end of the phone line.

"Okay. Apply pressure and wait for the ambulance." Sonia repeats the person's instructions.

"Do you need help?" I ask again, louder this time.

Sonia looks at me. "I don't feel very well."

"Breathe *with* me, Sonia," I say, and force myself to take slow, deep inhalations, exaggerating my own breathing. I

want to hold her, calm her down. But I can't leave the man; I'm scared he might stop breathing. Sonia's chest expands and contracts more slowly as she gets her breathing under control, and I notice she's wearing only a bra. In my confused state, I don't understand why. Then I realize she's used her shirt to staunch the woman's bleeding. But it's not enough. The woman is bleeding profusely.

"Here, Sonia," I say as I peel off my own T-shirt and toss it to her. She quickly replaces her blood-soaked shirt with mine and presses down on the woman's chest once more.

My head jerks at the sound of a siren, and to my relief, I see red and blue lights approaching. Less than a minute later, a police car pulls in behind our vehicle.

An officer, lanky and looking no older than sixteen, takes Sonia's place beside the injured woman. He continues to apply pressure to her chest, while a second officer, a solidly built woman, uses an extinguisher to douse the fire. By some miracle, the fire hasn't grown much bigger in the minutes since we came upon the accident.

The ambulance arrives soon after. The paramedics swiftly assess the injured couple, place them on yellow spine boards, and wrap on neck collars. They make no attempt to remove the glass from the woman's chest. Apparently, if the glass has pierced the woman's heart—which they have no way of knowing—and they remove it, she will bleed to death in seconds. She will be x-rayed at the hospital. Despondently, I wonder whether with all the blood she's already lost, she will make it that far.

A fire truck arrives just as the ambulance races away, its sirens wailing. As the police set up a roadblock to divert approaching vehicles from the scene, a few firemen seal the car's ruptured gas tank and spread something over the puddle of gasoline. At the same time, another two attend to

Sonia and me, cleaning and bandaging the mainly superficial wounds caused by the glass in our knees and hands. When they have finally finished, I take in the mess around us.

A single sock lies on the tarmac. An empty compact disk case, a pair of sunglasses, a broken camera. Small bits of people's lives strewn impersonally along some anonymous road. The sight saddens me, as if a love letter has been carelessly ripped apart and tossed away.

"We should collect their things," Sonia suggests.

I feel disoriented as I watch a photo drift across the highway. Looking at the upturned car, I see the British Columbia licence plate. The couple is a long way from home.

"Richard," Sonia says, returning me to the situation as she hands me a sweatshirt. At some point, she must have fetched clothes from our car. I hadn't noticed.

We begin to fill two big plastic suitcases, broken but still serviceable. We pack T-shirts, pants, underwear, photos, and bathing suits. One of the firefighters has given us two green garbage bags, into which we put sleeping bags, cooking pots, cutlery, shoes, and a tent.

We are gathering the injured couple's possessions when I spot the reason for the accident further up the highway, about a hundred feet from the overturned car. A deer—reddish-brown and white-tailed—lies partly hidden in dense bush. Curious, I approach it. There is no blood. No visible sign of injury. Were it not for the eyes, oddly unmoving, glassy and dark, a casual passerby would simply think the doe was resting. I half expect it to scramble to its legs, leap over the nearby fence, and disappear into the field beyond.

"Sonia!" I shout to my wife, who is well down the highway.

She looks up as I point towards the bush. Pausing to pick up what looks like a wallet, she comes to me. Glancing at

the lifeless animal, she frowns and shakes her head and then returns to her sad chore.

A police officer, the lanky kid who had been first on the scene after us, tells us the couple is being taken to the Centre Hospitalier de Granby: the nearest major hospital.

"What should we do with these things?" Sonia asks.

The officer thinks a moment. "Could you take them to the hospital? We may not be able to do it ourselves before tomorrow."

I nod. "Sure, no problem." The city of Granby is not far.

"Are you from around here?" he asks, perhaps wondering if he is taking us out of our way.

"Montreal," Sonia says.

"*Bien*. Not too far for you then."

My thoughts return to the injured couple. "Who are they?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, sir; I'm not allowed to give out names. Doesn't seem right after all you've done but…" His words trail away. His youth proclaims him new to the police force; evidently, he is careful about correct procedure. I am still too shaken to persist.

Sonia and I spend the next hour salvaging whatever we can find. At length, we return to our car. I am about to get inside when I spot a book under our front bumper. I pick it up and look at it in the beam of our headlights. The book is rather shabby, with a hard brown dilapidated cover. Its corners are rounded down, exposing the flaking cardboard underneath, and the spine is cracked with missing pieces at both ends. The book is untitled and very old. The accident, I think, was not the cause of damage to the book.

By the time I get in the car, Sonia is burrowed deep in her seat. Her eyes are closed, and fatigue etches her dusty face. Her hair, usually sleek and smooth, is tangled, and her

pants are stained with blood. She looks as weary as I feel.

"Sonia…" I say quietly.

"Richard." She opens her eyes, gives me a dazed look, then closes her eyes again.

"I found a book. Very old by the look of it."

"Oh…" She is not interested, not at this moment.

I am about to drive off, when curiosity gets the better of me. What is this book I have found? Something about it sparks my interest.

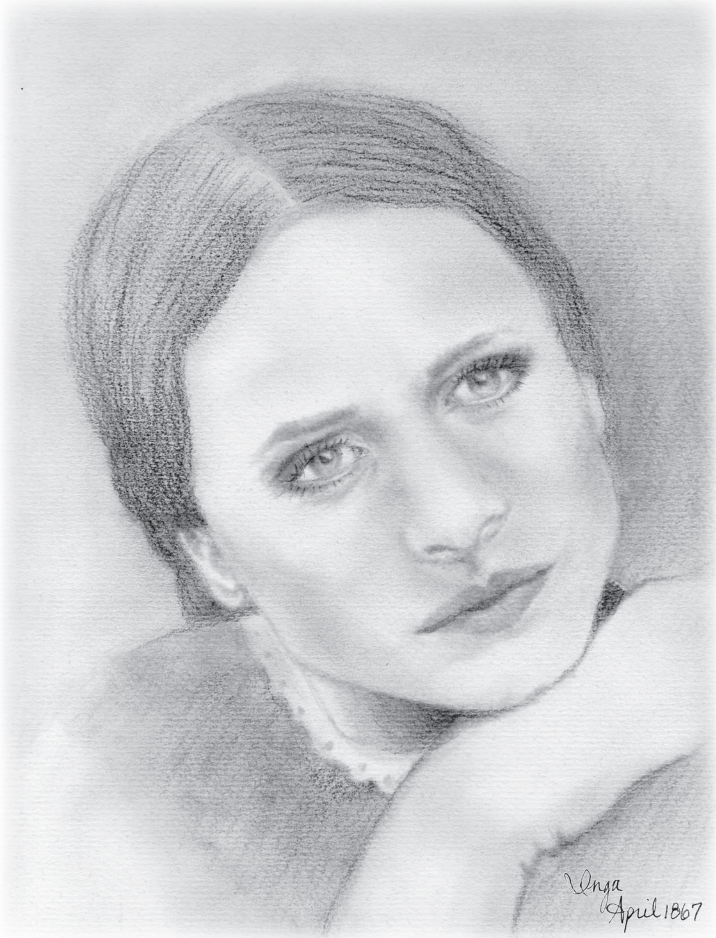
I flick on the interior light, then open the book. My first impression is confirmed: it's very old, an antique. A pencil sketch of a woman adorns the inside front cover. A beautiful woman with full lips, a strong jaw, small ears, and hair parted in the middle. Her lips are closed and she is smiling: a friendly, peaceful smile. Below the sketch, I read a name and date: Inga, April 1867.

On the opposite page is a drawing of a little girl, her face still chubby with baby fat. She has a pert little nose and a high forehead, and she beams joyfully. Her eyes, large and bright, are her most striking feature. Her name is Astrid, and this sketch, too, was completed in April 1867.

I gaze at the drawings a few minutes, impressed with the talent of the artist, and wonder about the identities of the woman and child. Intrigued, I flip through the next few pages, all of them blank and yellowed with age. Twenty empty pages further on, I come to another date—December 15, 2003—so recent as to seem out of place in this ancient book. Below the date is clear handwriting in blue ink. Have I found a diary?

"Richard?" Sonia says, wearily.

I glance at my watch. It is after one in the morning. I close the diary, put it on the seat between us, buckle my seatbelt, and head for the Granby Hospital.


Inga
April 1867

Astrid
April 1967

Jenner Curtis Herac

December 15, 2003

How do I add a meaningful story to a book that is of near legendary significance to my family? Thinking myself wise, I agonized over ideas I thought might leave a lasting impression on those who would receive this journal after me. But it wasn't until I realized I am not wise that I found I had something to say.

Seated in my brown leather chair, I was as usual waiting. I held the wide armrest firmly and tried to push back annoying thoughts of my wife, as my patient—Brenda—sat down on an identical chair across from me. Through the nearby window, I looked east, across the slow moving traffic of Hornby Street just two floors below, to the urban jungle of stairs, waterfalls, gardens, and the open-air ice rink of Robson Square. The fog of a Vancouver winter misted the buildings only a few blocks away.

"Is the world full of completely incompetent people?" Brenda asked peremptorily, without so much as a courteous hello. A rectangular, darkly stained mahogany coffee table

bearing a crystal dish of candy and a box of tissues separated us. "All I wanted was a Grande Skim Vanilla Latte. I order the same thing every time. You'd think they could get it right. So what do they do? Make it with whole milk. I wanted to throw it at them. Fifteen minutes to get the order wrong, another ten to get it right. Twenty-five minutes to get a coffee. Unbelievable! They deserve minimum wage."

Brenda's left hand held the cup of coffee with its inevitable red lipstick stain around the rim. I couldn't remember a time when she wasn't sipping incessantly, bringing the cup to her mouth seemingly without thought, even after it was empty.

Brenda was dressed immaculately, like the cover model of a fashion magazine. Black high-heeled shoes, belt, and expensive looking purse complemented a navy suit and tailored white silk blouse. A French manicure and sleekly styled shoulder-length brown hair completed the picture. She had the knack of remaining "put together" even when she was tearful, by dabbing her bottom eyelids carefully, making sure not to smear expertly applied makeup.

I wished Brenda wasn't there. I wanted nothing more than to lie down on the leather chesterfield, close my eyes, and drift into oblivion. I wondered if Brenda could smell the alcohol on my breath. Gripping the armrest more tightly, I tried to focus on my patient.

"I think I'm going to end it," she said abruptly.

She changed the subject so fast that it was a moment before I realized what she was talking about. "It" was her ten-month relationship. She had described her boyfriend as charming, good-looking, gentle, and funny. She had professed to love him. However, on a regular basis, she'd plop herself down in my office and announce she was breaking up with her boyfriend. When asked the reason, her usual

response was, "He doesn't give me everything I need." She had yet to define "everything."

"What's happening?" I asked.

I reached for a container of green breath mints from the small table on my left. Shaking out two mints, I popped them in my mouth and slipped the rest into my shirt pocket. Surreptitiously, I wiped my sweaty hands on my pants, folded my hands in front of me, and hoped the mints were strong enough to cover my breath. Foolish of me to drink so much at lunch.

"He's just so…" Brenda pursed her red-painted lips. Without completing the sentence, she took a long sip from her cup, depositing another layer of lipstick along the rim.

The first time Brenda saw me, she had just accepted a partnership at the law firm where she had been working since she was called to the bar. She had achieved what she had thought was her life's goal. Yet, after the initial satisfaction, she experienced an emptiness that frightened her. She had thought she had what she wanted, but when the achievement did not fill her with the contentment she had anticipated, she began to wonder what was missing.

"He pisses me off. Doesn't do his share of the housework. Won't clean up after himself. Last week there were tomato guts on the counter even after he wiped up, toast crumbs everywhere."

"Yes, that can be—"

"What's more, and I've talked to him about this, he leaves spots all over the mirror when he washes his face or brushes his teeth.…"

My mind began to wander as Brenda spoke, and my eyes strayed to the abundance of books behind her. Row upon row of unread classic novels filled eggshell-white shelves from

floor to ceiling. Behind me resided a similar accumulation of psychology textbooks and reference material.

When I first opened my practice, I had an image of the psychologist's ideal office—a big window, my framed degrees on the walls, an impressive array of literature, leather furniture, and a few tasteful carvings. Except for the textbooks, most of the volumes came from a second-hand bookstore in Coquitlam. It took several trips and two thousand dollars to acquire enough books to give the shelves a full appearance. Fortunately, I had inherited the furnishings. The tenant before me had run a fraudulent investment operation and had had to leave town quickly. In the hurry of a midnight flit, he had abandoned his expensive furniture. Besides the set of leather chairs, he had left an oak desk, which I used in my adjoining office, and the mahogany coffee table. I added the bookshelves and the little table beside my analyst's chair. Two pictures, both in thick black frames on the third shelf behind my patients' chair, were the room's only personal touches. One picture was of my wife, Kimberly. The other was of my parents, Charlotte and Max.

I had taken Kimberly's photo on a recent trip to an Okanagan winery. Standing in front of a stack of oak barrels, long black hair in a ponytail, looking like a field of daisies in her ankle-length green skirt and white blouse, Kimberly held a glass of red wine. While she did so, the winemaker described how that particular wine had been aged. Kimberly was unconcerned with how the brew was made, but as I was into wine, she feigned interest for my sake.

My parents' photo had been taken on their twentieth anniversary, ten years earlier. Wearing a blue angora sweater, her greying hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, my mother had a hand on my father's arm. As she looked up at him, her wide-lipped smile made the laugh lines at the corners of her

eyes more prominent. My father, his tanned skin contrasting with my mother's pale complexion, had a wide, blue paisley necktie wrapped around his forehead and hanging down the side of his head. He was trying to look serious, but the corners of his mouth were turned up in a barely suppressed smile that reminded me of the Mona Lisa.

When Brenda paused, I waited a second before commenting; I didn't want another interruption. "I can understand your irritation," I began then. "Housework is a common issue between people living together. What have you—"

But Brenda went on as if she didn't hear me. "You know, he still hasn't acknowledged all the work I've put into our condo. The time and money I've spent making it nice for the two of us…"

I let her ramble on. Without looking away from her, I could still see, just behind her, the picture of my parents. It was funny how I always focused on that photo, especially my father, whenever Brenda came for a session. It may have been that I worried I was more like Brenda and less like my easy-going dad.

Maximilian the Great was the moniker my friends gave him. I was thirteen when two of my buddies and I stole a dozen beers from Jeff's dad. On the pretext of a sleepover, we drank them in my basement. Three or four beers each, and we were all ill. Dad came downstairs when he heard the toilet flush for the tenth time in so many minutes. He found me curled up on the bathroom floor. Jeff had barfed all over his pillow and sleeping bag, while Angelo, the dumb shit, had had the bright idea of lifting up the cushions of the couch and throwing up; in his inebriated state, he must have thought no one would notice his vomit hidden there.

Two hours later, Dad had washed Jeff's sleeping bag and pillow, scrubbed the couch, and cleaned up the bathroom.

The next morning we wondered what would become of us. Angelo, a first-generation Canadian born to strict Italian immigrants, feared for his life. Jeff, too, was worried. One day went by, then another. No fallout for Angelo, Jeff, or myself. Happy to have escaped retribution, I let the incident rest. From then on, Dad became Maximilian the Great, like one of the Russian czars we had learned about recently in social studies.

That summer, in the midst of a muggy August heat wave, an awful stench emanated from the basement. It grew steadily worse, festering badly. Eventually, my father determined it was coming from the chesterfield. Evidently, Angelo's puke had not been completely removed and had fermented in the heat. Dad winked at me as he asked me to help him take the old orange couch to the dump. On the way there, I apologized for wrecking the sofa and asked him why he had not punished me.

Dad gave me a one-eyed look. "You needed me to say something?" He was laughing, his head cocked to one side, like a dog listening to the howls of a distant pack of wolves. "You can figure things out for yourself," he said.

Brenda's voice rose an octave, and I emerged from my memories.

"I even went out and bought an A.Y. Jackson," she said. She had become steadily more excited. "He doesn't even know anything about Jackson and the Group of Seven. Have you any idea what it cost me? The guy is such a boor."

"Let's deal with one thing at a time," I said patiently. "Have you told him your concerns about housework?"

"No. How can I? I don't want to sound like a nag."

"You can't hide from the issues."

We spent some time discussing strategies Brenda might use to broach the subject with her boyfriend.

"It's more than the housework," she said at last. "He's not paying me enough attention. I wanted to spend the evening with him yesterday, but he made plans with his friends. He should know by now that Wednesday is our special night!" She shifted the coffee cup from her left hand to her right and then back again. Her blue eyes darted around restlessly, as if she were considering what to say next.

Some of my patients visit me twice, maybe three times. Often they need no specific direction; talking out loud is enough for them. Most people come to see me fifteen to twenty times over six months. Usually, in that time, clients recognize their unhelpful behaviour and adjust. And then there is a third group: clients I see for years, who make few changes, forever retaining beliefs that make them unhappy. Brenda belonged to the last group. I was beginning to wonder if I belonged to it too.

"Why didn't you put the spaghetti sauce in a dark container? Now this one is stained," I had said to Kimberly two nights before, as I was washing the supper dishes. Before dinner she had admitted to denting the door frame of the garage with the right-hand mirror of her car. The mirror now hung by a few wires.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think it was that big a deal. I'll buy new containers." She had sounded exasperated.

"That's not the point. Our stuff would last longer if you were careful," I said, referring more to the car and the garage than the spaghetti container.

"I'm sorry," she said again, but I saw her rolling her eyes as she turned away.

"You're always doing things like that." I was angry that she did not take my comments seriously. After all, she was forever doing other things too. Shrinking my shirts or leaving a window too wide open when it rained—she loved the smell

of the rain—and the damp air would get the carpet wet and then mouldy. Small things, but they annoyed me.

"I'm sorry I don't do things the Jenner way," she said sarcastically.

"Don't be an idiot. I just want you to think!" My voice had risen; I was practically yelling. I regretted the words even though I meant them. I just wanted Kimberly to be more careful. I might even have apologized, but before I had a chance to control my emotions, she grabbed her car keys and left.

I compared myself to a good chess player, planning every step of my life—both personal and professional—many moves in advance. By being fully prepared for any contingency, I figured I could avoid irrevocable mistakes, big or small. But Kimberly differed from me. She liked to do things on a whim. She might want to climb a mountain, equipped with nothing but a soft drink and a chocolate bar, or give up a good job as she had done recently, for employment that lacked financial security. Her energy and unbridled enthusiasm had attracted me to her initially. She had energized my life, making it invigorating and refreshing. Now, after four years of marriage, I wondered if I could tolerate her disregard for possible consequences to her actions. Kimberly did not think things through the way I did. Sitting across the table from Brenda, I calculated that 42 hours had passed since I had last spoken with Kimberly.

"What is it you expect of your boyfriend?" I asked, as Brenda flicked the rim of her cup with a manicured finger.

She looked at me for so long that I had an uneasy sense that she could see through me. That she knew my life too was not without flaws. "Who are you to give advice?" I expected her to say.

"I don't know," she said at length. "I guess I want him to be more aware of my needs. We're supposed to look at engagement rings on Saturday, but I don't think I can go through with it. He's looking at such tiny rings. Totally inappropriate. I'd be willing to chip in myself for a decent two-carat diamond." She paused to straighten the creases of her pants, and then smoothed a fold on her jacket. "Why is he like that? Doesn't he know how important the ring is?"

She paused a moment, as if she'd heard the sound of her own words. For a moment she even looked slightly embarrassed. Then, she lifted her chin and went on. "Maybe you think that sounds awful. But it's what I want. It would make everything all right." There was longing in her tone as she said the last words.

"The diamond is so important to you?" I asked.

She made an angry face. The expression of someone who was accustomed to getting her own way and was frustrated because she wasn't getting it this time. Maybe she had even thought I would agree with her. A moment passed. "Oh, I don't want to talk about him anymore," she said then, in a huff. I knew that huff. Brenda expected easy solutions to her problems. When would she learn that my job is not to give answers? I hardly had answers for myself.

"What do you want to discuss?" I asked, and wondered if she sensed my impatience. Involuntarily, edginess emerged more and more frequently in our sessions together.

"I'd rather talk about work," she said.

"Okay."

"It's getting worse."

"Oh?"

"I'm hating work more and more."

"And?"

"I thought about what you said last week. Not to worry what people think of lawyers. Anyway, I don't believe that's what's really bothering me."

"Do you know what **is** bothering you?"

"I think so…after all the years of eighty-hour weeks, of making sacrifices to get where I am now, I believe I never really liked law."

"What would happen if you left?"

"I would lose everything I've worked for: my partnership, my reputation, the money! Ten years of sacrifice, all for nothing." She shook her head, almost as if she felt she had wasted her life.

"And if you stayed?"

Brenda did not answer. She did not even sip her coffee. Instead, she looked towards the window. I could not see her eyes now, but her face bore an unfamiliar expression. I wondered how she saw the street below us. The silence continued for a least a minute.

"Brenda?" I asked at last.

"I'm thinking." She took a long sip of coffee. "I'll be miserable if I go on practicing law, but at least, I'll be able to afford the things I want."

"What's more important?"

She answered without hesitation. "My happiness, of course. But I can't just give up the work. I'm stuck."

"So is everyone," I wanted to say. Almost everyone.

Looking over to the picture of Mom and Dad, I wondered how my father became unstuck. As a ten-year-old boy, he had contracted polio. He'd spent weeks at the Hospital for Sick Children, in Toronto. During his stay there, he'd become fascinated with the nurses, doctors, and physical therapists who cared for him. On his discharge, he dedicated himself to becoming a physician. Then one night, only months from

completing his medical degree, he quit his studies and went into carpentry instead. He's been a carpenter ever since.

"Why are you stuck?" I asked Brenda.

"Think about it—how else can I use my law degree? I've read that people in other fields don't like to hire lawyers. They don't trust us; they don't believe our skills are transferable." Close by hung my degrees. Brenda gazed at them for what seemed a long fifteen seconds. "Maybe I should have been a psychologist, like you. You get to talk with people all day, to learn what makes them tick. Must be interesting."

I was always irritated when people considered therapy to be no more than friendly, helpful conversation. The three degrees represented nine years of schooling. I could have been a medical doctor in less time than that, and gotten more respect. But I wasn't allowed to give into my feelings and speak my mind. I had to remain disciplined and listen to my patients' problems, all because I'd managed an A in my first-year psychology course. I pictured a cold beer, tapped another mint into my hand, and popped it into my mouth.

"If you could do anything in the world, what would you choose?" I asked.

"I wanted to be a journalist when I first started university." She had mentioned this before.

"Why did you go into law?"

"Lawyers make more money."

It wasn't the only reason, I knew. Words had always been something of a fascinating dichotomy for Brenda. Her father was not a reader—I suspected he was illiterate, though Brenda had never actually said so. Her mother read only grocery store tabloids, which she hid when guests came to visit. More factors had been involved in Brenda's choice of a career than just money, but this wasn't the right time to

discuss them. We had already gone off in too many directions in this session.

“What is so important about money?” I asked.

Brenda signed. “It makes life easier. You know what I mean.”

I did. I knew what she earned, and I was envious. “What do you mean by ‘makes life easier’?”

“I know it’s not the be-all-and-end-all, but I can buy what I need.”

“How much time can you buy?”

The question took her by surprise, as I had known it would.

“**What**?”

“Let’s say you spend eighty hours a week working. How much time would you say your money buys you?”

Again there was silence. She seemed restless as she gazed once more through the window.

“I just can’t start over again,” she said at length, sadly.

“So then I guess being miserable is better than being poor?” An unprofessional question.

“Oh, I don’t know what’s wrong anymore,” she said, putting down the cup and rubbing her temples. “Maybe I need to treat myself. Get some work done. I’ve been considering liposuction. I’ve never been happy with my hips.”

If she only knew how others saw her—a beautiful woman with an almost-perfect body.

“We’re getting off topic again,” I said. “We were talking about work.”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore; it’s giving me a headache.”

“Okay. What will cosmetic surgery do for you?”

“Maybe if I felt better about myself, everything else would be okay.”

I wanted to shake her. Hard. Nothing had changed since Brenda had first started coming to me. She jumped from one topic to another, skimming the surface of her problems. She resisted digging down to discover what lurked underneath, to understand herself better. Yet who was I to say anything? I felt like a fraud. If I couldn't make myself happy, how could I help Brenda or anyone else? I knew my thoughts were irrational. I knew I could help others, but sometimes I wanted to close the door on my practice, burn my degrees, walk out, and never look back.

I badly wanted a drink.

"How will slimmer hips improve your relationship and make your job more enjoyable?"

Brenda flinched. She looked at me as if I had yelled at her. Perhaps I had. She took a candy from the crystal tray. I heard a car honking outside. I looked at my watch. A minute over Brenda's allotted time. She looked tired.

"Why is everything so difficult? Does the crap ever stop? Look at you—you're fine. How do you do it?" she asked.

I wanted to admit that I was anything but fine. "We're here to talk about you."

"But if I know how you do it, maybe I could do it that way, too," she said, hopefully.

"We all need to find our own way."

I stood to let her know her time was up. Childlike, she pouted. As she left, she checked her makeup in the mirror of a small compact and reapplied her lipstick.

Once she'd gone, I made notes on the session, put on my raincoat, and locked up the office. It was drizzling outside, a bleak, grey, cheerless rain. I longed for the bright cold of an Edmonton winter, but Kimberly loved Vancouver. Her favourite place was Stanley Park's seawall, nine kilometres of

paved trail around the perimeter of a heavily treed peninsula jutting into the Burrard Inlet. On days like this, only the more intrepid joggers, those determined not to miss a day of training, would be on the seawall.

Across the street from my office, people with placards were demonstrating outside the art gallery. I couldn't quite make out the signs, something about protecting killer whales. I headed west down Robson Street, across Burrard Street and into the core of the tourist area. Here the stores were close together: fashion boutiques and stores selling T-shirts, jewellery, and souvenirs—paradise behind glass. A busker, her guitar case open on the ground in front of her, strummed away fervently, seemingly oblivious to the deepening rain. A car backfired somewhere down the street.

Walking along the slippery sidewalk, I thought about my dad's old truck, rust eating away at the door frame and wheel arches. A dark green half-ton GMC, paint flaking away to reveal sky blue underneath. I've never known if the truck was once blue or if that colour was the undercoating of 1963 GM trucks. My dad would joke that he had to top up the oil more often than the gas.

On Saturdays, when I was little, he would take me to whichever site he was working on. Carrying me on his shoulders, he would point out the latest additions to the particular structure he was working on. Moving from room to room in the skeleton of those newly framed buildings, we would both duck our heads as we passed through doorways. Dad would carry a bottle of orange pop that we would pass back and forth—a shared vice kept secret from my health-conscious mother. On the drive home, if there were few cars on the road, he would put me in his lap and let me steer. Sitting in that grey cab, gripping the big, white steering wheel, Dad's

hands hovering close to mine, I used to wish the journey would never end.

I walked a few blocks past the pubs I usually visited, heading instead towards a bar on Broughton Street. It would not do for a psychologist to gain a reputation as a drinker. The place was empty except for two guys in suits sitting in a booth, watching a hockey game on one of the half dozen televisions above the long stone counter. The Canucks playing the Rangers in New York. An East Coast game—no wonder it's on at 3:30 in the afternoon here, I thought. I took the booth two down from the corporate types and ordered a pint of beer from the stick-thin waitress. I watched the game for a few minutes; the sound of the TV echoed in the room. I got my cold beer and downed half of it in a gulp. The mints had coated my tongue, giving the beer a strange taste, but it wasn't the taste I cared about.

Round water stains broke the pattern of the table's wood grain top. I tried to fit my glass into the stains, but they were either too big or too small, none just right. I was a frustrated Goldilocks. All the porridge, all the chairs, all the beds were too hot, too cold, too hard, too soft, too big, too small. Nothing ever seemed just right.

I thought about Kimberly and considered whether or not to phone her. She would still be at work right now.... I pictured her at her desk, designing a playground for a new school or perhaps a front yard for some wealthy family in West Vancouver. Her boss favoured comfortable clothes at work, insisting on professional attire only when visiting clients. She was probably wearing jeans and a loose sweater, years out of style: the polar opposite of Brenda's immaculate presentation.

In one sense, I had to agree with Brenda. If we don't try for the ideal, then what do we strive for? I had saved money

to buy the right house, had looked carefully for the right car, the right clothes, and even the right wife. I was constantly creating new goals for myself. Each goal, an island of its own. I'd swim towards the place that seemed to hold the answer to my quest. When I found nothing there, I would make for a new island.

Even as a child, I lay awake at night worrying about being perfect. My grades were good, but not as good as some. I had friends, but I wasn't the most popular kid in the school. I was decent at sports but was never picked first for games at recess and never made an all-star team. Unable to sleep, I'd kneel on my bed and look out the window at the illuminated park across the road. I often wondered if my parents could hear me staring out the window. It's the kind of thought that occurs to a nine-year-old. My parents probably heard me sigh loudly or adjust my bedsheets as I tried to make myself comfortable enough to fall asleep.

Dad would appear at my door. "Jenner, can I ask you something?"

I'd nod to Dad and follow him down the hall. In the living room, he would sit down in his chair, lean forward with his elbows on his knees, and his interlocked fingers against his chin. In the kitchen, I could hear Mom stirring a warm pot of milk, the spoon hitting the metal pot, a strangely comforting sound. I knew what she was making.

Dad never started with "What's the matter?" He knew me, or perhaps he just understood people well enough to probe by not probing. The intent was not to get my opinion, although I felt as if he dearly wanted my input; he wanted to get me talking.

"I've been thinking where we might go for summer holidays," he'd say. In winter, he might ask me where we

should go cross-country skiing or with which grandparents we should have Christmas dinner.

I'd take a moment to think. At that age, I sensed that a question asked in a serious tone should be given careful thought before one answered. "We should go to the lake." By which I meant Shuswap Lake in the interior of British Columbia. We went there most summers. I knew what I liked.

"I was thinking we might try a new lake."

We would discuss the pros and cons of going somewhere new. Mom would appear with a cup of warm Ovaltine, that sweet milk mix, then go back to the kitchen. She understood that two pairs of eyes, especially on an only child, might keep me from saying what bothered me. Predictably, I'd start to talk.

"You can't be perfect Jenner. No one is, and no one ever will be." Dad seldom had to explain. However, there were occasions when he would take from his desk the old family journal—the very journal I write in now—and use it to illustrate a point. For me, it was enough just to hear my Dad talk, to listen to someone I trusted.

When we had finished our Ovaltine, which had a way of lasting until we had finished talking, Dad would say how tired he was and would joke that he needed his beauty rest. He would stand up, letting me decide myself when I was ready for sleep. Usually, minutes later, I would feel drowsy and go to bed.

Outside the pub, the sidewalk was crowded with people going home from work. At the bar, the TV hollered the play-by-play action of the hockey game. The men in suits raised glasses of beer to their lips, their eyes glued to the tube. The waitress came by to ask if I wanted another beer. I said yes.

She set it in front of me. I grabbed it, meaning to down the glass quickly. Suddenly, I hesitated.

I knew I couldn't stall any longer. It might have been the wrong time to call Kimberly, but I had to start making changes now. I pulled out my cellphone and dialed the number. One ring; two. I cleared my throat as her voice mail greeting came on.

"Hi, Kimberly. It's me." I wondered again if I should wait to see her face to face and to tell her then, but I decided I had wasted enough time already.

"I've been doing lots of thinking, honey. How about we take advantage of the rain? Let's take umbrellas and walk around the seawall. Please, call me back, Kimberly."

Jenner Curtis Herac

Richard

For some time after leaving the accident site and heading towards Granby Hospital, Sonia and I drive in silence. Pictures relating to the accident appear like a string of billboard ads in my mind: The overturned car. The clothes scattered on the road. The man pinned to his seat by the steering wheel. The dead deer on the side of the road.

Ten minutes of silence pass, when Sonia finally speaks. "I wonder how they are."

I wonder this too. From the time they arrived at the accident, the paramedics had worked feverishly on the injured couple. Of the two, the woman appeared to be in more critical condition. But I had heard the man's breathing; it had sounded as if he were trying to suck the last of a milkshake through a straw, and I wondered if the steering wheel pinning him to his seat might have crushed his lungs.

"It's the first time I've ever seen such a terrible accident." Sonia's voice has a distant sound. She puts a hand to her mouth, as if trying to prevent certain words from emerging. Then, hastily, she rolls down the window, puts her head out, and retches.

"You all right? Want me to stop?" I take my foot from the gas pedal and let it hover over the brake.

Sonia shakes her head, pulls a tissue from the glove compartment, and puts her hand to her mouth again. She sits like that for a while, then leans her head against the door and lets the air coming in from outside rush over her. I am about to reach over and touch her leg, but after a moment, I decide to keep my hand on the wheel, denying a natural impulse to comfort her.

While Sonia fights to control her churning stomach, I glance over my shoulder at the two plastic suitcases, one blue and one yellow, and the two green garbage bags on the back seat. Not a single vehicle had passed us as we collected the couple's scattered possessions. The only people at the accident had been the police, the firemen, the paramedics, and the two of us.

"Lucky that we came across the accident when we did, or they might not have been found until morning," Sonia says, echoing my own thoughts.

"Yes," I answer. Lucky for the couple, I think: not lucky for us.

We had found ourselves on that deserted stretch of road after an early ending to our two-week vacation. Twelve days early, to be exact. I had never thought we would be one of those "*We-need-to-get-away-to-save-our-marriage*" couples; yet that had been the purpose of the aborted trip, though neither of us had dared speak the dangerous words aloud.

We were going to get along together and have fun, we said. Fun exploring what was figuratively our backyard—the *Cantons de l'Est* or *Estrie*: the region known in English as the Eastern Townships, an area east of Montreal and north of the borders of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York State.

Originally settled in the 1780s by United Empire Loyalists—American colonists who remained loyal to the

British Crown by moving to Canada after the American Revolution—the Eastern Townships are considered one of the two main playgrounds for Montrealers, the other being the Laurentian Mountains, north of the city.

Although the Eastern Townships offer tourists everything from luxury resorts to historic *auberges* (inns) to cosy bed and breakfasts, the main focus of the region is the outdoors. In summer, rustic farmhouses surrounded by evenly spaced green vines on gently rolling hillsides are reminiscent of Tuscany. In fall, the covered bridges, the stone buildings, and the red, orange, and yellow leaves remind one of New England. In winter, the snow-covered mountains evoke memories of Austria. At least, that's what I have been told, for I have never been to any of those places.

Sonia and I had had a plan. We were going to stay at a few different B&Bs, drive around the countryside, along the covered bridges and over the gently rolling hills in search of antique stores, museums, and anything else that might strike our fancy.

The antique stores were for Sonia, who regularly sifts through Friday's *Gazette* and *La Presse* for information about local garage sales with, as she puts it, "potential." On Saturday mornings, while the kids amuse themselves with TV cartoons, Sonia enjoys hunting for old and interesting pieces for the house. Usually, she returns with nothing, but there have been Saturdays when she's made a discovery: an 1880s bowl with fancy feet, an 1860s ceramic water pitcher, or a mahogany dining table made in the early 1900s. Sonia had hoped she might find something even older or more unusual in the Eastern Townships. I, on the other hand, am more interested in museums. I especially wanted to visit the Musée J. Armand Bombardier in Valcourt, which features the inventor of the snowmobile, and the Musée Minéralogique et

d'Histoire Minière in Asbestos.

We had planned to rent canoes and to go on a few vineyard tours. Though neither of us care much for wine, there was a time when we enjoyed sharing a cider before bed, especially after a busy day ferrying the kids to soccer games or pottery classes. We thought of these activities as nice "couple" things to do together. I had even considered parasailing over Lac Memphrémagog—though in the event, I might well have chickened out. I don't wear shorts and might have felt foolish in long pants when everyone else was wearing bathing suits.

We were, once upon a time, considered the ideal couple. The kind of partnership people point to and ask, "Why isn't our marriage like that?" Sonia and I used to relish the admiration, as well as the anecdotes that made the rounds at office Christmas parties and neighbourhood barbecues.

My favourite story occurred at a couples' evening, more than seven years ago. Eight of us were at Doug and Mary Olivers', where we were playing Pictionary, a game similar to charades, but played on paper rather than by acting out the answers. Played in teams—in this case, couples—the game required one team member to pull a card from the Pictionary deck. Without using numbers or letters, that person had to draw a picture representing the word on the card.

Sonia and I had garnered a reputation as an unbeatable team. No matter how poorly I drew, Sonia always guessed the word correctly. On this particular evening, Doug noticed that whenever I sketched, Sonia had a hand on my back or arm, and when she drew, I was touching her. We were accused of having telepathic abilities that came into force only when we touched. And so, Doug implemented a new rule: no touching between partners when they were playing the game. Of course, Sonia and I thought Doug was joking,

but he was a competitive man, and he and his wife, Mary, usually came second to us. Sonia and I did not believe in telepathy, but reluctant to start a row, we agreed to a rule that seemed ridiculous.

Not surprisingly, we continued to win. Doug was the only one at the table who did not realize that Sonia had kicked off a shoe and was working her bare foot up my leg. Though I don't believe my wife's flirtatiousness influenced our success, it did make me feel lucky to be with her, not to mention a bit amorous. I'm pretty sure Aidan was conceived that night.

In the last year, however, things have changed. We've stopped holding hands; we no longer cuddle in our queen-sized bed but sleep with enough space between us to drive a car through, and no longer spend much time together. We don't converse, but communicate in as few words as necessary. We remain considerate to each other, though in a formal way, as one would behave with a stranger. Three ciders languish in the fridge, waiting for us to resume our intimate conversations. Gradually, the ciders have made their way to the rear of the fridge, where they now stand almost forgotten behind the rarely used bottle of Worcestershire sauce and the unopened jar of pickled onions.

It was Sonia who suggested the two-week vacation, and I agreed. We sent the kids to stay with my sister in Dartmouth, and drove a few hours to an Eastern Townships' bed and breakfast I had found on the Internet. In that quiet B&B, beside a slow-moving stream, we would get together again. Unfortunately, difficulties returned on the second night of our retreat.

We were going to spend the evening in our comfortable suite watching a quirky movie called *Better Off Dead*. While I microwaved a bag of sour cream and onion-flavoured popcorn, my favourite, Sonia, a large package of red liquorice

at the ready, changed into a loose-fitting T-shirt and pyjama bottoms and arranged herself on the loveseat in front of the television. When my popcorn was ready, I started the DVD player and settled into an oversized chair. Almost immediately, Sonia began to weep.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to speak calmly. During our first fourteen years together, I had only seen her cry a handful of times. Lately, she had been doing so a lot, and it bothered me.

"You never want to be near me anymore," she sobbed.

I shook my head. "What are you talking about?"

But Sonia was right: I didn't want to sit beside her, though I wouldn't tell her so. I was trying hard to get along with her. I, too, wanted this trip to be a success.

"Then why aren't you sitting next to me?" A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

"I thought I'd give you lots of room to stretch out."

"I don't want room." She raised her voice. "I want you beside me!"

I wondered if her voice could be heard through the walls by the others at the B&B. I hoped not.

I thought quickly and said the wrong thing. "I thought I'd be more comfortable in the chair."

Sonia was upset. "So you don't want to be near me! *Why not*? You haven't hugged me once since we got here. In bed last night, you pulled away when I tried to touch you. Why do I disgust you?"

If only I had said those three words so vital to marriage, I could have salvaged the evening, perhaps the whole trip. *I love you. I love you.* The thing is, I really do love Sonia; more than anyone in my life, perhaps even more than the kids. But I couldn't bring myself to get the words past my lips. I wanted Sonia to be the one to break down the barrier between us. I

wanted *her* to save our marriage. There may even have been some small part of me that wanted to punish her, because she hadn't tried hard enough to heal the wounds I'd suffered.

When I didn't answer right away, she began to cry in earnest. Normally, I would have held her in my arms—which is exactly what I wanted to do at that moment—but for some reason, I could not. I put on my shoes instead and went for a walk.

When I returned an hour later, Sonia was still very upset. It was not difficult to imagine the rest of the vacation consisting of nothing more than stretches of silence punctuated by Sonia's sobs. That being the case, it was probably best for us to go home and try to work things out in familiar surroundings.

I should have imparted this thought to Sonia gently. Instead, fool that I am, I blurted out the words, "Let's go. Being here is just a waste of time."

Sonia gasped, stared at me in shock, then began to weep fiercely once more.

Rattled by her intense distress, I acted unwisely: without another word, I opened the suitcase and started to pack. That done, I sat down, and waited. When her weeping had subsided, I asked Sonia if she wanted to stay after all. I spoke as gently as I could.

She did not deign to answer me with words: she just tugged on a pair of jeans, threw her clothes and makeup bag into the suitcase, and went outside to the car. I told the owner of the B&B that something had come up unexpectedly—a family emergency—necessitating our immediate return to Montreal. I hoped the story would explain Sonia's tears and our early departure.

Half an hour later, we came upon the accident.

Sonia shifts in her seat. Whenever she rubs her arms and neck, I know she is nervous or upset. She's doing it now.

"Should we have the kids come home?" I ask her. Nadie and Aidan have spent the first few days of their Nova Scotia vacation with my sister and her children, at the beach: making sandcastles, poking jellyfish with sticks, and playing in the waves of the cold North Atlantic Ocean.

"I don't think so. Why spoil their fun?" Sonia answers wearily.

I nod, more to myself than to Sonia. She's right, I think. Why bring them home? They'd want to know why, as would my sister. What would we tell them?

"Those poor people," Sonia says, "I can't believe what just happened." She stares forward through the front window into the night. The sky may be covered with cloud, for there is no light from the moon or the stars; our lonely headlights provide the only brightness.

"How are we going to get their stuff back to them?" I venture. I feel as if I'm talking to a stranger rather than to my wife of fifteen years. I turn my head again to see the suitcases and the green garbage bags. "I wish the police had told us their names," I add.

"Jenner and Kimberly Herac," Sonia murmurs.

I glance at her. "How do you know?"

"I overheard the paramedics. They didn't think they'd make it." Sonia's voice shakes. "They were bleeding internally. I keep hoping they'll be all right. Oh, Richard, that could have been us! If the deer had crossed the road a minute later...." Sonia reaches for more tissues. She has been strong until now, but with the passing of the crisis, she starts to weep.

I want very much to comfort her. I love Sonia, but having felt betrayed once, I do not want to be influenced by her tears.

As we reach Granby some ten minutes later, Sonia's sobbing slows, then ceases. As we pass beneath them, the street lights shine like strobe lights on the hood of the car. Light. Dark. Light. Dark. Light. Dark. All at once, Sonia notices the old book I found and picks it up.

"What is this? Where did you get it?" she asks curiously.

Did she not see me look at it before we left the accident scene, I wonder. "Found it at the accident," I say calmly.

As I look for signs that will direct me to the hospital, Sonia turns on the interior light and opens the diary to the first page. She gazes at the drawing of the woman and the little girl. "Wow!" she mutters, evidently as impressed as I was by the artist's skill.

She flips through the first twenty blank pages, before reaching the 2003 entry, which I had seen too. "Hmm," I hear her sigh softly, before she looks further through the brittle diary, doing so carefully. Thirty pages later, the written entry ends with a signature: Jenner Curtis Herac.

"Herac!" Sonia says, and we exchange a look of interest.

On the following page, a new date appears: June 23, 1975. The handwriting is in black ink and is quite different from that of the previous entry.

"Weird," Sonia pronounces. Then she adds in a conversational tone, almost as if she hadn't spent so long crying, "None of my business." She closes the diary and puts it back between us on the seat. Seconds later, we turn a corner and see the hospital.

Maximilian Curtis Herac

June 23, 1975

"When did you know something was wrong?" I asked Grandpa Sean.

Elbows on the table, he brought his hands together like a ball and socket, fist inside a cupped palm, and rubbed them together.

"With your grandmother?"

I nodded, watching the play of expressions on his face as he thought about the question: the frown that puckered his forehead, the smile at some unspoken memory, the sheen of sadness in his eyes.

"She let a pot of water boil dry," he said at last. "Then another one. I think that was the first bit of unusual behaviour. She wasn't the forgetful type, as you know." He put a hand to his mouth and rubbed a day's growth of whiskers. Unconsciously, I did the same.

My mother leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, eyebrows knit slightly together. She looked at me. "Why do you ask?"

"Curious," I said, feigning indifference.

It was late at night in the spring of 1962. The three of us sat around the dining room table, overhead light casting shadows on the wall behind us. The house was pleasantly calm at last, after Grandma's seventy-third birthday celebrations. Outside, the streets were quiet and dark; so dark that I could see my reflection in the room's lone window, almost as if it were a mirror.

At first, Grandpa had tried to handle the situation alone. He had spent his days watching her. But as Grandma's condition worsened, she needed greater supervision. Eventually, she began to get up in the middle of the night and leave the house to walk around the neighbourhood, curious about surroundings that had become new to her as she lost her memories. Inevitably, and despite his most devoted efforts, Grandpa's vigilance began to take its toll on his health. It would have taxed a young man to keep an eye on her twenty-four hours a day, let alone an eighty-year-old. Wanting to help Grandpa, Mom and Dad left Toronto for Edmonton, and I spent the night every once in a while when my studies allowed. This particular night was my night. I didn't mind helping out. I was in my final year of medicine at the University of Alberta, and I was getting used to the thirty-six-hour hospital shifts.

"Any new changes?" Mom asked. Although she visited nearly every day, it was difficult to gauge alterations in Grandma, unless she behaved uncharacteristically in one's presence.

"Not lately," said Grandpa. "Of course, today wasn't good for her. Too many people, I suspect."

Worse than you know, I thought to myself. "What was Grandma like when she was younger?" I asked aloud.

I had grown up in Toronto, but my grandparents had moved from there to Edmonton when I was only six. Although we visited them every few years, I had not had the

chance to get to know my grandparents well. Even after I came to Edmonton, on starting medicine here, I'm sorry to say that my studies and social life kept me so busy that I didn't spend much time with them. It had taken Grandma's severe deterioration to persuade me to visit more often.

"What do you want to know?" Grandpa asked.

"Anything."

I realized that for most of my life, I had seen my grandmother mainly as a gardener. In my earliest memories, her face and arms are tanned brown by the sun, and she is pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with enough fertilizer and soil to make a man twice her size grunt with effort. Every few years, the family travelled to Alberta by train, where we would spend part of the summer with my grandparents. Each visit began with a tour of Grandma's garden. She loved to show us around and bring us up to date with the things she had worked on since last we'd seen her: a new bed of flowers, a stone birdbath, a recently planted seedling, perhaps, or well-placed stepping stones that made the flower-filled corners of her garden more accessible.

On another level, of course, I was also aware of her intellectual accomplishments. She was one of the first women in Canada to receive a Ph.D., and one of the earliest to attain the status of associate professor, events which occurred years ago, before she and Grandpa retired in Edmonton. Yet for some reason, to me Grandma was her garden and the garden was her, an indivisible unity, neither existing without the other. That is, until earlier that day when, in a kitchen crowded with family and friends, Grandma had motioned me to lean down so that she could whisper in my ear and ask, "Who am I?"

Who am I? The question startled me at the time. I still felt stunned, hours later. It was as if part of the foundation

of my life, something I had always taken for granted, had started to crumble beneath me.

Dimly, I heard my mother talking. With an effort of will, I forced myself back to the present. “Dad, remember the time I froze my tongue to the axe?” she was asking my grandfather.

“Yes,” he said, and made himself comfortable in the chair, as if in a theatre, waiting for a movie to begin.

Mom turned to me. “It happened at our place on Concord Avenue. I was four. I was outside, playing in the backyard after dinner. The snow was bright, lit by a full moon. Every chimney in the neighbourhood gave off smoke that looked like arms reaching for the sky. I saw the hatchet leaning against the shed. When I picked it up, ice crystals on the axe head sparkled in the moonlight. The crystals looked so beautiful that I had a sudden urge to taste them. Next thing I knew, my tongue was stuck to the cold metal. Sobbing and frightened, I stumbled back to the house. I tried to yell, hoping my parents would hear me and come to my aid, but no sound came, for the heavy hatchet, as long as I was tall, was pulling at my tongue. I was terrified my tongue would be pulled right out of my mouth. Mom was shocked when I burst into the kitchen, and she saw the hatchet on my tongue. But she hid her shock well. I still remember how calm she was. She scooped me up in her arms, sat me at the kitchen table, heated some water, and poured it over the axe head. When it came off, I was still sobbing. I cried and cried and cried. It’s one of my earliest memories.”

Mom had just finished her story, when Grandpa arched back in his chair and turned his head to the hallway. Putting a finger to his lips, he signalled us to be quiet. We listened and waited a few seconds, then Grandpa said, “I think I hear Viktoria,” and got up to check on Grandma.

Grandma had gone to bed three hours earlier, but with her erratic sleep patterns, she could wake up and try to get out of the house at any time. When Grandpa left the room, I looked at the birthday cards set out on the china hutch. I recognized names of cousins, uncles, and aunts. There were also names I did not recognize; I presumed they belonged to friends. My eyes fell on one card in particular, a romantic-looking thing with entwined hearts and roses. "From an old boyfriend," it was signed.

"Mom, take a look at this," I said in surprise. "Who gave her this?" My grandparents had been married more than fifty years, and I found it impossible to imagine anyone tracking down my grandmother after so long.

My mother smiled as she looked at the card I handed her. "Ask your grandfather," she said.

The thought of asking Grandpa about Grandma's old flame made me uncomfortable. "Tell me," I said.

Mom just looked at me the way a teacher looks at a bright student, hoping he'll get the answer without help.

"Ask your Grandpa," she said again, just as Grandpa returned to the room.

"She's still down," Grandpa said, referring to Grandma.

"Good. Dad, Max has a question for you."

I gave Mom a dirty look. Her smile was without remorse. Trapped, I had no choice but to hand him the card and ask, "Grandpa, who is this from?"

As my grandfather looked at the card, I noticed that his fingers were gnarled with age and his hands marked with brown spots. Somewhat nervous, I glanced at his face, but his expression told me nothing. He looked up and gave me a wide grin. I felt dim-witted, as if I were the only person at a dinner party not laughing at a clever joke.

"You don't know?"

"No!"

"Me!" he said with a grin, and blew his nose like an out-of-tune horn.

At least I had the grace to feel abashed as it struck me how one dimensionally I had seen my grandparents until now. Two elderly people with no lives other than their present ones.

Earlier that day, when Grandma had asked, "Who am I?" I had given the first answer that came to mind: "Your name is Viktoria, and I am your grandson, Max."

She had looked at me a moment, without answering. Then she'd shuffled over to Grandpa, at whose side she remained for the rest of the day, like a child who stays close to a parent in a stranger's house. I had watched her follow my grandfather around, had noticed the odd strand of black hair on a head mostly grey, and observed the face tanned and wrinkled like an apple stripped of its peel and left too long in the open air. Never a tall woman, age had further diminished Grandma's stature.

For some reason, her question had affected me profoundly and reminded me of my own uncertainty. In a few short months, I would be a licensed physician, and yet I was having doubts about my chosen profession. I lacked passion for my work. Though I enjoyed studying chemistry, biology, and physiology, treating patients failed to provide me with the satisfaction I had expected. If someone had told me, before I started medical school, how I would feel around sick people—some of them complainers and malingerers—or that my patients would expect miracle cures rather than take proper care of themselves, I might not have gone into medicine.

In hindsight, I realize I should have been more realistic—after all, medicine is about illness, disease, and healing. It was only at that point, after years of study and work in hospital

wards, that I had a clearer idea of what my career entailed. Now that I was so close to the end, I wondered if I had what it took to be a dedicated doctor. If I even cared about being a doctor. Could I have chosen a different career? Hard to know. After all, I had wanted to be a doctor for so long that I hadn't explored other careers. And what would happen if I did do something else?

"You know, leaving the pot to boil dry may have been the first bit of odd behaviour," said Grandpa, referring to our earlier conversation, "but the first time I really understood something was wrong was when your grandmother rearranged the house."

Mom laughed and looked at me. "You haven't heard this one?"

I shook my head.

A moment passed before Grandpa continued. "I left home to do some errands one afternoon. Viktoria hadn't done anything more than let a pot or two boil dry—unusual but not enough to indicate there was any real need for concern. When I got home, I found her exactly where I had left her, working with her flowers in the front yard. I went into the house. Max, it was as if I'd walked into a stranger's home. I can't explain it, other than to say that something didn't feel right. The furniture was all there. The pictures were hanging in the same spots. The dirty dishes were still in the sink. But somehow there was an emptiness. I looked around puzzled. Suddenly, it dawned on me…where were all the plants? As you know, Grandma not only loved growing flowers and trees in her garden, she also loved the greenery and vibrant colours of the flowers throughout the house."

Grandpa paused. His eyes had a distant expression, as if he had gone back in time. Then he went on. "When I realized the plants were missing, I thought maybe she had

taken them outside to repot, but when I looked outside, I didn't see any houseplants. I was stunned that all of these plants could just disappear. It wasn't possible. I was about to ask your grandmother where they were, when I noticed soil, like a cat's paw, extending from beneath the front closet. I opened the closet. To my amazement, twenty houseplants had been thrown in there helter-skelter. I couldn't believe it! Since there should have been at least a hundred plants in the house, I went from closet to closet and opened them. Sure enough, I found the rest."

"Did you speak to Grandma about them?"

"I did. I went back outside and asked her why the plants were in the closets. She looked at me with a straight face and said, 'Because they were bad.'" Grandpa chuckled. "I don't know what the plants did to piss off your grandmother, but they never did it again."

I wondered how my grandfather could laugh. My grandmother's growing confusion and memory loss saddened me profoundly—maybe because I knew from experience where her path would inevitably lead. I had already completed a stretch in a geriatric ward. The men and women there, forced through necessity to leave their homes and spouses, lingered in various stages of dementia. Those furthest along were often angry, confused by their unfamiliar surroundings, or immobile, lying in bed unwilling to move. My grandfather, wise man that he was, must have known what to expect. Yet even though he was losing more of his wife day by day, he seemed able to accept the situation stoically.

"I have another childhood memory," said Mom, rubbing her hands together as if for warmth. "Conrad and I got into a big sack of flour in the pantry. It felt so good to dip our hands in the soft flour. Pretty soon we started to fling handfuls all

over the kitchen. When your grandma came back from the neighbour's, the kitchen was covered in flour."

"Did you catch hell?" I asked.

"No. Your grandma walked into the kitchen, grabbed some change from her flour-covered purse and took us to a café on Bloor Street, where she treated us to milkshakes and pie. It was if she was rewarding us for what we'd done. I can still picture the tracks her shoes left as she walked across the kitchen floor. I remember thinking it looked like it had snowed in the house."

"She actually took you for milkshakes and pies?" I asked disbelievingly.

"Yes, really good pie too. Flapper pie!"

"***Why?***"

"What else could she do? She had only herself to blame, leaving two young children alone, even if it was just for a few minutes. She was a good mother."

Grandpa reached over and put his hand lovingly on Mom's arm. They shared a long look and an understanding that I was not part of.

Suddenly, I remembered a hot day in July 1949, a few weeks after my tenth birthday. I had been outside all day, playing Red Rover and tag with my friends. Before falling asleep that night, my legs felt stiff and sore. Next morning when I tried to get out of bed, I fell on the floor. I called my mother and told her to look at my legs because they were still sleeping. A flash of terror ripped across her face—the first and only time I saw her frightened. She was barely taller than me, but she lifted me in her arms, put me in the car, and took me to the Hospital for Sick Children.

I spent the next three months in the polio ward. Three times a day, the nurses would apply hot wet woollen cloths,

called Sister Kenny Hot Packs, to my legs. The packs were meant to help loosen muscles, relieve pain, and enable my legs to be moved, stretched, and strengthened. After that, the nurses rubbed my legs with hot oil. Twice a day, my physical therapists encouraged me to get on a bicycle equipped with training wheels and to pedal the corridors of the ward. The rest of the time, I listened to baseball games on the radio and played with my new friends, who were in wheelchairs or on crutches like me.

I was one of the fortunate ones—I was only paralyzed from the waist down. Some of the people, many of them kids my age, could not breathe on their own and were placed in iron lungs, the "whoo-ish" sound filling the wards. Mom and Dad visited every day. Through the window separating us, I would tell them about my new friends, the nurses, the doctors, and the games we played. Like all parents, they brought gifts. The wealthier ones brought toys; the poorer ones lumps of sugar. Mom and Dad were always smiling and talkative, maybe because I was getting better, but I saw many parents with puffy, red eyes who would leave quickly as their tears flowed.

Three months later, I walked out of the hospital unaided. Before I left, I promised my favourite nurse Miss Hanham that I would be a doctor one day. From then on, every time I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "A doctor."

But it wasn't what I wanted anymore. The realization worried me. Again, I asked myself, what would I be if not a doctor? If I did something else, would that change me? Would I become something less if I did something less prestigious than medicine? Would I lose some part of myself? For so long, becoming a physician was part of my identity. Without a clear identity, I was disoriented, as if I'd been riding a fast-moving merry-go-round for too long. There was a haven of

security in knowing who I was going to be, and that haven was vanishing.

"Your grandmother loved horses," said Grandpa, drawing me out of my reverie. "We used to borrow old Mr. Issacman's mares. He had a farm not far from our place on Concord Avenue."

"I remember him. Conrad and I used to raid his garden for peas. Threatened to shoot us, the old grouch," Mom reflected.

Grandpa laughed. "We told him to say that."

"***What?***"

"Just to see if it had any effect on you kids."

"Dad!"

"You turned out all right." He was still amused. "We rode those mares of his every Saturday before you kids came along. There's a great picture of Viktoria and me standing on them." Grandpa went looking for the photo. He was back quickly. "She's hiding that one again," he said, referring to Grandma's habit of hiding things that held strong memories for her. "But I found these." He handed me a pile of grainy black and white 5 x 7 photos.

The captions on the back of the photos identified members of Grandma's family. For the first time I saw pictures of my great-grandparents. In some of the photos they were cradling babies—Grandma and her two sisters.

"There's one of you and her in there somewhere," said Grandpa.

I flipped through the batch until I found a picture of Grandma and myself feeding a horse. It was taken in 1944, when I was five. A year later, Grandma and Grandpa would move to Edmonton.

"I remember this!" I said, too loudly, for Mom motioned me to keep my voice down. The picture evoked a memory

of walking towards a barbed-wire fence where two or three horses stood. At the fence, Grandma would place a carrot in my outstretched hand so that I could offer the treat to whichever horse butted its head closest to me. I recall the tickling caress of gentle lips. I fed them one at a time. When the last carrot had been devoured, Grandma, her strength belying her shortness, would manage to balance me on a fence post. Standing there, secure in Grandma's arms, I enjoyed stroking the firm necks of the horses until they grew bored with us and wandered away in search of something more interesting.

"Here's another good one," said Grandpa.

Pictured was a group of people, all wearing white lab coats. In the foreground, Bunsen burners, beakers, graduated cylinders, filter flasks, test tubes, and a mortar and pestle crowded together on a table. Of the thirty-odd people, only one was a woman—Grandma, very young and fresh faced.

"Who are they?" I asked, intrigued.

"A bunch of Viktoria's undergrad students. See there, that's Charlie Best on her right."

"***Charles Best***?" Wide-eyed, I gaped at Grandpa. "Of Banting and Best? The men who discovered insulin?"

"The very same. Viktoria was a lecturer then. A few years later, she became an associate professor. You didn't know that, Max?"

"I knew Grandma taught university. I didn't know about Charles Best." I looked at my mother, wondering how I had missed this fascinating bit of information.

"It was long before you were born, honey. I haven't thought about it for years. My mother never was one to talk about herself."

"She was something else." Grandpa beamed. "In those days not many women went to university, let alone taught. Hell, women weren't even allowed to vote yet! A lot of men

didn't believe she was capable of teaching—doing a man's work."

I had no women professors even now, I thought.

"Even when things were difficult," Grandpa said proudly, "I never saw Viktoria without a smile on her face."

I must have had an unpleasant look on mine.

Grandpa looked at me. "Burr under your saddle, Max?"

I bit my lip, unable to speak. I felt quite remote from Mom and Grandpa just then. Conscience-stricken. I had listened to them sharing their memories about Grandma, while at the same time I was keeping important information from them. I needed to come clean about Grandma's further mental deterioration.

I looked from my mother to my grandfather. "Grandma asked me today, 'Who am I?'"

Grandpa nodded. "She asks that once in a while," he said, without a trace of sadness in his voice.

"What do you tell her?"

"That she's anything she wants to be."

"Why?"

"Because it's what she believed." Seeing my bewilderment, Grandpa went on. "Didn't your mom ever tell you that you could be anything you wanted to be?"

I nodded, and Mom smiled. I had heard the words a million times. Mom and Dad hadn't pressured me to become a doctor—or anything else for that matter.

"So, why the look?" Grandpa persisted.

"Why wouldn't you remind Grandma she's your wife and a mother? Something like that?"

Grandpa yawned and stretched. "Because she's no one thing. She's much more complex than that." He gave me a probing look. "Do you understand, Max?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Good. Well, I better hit the kip. Viktoria went down early tonight." Grandpa gave my mom a hug and told me to wake him if I needed help.

I walked Mom to the door. "You okay?" she asked, as she put on her jacket.

"Yes. Just have lots of studying to get done."

"Don't work too hard." She gave me a hug, "Thanks for helping out tonight. I know you're busy." She drove away and I locked the door.

I walked quietly around the house that was becoming gradually more familiar to me. I wondered what would happen to it when Grandpa became too old to care for it. A carpenter by trade, my grandfather had built the house. "First came out here in '14," he once told me, "but we weren't ready to leave Toronto then. Wasn't a hell of a lot here at the time, but I sure loved the big open sky. It was like there was more room to breathe. And that river valley in the summer—green as an emerald. I knew then we'd come back one day." Right after the Second World War, my grandparents moved permanently to Edmonton. They found a piece of land west of the old McKernan homestead and south of the University of Alberta and built their retirement home. The little house, painted yellow with light green trim on the eaves, doors, and windows was now becoming the cosiest, most secure place I knew.

I went into the living room to sit down on the chesterfield and read. As I sat down, I felt something hard beneath one of the cushions. Reaching underneath, I pulled out a gilt-framed photo and an old book, both no doubt hidden by my grandmother. The photo was of Grandpa and Grandma standing side by side on top of three saddled horses, like a couple of trick riders in a circus. They were decked out in chaps, vests, and cowboy hats. Both were smiling and full of

the joy of youth. I studied the photo, then put it on the coffee table and opened the old book. It took me a few moments to recognize it. It was the old journal.

It was years since I had seen the old wreck with its tattered corners and yellowed paper. My mother had often read it to me when I was young and told me one day I would add a story of my own to it. The stories hadn't interested me much then. At the time, I was too absorbed in tree forts and board games and the neighbours' three-legged dog to give much attention to some ratty old diary. The only part of the journal I did find intriguing was the geographic coordinates at the end of the original entry. I liked to imagine that the coordinates would lead me to buried pirate treasure. I sighed, wishing I were young and naive again.

I closed the old journal and lay down on the chesterfield to think about my situation. It seemed so simple when I was young. I knew what I wanted to be, and my teachers praised and encouraged my choice of career, solidifying my sense of self. What would those teachers think if I were to abandon medicine? What would my friends think of their former valedictorian, the boy most likely to succeed? What would my family think? Was I measured by the expectations of others?

I thought back to my first year anatomy class when our professor held up his hand and asked, "Is this my hand?" Sensing a trick, the class had remained silent until an intrepid student responded in the affirmative. "Has this always been my hand?" the professor continued. A student behind me said, "Yes." "Will this always be my hand?" This time I said, "Yes." "Consider," the professor said, "that it takes approximately seven years for every cell in your hand to be replaced. All your blood, bones, muscles, tendons, ligaments, hair, fingernails, skin, and fluids—what you now call your hand—was not a part of your hand seven years ago.

From down the hall, I heard some rustling and then a door opened. I lifted my head and saw Grandma. She wore a yellow housecoat, embroidered with delicate little blue-petalled flowers, over Grandpa's full-length, red, button-up long johns, which were rolled up at the ankles and sleeves.

I stood and said, "Hello."

"Conrad!" she said. In her state of dementia, she'd mistaken me for her son. "Did you see what Emily's boy drew today?" She scurried into the guest bedroom, returning with a sheet of orange cardboard paper, which she handed to me. It was a childish drawing of two stick characters, one smaller than the other, executed in black crayon. The smaller figure held what looked like a hammer; the larger one a saw. On one side a shining purple sun beat down on a half-built yellow house.

"Max drew it," Grandma said enthusiastically. On the back, in my mother's distinctive, bold handwriting were the words, "Max and his Grandpa building the house. October 1945." I was six when I drew it—a lifetime before polio, a lifetime before medical school.

"Emily tells me he wants to be a carpenter like his grandpa."

I searched my mind but didn't remember ever wanting to be a carpenter. "What if he wants to be something else?" I asked. My neck and shoulders ached with sudden tension.

"I suspect he will," she said matter of factly.

But it can't be that easy, can it? I asked myself. I expected no reply to the unspoken question. I felt as fragile as an origami crane, at the mercy of a slight breeze or angry hand. *Who am I? How do I find my place in the world?* I wondered.

It was as if Grandma had heard the questions in my mind. This mother, daughter, grandmother, wife, girlfriend, animal

lover, chemist, and gardener reached up and took my face firmly, but gently, in her bird-like hands. Her eyes as sober as if a piece of her formal vital self had returned, she looked hard at me, then said, "Never let anyone define you."

And then the look was gone. Confusion replaced her lucidity. But that moment was enough. "Where am I going?" she asked. Without a word, I put her arm on mine and turned towards her bedroom.

Maximilian Curtis Herac