

*entrez andré*  
**ENTREZ, ANDRÉ**

Is it the gothic window? The diffuse slant of light bathing her head? Or her white skin, so removed from everyday contretemps that he can't imagine she ever blushes or looks flustered. Today a headband keeps the smooth veil of dark hair off her face. Like a nun, he thinks—except for her short skirt with its frilled hem of brown lace, her faded denim jacket on the library chair.

André watches as if to pinpoint a secret. Her hands on the keyboard, eyes on the screen, posture attentive to the spell of her writing. His guess is fiction. He's got close enough to recognize the stab-and-shrink layout of dialogue. The short paragraphs. Tight description, if she's wise. Show, don't tell. The mantra of Writing 101.

But he can't always sit where he can observe her. The library used to be quieter, emptier. More like the church it once was. Now, with the computers, people rush in off the street with their bags of shopping or laundry to check e-mail. Or they're avid for news they can only get online: not the local outcry about changing Avenue du Parc to Avenue Robert Bourassa, but what's happening back home in Haiti or Russia.

André has his laptop. He escapes to the library for a change of vacuum, as he calls it. The emptiness wherein words bloom—or don't. He can only stare at his desk for so long. The shelf of reference books he no longer uses. (Google is easier.) Dictionaries, Greek mythology, architectural styles, a thesaurus. Against the books he's propped a framed photo of his grandparents who farmed in the Alps. They wear their holiday best—kerchief,

locket, white shirt, vest—though their backs and shoulders are hunched like the beasts of burden they were. Beside them, a picture of his niece, Maude, grinning to show off her two missing front teeth. She's finished university and pregnant now, generous with details about how a lesbian gets pregnant. As if he can't figure it out for himself. Above the books and the photos hangs the poster he carried across Europe in a plastic tube tied to his backpack. At twenty-two he identified with the painting of a man on a bench by the coal fire, his abject posture, the close dormer ceiling. All these years later he sees the pathos, but he still doesn't take the poster down. It reminds him of himself as a young man hitchhiking across France and Germany, sleeping on a beach in Crete.

Computers, André thinks. They don't belong in a library. The traffic of people using them causes too much disturbance to work. So he tells himself as he leans on his forearms, drums fingers on the table, watches the young woman who carries her own deep pool of quiet with her. Eyes focused, wrists at the ready. She's keying at her devotions. The library still has that nave and apse feel. The vaulted ceiling and long gothic windows. The rows of books like rows of pews.

She's packing up. One minute her eyes are level with the screen. The next she bends to the tower on the floor, tugs her USB stick by its green and black bracelet—something she might have knotted or braided—and drops it in the corduroy bag she slings over her shoulder.

He usually resents these modern hippie pretenders to the styles of his youth. Can't they develop their own fashion and music, and leave his nostalgia alone? He remembers the flapping bells of his jeans against his bare feet, the sun on his chest, the apple-seed necklace Cécile made for him.

Now André wonders if it might be a point of contact. Hey, he could say, I noticed ...

His eyes follow her to the doorway. Her short skirt, its frilled hem, the tights, her pink ankle-high runners.

André orders another beer. Jacques still has his hands in a fence around his first. He becomes sullen when life isn't going well.

Drinks less instead of more. Just as well, André thinks, since the beer drags him lower.

The bar is narrow, a corridor of late-afternoon dusk edged by the light from the French doors onto the terrace out back, the street out front. Ceiling fans stir the tails of talk that rise from the few tables where people sit.

Jacques stares at his beer, his coarse features in shadow. When he looks up, his face is sallow in the bald light from the street. “What’s she trying to prove? I stripped that table. Probably lost a couple months off my life breathing the fumes. And now she stands there with the movers saying *that*, the table.” He waves an imperious hand in the air.

“Wasn’t it her grandmother’s?”

“She hated her grandmother. Said she didn’t want anything from the house. I was the one who said to take the table. It’s solid cherry, just needed some work.”

André remembers the silken sheen of the table, the amber grain. In their heyday, Jacques and Christiane hosted evenings renowned among the faculty. But André carefully keeps his sigh of regret to himself. The ghost-shrug of his shoulder.

His own divorce, more than nine years ago, was relatively friendly. Gwen had worn the suit and breakfasted downtown while he tumbled laundry from the washer to the dryer, conjuring sexy scenes for his urban picaresque novel. When they split, he took only his desk, his books, and his clothes. He didn’t look forward to teaching again—playing stooge to a room of dull faces—but entertained great hopes for his newly single status, his mystique as a writer at large, his unpardonable pen. At long last, too, his novel was published, followed by another that made it onto the shortlist for a national award. Rumours circulated that Gwen felt he owed her a cheque. She was living in Sainte-Foy, remarried with two children. He recalled the flattened pancakes of spun laundry. Stacking and emptying the dishwasher day after day. How she wouldn’t eat salad unless he’d made it with hydroponic lettuce. As far as he was concerned, they were even.

André swings back the door, already scanning the computers

for her smooth, dark head. Good. She sits out in the open across from a table where he'll be able to see her face.

He shifts a chair for a bee-line prospect, warily settling himself and his laptop. Not that she even glances his way. Her fingers piano, outward eyes on the screen, inward eyes on a game that makes her generous mouth quirk, almost smile. She likes what she's writing. She's decided it's good. He knows that trick. The sorcery of self-love. You've written it, it's your darling. Words buoyed by your own heart-sore viscera. You don't see how they sag, or that the knit of your convictions is as transparent as an Ann Landers column.

Does she know she needs a reader? Not a boyfriend who feels he fathered her oeuvre because of a few sex scenes, but someone with an experienced, critical eye?

Entrez, André.

Though he hasn't yet figured out how to plot that. Hey, there, I've noticed you writing every day ...

Right. That'll give her the creeps. You're not supposed to watch people in the library.

Or: Hey, seems to me I've seen you here before. Do you live in the neighbourhood? She might say yes. She might say no. Either way she'll go back to her writing.

Hey, that's cute, that string there. His foot mimes how his toes will point at the little black and green noose attached to her USB stick.

He wonders why she doesn't have a computer at home. Although he remembers that, too, what it's like to have no more than ten bucks left once the rent was paid.

He can't help but watch her at the altar of her words. The thrall of her ardour. He'd call her his muse, except that his own writing has hardly advanced.

Maybe he should use her as a character? His agent would gag. She already told him he had a dozen too many. Can't you write from just *one* point of view for a change? And why not first person? In the age of reality TV, that's what people want: seamy, confessional, private I's.

This time he sees when it happens—remarkable, really—how her expression changes like a nictitating tremor across her face.

She doesn't reread, doesn't hesitate. She bends to pull out her USB stick, drops it in her corduroy bag, and grabs her jacket as she slides off the chair. Her peg-legged jeans emphasize her stride, the bounce of her step. So much energy for a body so slight, her hand already out to shove through the door.

She faces the wall today, her computer in full view for whoever cares to look. André wonders if he ever worked with such easy oblivion. Even when a kid swings into the chair next to her, almost sending her raggedy jacket to the floor with his knapsack, she keeps tapping word upon word into being. She backspaces too, but not the way André zigzags retreat until a whole morning's work doesn't amount to a paragraph.

He details the piety of her straight back, the poise of her shoulders—and feels how he slouches. The leather string that ties her hair lies off-centre between her shoulder blades. A wayward snake on a pale blue top. He tries not to let his eyes flick to her screen. To watch the unflagging train of her progress.

The angle of her back shifts slightly. She seems to nod once, opens her hand for the mouse, and closes the program. She glances at the window, sees it's still raining, pokes her arms into her jacket, snatches her bag.

Wait! The word nearly flies out but he bites it back, lowers his head, and pretends not to watch her swing through the door.

He snaps his laptop shut, scoops it under his arm, and makes an ungainly dash for her chair. To do what? Right, the internet. He'll look up ... the correct temperature to serve Pinot Noir. He created a character who's a stickler for elegant dining.

He clicks from site to site, ready for when she returns. She has to return. Her little black and green rosary still hangs from the tower on the floor.

The next day André arrives earlier than usual to wait for her. He's already looked on the bulletin board to see if she posted a notice. The wool braid in his shirt pocket makes a small, irregular bulge. He imagines pulling it out—abracadabra!—and hopes that the magic of surprise will keep her from wondering how he knows it's hers.

She'll be grateful. She should be grateful. Her eyes on his, finally noticing him.

"I can hardly believe it of Christiane," Jacques says. Another Wednesday, their weekly beer after teaching. André teaches a creative writing course, Jacques a lecture on medieval literature for third-year students.

"Divorce does that."

"I put the money into RRSP's so I could get a tax break. They're not fifty-fifty. They're mine."

"Whose money was it?"

Jacques throws him a look. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm trying to understand her rationale."

Jacques scowls at his beer. "She's not *being* rational. There's nothing to understand. She wants things that aren't hers to want."

André thinks of the USB pen on his desk. He doesn't want it. He'd return it if he could. He knows they're her words. He's not a thief.

André sits facing the door of the library. He realizes now that he should have called out when it happened. Hey, you forgot your USB! She would have smiled. Thanked him. Oh God, you saved my life! I know, he'd have said, nodding at his laptop. I'm a writer. And you?

That night André wakes in the thin hours when even the traffic on Parc has stopped. For a long moment he lies, gauging the depth of darkness to the ceiling. Then he throws aside the duvet and pulls on a T-shirt. His feet know the path to his study in the dark. The tiny, electric-blue beacon from under the lid of his laptop. He clicks on the desk lamp, then doesn't move for a moment. Still standing, he considers the shoreline of debris around his laptop, the strata of yellow Post-its, sheets of foolscap, torn ends of envelopes. He only rarely reads his notes but still has to write them—like throwing out the crumbs of a trail he follows as best as he can.

Next to his laptop lies the USB stick with its coy tail. His grandparents and four-year-old niece watch. But he doesn't want to spy on what held her attention so faithfully day after day,

line after line. He's not a thief, not a voyeur either.

And yet. A thought needles him. Woke him from his sleep, forced him from his bed. Not words, a number.

He remains upright and, from this strange angle, fiddles with the button to open his laptop. Turns it on, has to wait. Slots in the stick. There's only one document. *Yesterday You Knew*. He double-clicks, keeps his eyes on the keyboard. Ctrl + End takes him to ... 268 pages. She's lost a whole novel. Or what, for him, would be a novel. She showed no signs of slowing.

He closes the document. Removes the pen. His laptop burps.

In bed again, sleep eludes him, whether he faces the window or the door, lies on his back, heaps the pillows.

André no longer visits the library. The weather is finally warm enough that he can install himself at the park by the fountain with its white-noise splash of water. Century-old maples hang a canopy that shades his screen. He sits in the middle of a bench with his laptop bag to one side, a takeout double espresso on the other.

No one bothers him. They see he's working. He's lopped a few characters, changed some details. Jacques will forgive him. Christiane won't. They always liked to joke, are you going to put this in a novel? But it's never what people offer that he uses.

Today, when André steps out the front door of his building, he's distracted by a scene between a cyclist and a squeegee punk. Both brandish swords: a bicycle pump, a long-handled sponge. Traffic honks, a disgruntled chorus with no time for drama. The cyclist flips his bike around and wheels off. So much, André thinks, for heroics.

By the time he realizes he's walking in the wrong direction, he's almost at the library. He hesitates, then continues along the block. Up the church steps, then holding the door for a mom with a stroller.

Inside, he peers toward the direction of the computers. The mayhem of heads and caps and scarves seems to part. She sits in plain view, her back as erect as ever, her eyes on the screen.

His glance drops to the tower on the floor. She's attached a new USB stick to a circlet of red beads. Shiny, blood-red drops. Hard to miss or forget.

He lowers himself onto a chair where he can see her in profile, holding his laptop bag in a loose embrace against his chest. He knows she won't turn around. She only sees what she's writing, what's playing out in her head.

He notes the sleek pull of her hair. Her deep white skin. The yearning that softens her mouth. And still the pink runners, though it's sandal weather. A skirt you can probably see through when she walks. Her fingers on the keyboard not once breaking stride. Above her, the high gothic window.

He stands, hands clenched on his laptop bag, banging it against his chest as he strides to the door.

A year later his novel is complete, printed, packaged in a cardboard box and entrusted to the bowels of the postal system. Despite her initial misgivings, his agent *loves* it. His *agent*, he scoffs, though in this case he decides to believe her.

He's sweeping the messy heap of notes off his desk into the garbage, unsticking Post-its, reading one now and again, when he finds the black and green braid. He stares at it for a moment. Losing it didn't even slow her down.

He opens the drawer where he keeps a pair of scissors. Dollar-store scissors. Green plastic handles. One quick snip. The wool drops onto the scraps of paper in the garbage. His laptop is on, though angled away because he was cleaning. He doesn't pull it closer. He uncaps the stick, slots it in. Highlights the file with a click. Jabs Delete. Are you sure? Yes. Opens the trash icon, empties the bin.

## the laird boy

### THE LAIRD BOY

Never any food in the house, but you could be sure they never ran out of smokes or booze. Halfway through a pack and they sent her off to the store on her bike. When he cabbied nights, he stayed in town until the liquor store opened. Those mornings she stood in the dust-stinky corner behind the tv, staring out the dirty window up the road at the crest of the hill where cars appeared. She knew the exact flat-top shape and size of his, the space between the headlights. She yearned for boxes and cans, packages her mom could turn into meals. Ten years old, the fingers on both hands crossed, whispering the prayer she'd learned in school—*my soul to keep*—and the cursing she heard at home—*bastard son of a bitch, you'd better*. Sometimes he remembered and she watched him heave a sack from the seat. She still only ran when she heard the kitchen door. Cereal and milk, like kids on tv. Once, a loaf of raisin bread she toasted, slice after slice, and slathered with marg. She could always tell, just seeing his Impala barely cruise down the hill, the dust slowly rising behind it, when he already had the cap off a bottle. He'd forgot.

They lived on gin and cigarettes. Cocktail nuts. Doughnuts that sat on the table breeding flies. Some days her mom didn't even get out of bed. Half-drunk, sleeping off a drunk, cranky and drunk. Her body inert, pillow crushed between the bed and the wall, sheets the grey residue of nightmares. Her dad snoring by the tv. The yellowed armholes of his undershirt. Foam stuffing gaping from the ripped seam in his chair. He jerked awake, mumbling his dry mouth, hand already open for his glass.

She rode fast on her bike, dodging the big chunks of gravel, not looking at the fields on either side or the few houses below the rise of the hill. She knew how the neighbours watched from behind their curtains down long telescope lanes, the words they called her mom and dad. In the winter, she couldn't ride her bike unless the plough had just passed. Wind slammed down the hill, ice turned into air. The outreaching arms of the trees implored the sky, so bare without leaves they were, frozen and shivering. In the spring, the fields swamped across the ditch almost as high as the bed of the road. Ontario marshland. Jellied blobs of tadpoles in the clear, wet-straw water the sun warmed, sprouting baby frogs that hopped everywhere—hundreds of them, in every direction—in the weeds, in the ditch, onto the road. Sometimes she squished one with her tires. She couldn't help it, pedalling so hard, veering around the potholes and stones in the road. A frog arced out of nowhere. Landed just there.

At the store, Crapface added her mom's smokes to their tab before he slid the pack across the counter but, when she tried the same with a can of noodles or a bag of chips, he said, I don't know about that. Your mom didn't say.

Her voice pitched in amazement. Mom didn't say? Can I use the phone? She held it close to her ear so Crapface couldn't hear that it was still ringing. Mom, I'm at the store. You forgot to say about supper. Yeah, OK. Nodding at Crapface. She says it's OK.

At school she could beat up on the little kids, swipe their lunches. Sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper, folded and tucked, the bread sliced in half, sometimes in quarters. Tuna and lettuce. Bologna. Peanut butter. Homemade cookies. Chocolate chip. Shortbread trees with red and green sprinkles at Christmas. She told the kids that if they squealed she'd grind their knees in the gravel behind the rink. They knew she'd do it. Knew too that she never took from the same kid twice in a row.

But at home, what was she supposed to eat? The curtains?

They hung in blue folds, felted with dust, next to the toaster. Joking at first, knowing it was mean but feeling mean, she lifted an edge of fabric and dropped it in the slot. She didn't move when she saw the twisted threads of smoke rising, nor when

the tips of flame began to dance-lick in play. But then the curtains caught and the toaster was a dragon breathing wrath. She jumped away, shouting fire!

She managed to guide her mom past the kitchen, already barred with flames, and out the door. Her mom's nightie was limp, her dirty hair mashed to the side of her head. She stood barefoot in the weeds by the ditch, moaning and tearful. Her face looked like any other mom watching her house burn down. Except that it was four o'clock in the afternoon when every other mom was making supper.

The neighbours drove up to watch. They sounded concerned and tried to comfort her mom, but she could see the righteous pleasure on their faces. She'd often heard them say that their house was an eyesore that should be pulled down.

She left her mom with them and rode away on her bike to sit by the creek. She stared at the minnows hanging in the water like tiny slashes of paint. A crayfish scuttled from under one stone to another. A long time passed before she heard sirens in the distance, longer again before they crested the hill.

Later, when the neighbours asked her what had happened and she said she didn't know, they didn't believe her. But when she told them she'd tried to toast the curtains because there was never anything to eat, they told her to be quiet. Not to make up stories.

With the insurance money, her dad bought a trailer he set on blocks beside where their house used to be. He said grass would cover the burned ground, but they never had grass, only weeds, and the needling stink of charred wood and plaster brooded in the damp marsh air. She held her breath whenever she stepped out the door.

When she went to the store now, she didn't bother lying about food anymore. She took what she wanted. Crapface didn't know because he never moved from his stool. She could stand in front of him, holding a can below the edge of the counter, and he didn't even guess. Ketchup, hamburger buns, even eggs. As long as no one drove up and walked in the door behind her. If they did, she always heard the easing crunch of their car on the stones in time.

The thing with Mr. Tegger started when he fixed her tire. She stood in the garage, watching how he patched the rubber and held the tire in a basin of water, turning it length by length to check for bubbles. His hands were deliberate and careful. They knew how to touch. When he finished, he leaned her bike against the wall. All around stood old pieces of furniture he might repair one day, car parts he'd salvaged, tools black with grease. He never said a word. She followed him to the back of the garage, right up to where he sat in a chair, and let him maneuver her until she stood with her bum pressed against his open legs. That first day he only held her close, and she smelled his man's smell of work sweat and sawdust as his hands crept under her shirt and tapped her tender new breasts. She could see past the upended chair legs and discarded furniture to the driveway and the fields outside. Other times his hand touched her crotch, rubbing over her jeans to a rhythm he opened inside her, holding her so gently, yet urgently against him. The day his hand hesitated at her zipper, she undid it, wanting him to slide his work-roughened fingers between her legs. *There.*

Jimmy Tegger spied on them and told. The neighbours said what could you expect? Growing up in that house. Sure as anything, she'd end up like her mom, pregnant and drunk.

Pregnant? Never. And just the smell of booze soured her mouth. She'd as soon drink gasoline.

A skinny-hipped teenager with long legs, she was already planning her getaway when her dad totalled the cab and himself in it. He took an overpass, sailed right over it.

That left the girl and her mom, who wanted to sell the trailer and their small square of land and rent an apartment in town. The two of them in town, even closer to the liquor store? *No way.*

The girl packed her slinkiest tops, walked an hour to the end of the gravel road where it met the highway, and stuck out her thumb.

Before Laird was even born, the farm was divided. Each acre. Each fence post. Each potato, if they could have. Resentment seethed. Decisions stung. But what was ever fair and square between brothers?

Everything finally committed to paper and legal, they weren't about to start again because their mother had a last-minute whim for a baby. (No mention was ever made of the old man's part, the embarrassing proof that, at his age, he still importuned her.) A baby at this late stage was simply *too* late. Out of line. Practically the next generation. The baby was supposed to be a girl, too. Their mother never hid that, hope against hope, she prayed for a girl.

She had another boy. But at least this one wouldn't—couldn't—be a farmer. She gave him a sonorous, bookish name she found in the Bible. His brothers called him Buddy. Hey, Buddy. Where's Buddy? When he started school, the teacher's eyes squinted when she read the class list aloud and came to the unusual conjunction of letters. You're another Laird? she asked. She baptized him anew: Laird, just Laird, like the farm he wouldn't inherit.

Laird grew up knowing which storage barns were filled to capacity, which of the canisters were fertilizer and which insecticide. He sluiced water across the concrete floors, stood behind a brother on a tractor, facing the breeze, the furrowed earth below them a map of risks and possibilities.

School was harder. He sat at the kitchen table whole Saturday afternoons, staring at his homework, the paper in his notebooks pocked with troughs where he'd erased too often. Dividing fractions. Drawing like Egyptians.

He'd sooner watch his mother cutting lard into flour, slicing apples, fitting pastry into heavy glass pie plates. Sometimes she fashioned a leftover flap of dough into a small boat of sugared apple she baked on a scrap of foil wrap between the pie plates. There she set a flowered teacup saucer by his notebook. Finish your homework and you can have that.

At supper, he sat next to his mother at the foot of the table close to the stove. Laird's brothers, with their scarred and muscled arms, broad chests and thick necks, sat along the sides, the old man at the head.

The old man didn't like talk at the table, but meals were also the only time they were all together—the only time matters could be discussed, if in broken and reluctant snatches.

You looked?

It's the shaft.

Not the axle?

I said the shaft.

Boys! their mother warned.

Hail this morning over Bonham's way, the old man said.

Looks were exchanged. What did Bonham lose?

Laird had to take it on faith that the photo of a freckled boy in the upstairs hallway used to be the old man. In no part of the boy's stance or features could Laird see a resemblance, though the barn in the background was the same barn where they wintered the tractors now.

As Laird grew older, each of his brothers took him aside to tell him how lucky he was. They wished they could get out too, but they were stuck—and every year more stuck with debts and wives and children, trikes and toys underfoot, the washing machine in the basement sloshing loads without cease.

By the time Laird finished high school, no one even questioned whether he should leave or stay. In everyone's mind he was already gone. He moved to the city and got a job in a factory that made tires. When he worked nightshift, he woke in the daytime to the rumbling of trucks in the alley below. From his bed, the sky was a framed box of air that faced another building.

Every weekend he returned to the farm for Sunday supper, as a witness to the quarrelling as if from a ringside seat. Plates were passed down the table, not always in order. One brother gripped his fork, waiting, while another already bent to his plate. Laird had long ago lost his place next to his mother, where the latest toddler now sat. His brothers' wives murmured spite on their own and their husbands' behalf. The children elbowed each other, whispered, giggled, and whined. The old man's silence was complete now. He was deaf.

Laird never regretted not becoming a farmer. He believed his brothers—the eldest with a mangled thumb, another with a permanently piebald tan—when they cursed their lot. They said it was a fool's game to depend on farming for a living. Damn weather, damn banks!

But if farming was a fool's game, then what was his life?

Fitting sections of tire under a machine. The dead feel of rubber. The pattern of tread.

None of it was the same as seeing potatoes tumbling like fists off a shovel of earth. Laird often stood in the midst of factory clamour and stench, remembering the wet smell of earth when it thawed, the first shoots of green screwing up to the sun.

That Sunday Laird took a different route off the highway when he left the city, away from the potato dynasties and into more modest country, where the acreage had been picked out between the swamps and the hills that long-ago glaciers had rolled into place. Candelabra clusters of goldenrod reigned in the high grass. Chicory waved blue-starred wands in the breeze. Every so often the creek he'd just passed looped back for another twist under the road.

Laird's instincts told him it was good land, if not on a scale the old man would have noticed. People farmed here too, if less ambitiously. Strawberries, tomatoes, soy, and corn.

He nearly missed the homemade plank with the painted letters For Sale floating above the grass in the ditch. The yard was a jungle of weeds. The house must have stood empty for years, the wood siding cracked and dry, its last coat of paint weathered to scabs of dull yellow. The tilt of the veranda seemed more likely to throw a person back than let him in.

Laird was a boy again, jumping across the ditch to stride into the thigh-high swish and drag of leaves and stems grown tough after a good season of sun and rain. He headed to the side of the house where he knew he'd find the door country people used—never the front door in memory of once-upon-a-time coffins and wakes. The steps had collapsed but he straddled them, gripped the knob, and shoved until the many years' hold of wood on wood finally groaned free.

From room to room he walked, revelling in the honeycomb layout. Doors opened at angles to each other. A stairway with a spindle banister led to smaller rooms with dormer windows at the back of the house. He looked out between the chinks in the boards across the windows and saw the glimmer of a creek. A heron rose, its astounding wingspread opening and closing with beats that slowly—impossibly—became flight.

This place could be his, Laird thought. He'd still keep his job making tires. He wouldn't be a farmer. But he could live here. Tromp the length of a field. Feel the sun on his face. Look out at a breadth of sky. Maybe even get a couple of cows. It would be home.

The car slowed, then pulled over at the crossroad. She opened the car door but took a moment before stepping out. She wore higher than high heels and shorter than short denim cut-offs that showed off her long legs. Her hair was dyed blonde and styled to curl back from her face. She had a young boy with her—too young to have started school yet.

She reached back into the car for a gym bag and hooked it onto her shoulder.

The man, still idling his engine, asked, "You sure this is it?" As she didn't answer, didn't even have the courtesy to show she'd heard, he pursed his lips, shrugged, yanked the wheel, and drove away.

She looked around. Weeds and fields. That long, cigar-shaped hill ... a drumlin; she suddenly remembered the word. Nothing had changed. Recognition sunk in like a dull, heavy weight.

Or no: one difference. The road was paved. No more gravel, no more dust. The spin of bicycle tires dodging the stones.

Then she saw the creek. "Look," she told the boy.

He had straight, blonde hair with a pale face and soft cheeks. He didn't remind her of herself as a child at all. He wasn't alert or wise enough. He took too long to decide what to do. Sometimes she wondered if he was even normal. She'd only said it once, though, and Talat had told her she was the one who wasn't normal, thinking that about her own kid. Talat—

A door slammed shut in her mind. She couldn't think about Talat now. She had to do this first. Get it done.

She watched the boy stare at the creek. His city-bred eyes didn't know how to look through the mirror of reeds and sky to where there were fish and sinewy arms of grass moving with the current.

Up ahead at the bend, a tree lay at an angle, fallen in the creek, the wood probably half-rotted and slimy by now. "See

the turtles?” She nodded with her chin. Along the length of the trunk, petrified mushrooms plopped, one by one, into the water.

He’d missed them, though. All he saw was how the water rippled.

“Let’s go.” She hoisted the bag again and set off in the direction of their house. She could see the tip of the roof through a screen of trees. She thought she remembered the house being closer to the creek. Back then, though, she used to come by bike, not walking on four-inch heels.

It took another moment before she realized the trick her mind had played. Their house with the peaked roof had burned down. This was a new house with blue trim, flowerbeds, and a set of swings. But then where was the trailer?

She drew her breath in sharply and turned away, slid her finger inside her pocket for another pill. She’d taken one this morning, and another in the car to prepare herself for seeing her mom again. She never once thought that her mom wouldn’t be where she’d left her.

“There’s a car coming,” the boy said. When they’d hitched from where the bus had let them out, he’d always heard the cars before she’d seen them.

“Forget it,” she told him. They weren’t on the main road now. “No one picks anyone up out here. They’re too paranoid.”

But the pickup drew to a stop and the man driving asked if they needed a lift. Blonde hair hung over his forehead. Except for the jut of his nose, he had a curiously flattened face. “I’m going to the store,” he offered.

The store. *Crapface*. Years it had been since she’d last thought of the bastard, but it could have been yesterday, the hate surfaced so instantly: a child’s hate—trapped and helpless, wishing she could kill. If anyone, though, Crapface would know about her mom.

“You live out here?” the man asked as she swung the bag into the pickup and lifted the boy onto the seat between them.

She turned her head to the window. The question was dumb. As if everyone out here didn’t already know who lived where and who didn’t.

He didn't speak again for the rest of the few minutes' drive. "This—" he said as he pulled in at the store, but she was already reaching for the bag. She knew where they were.

He jumped down from the truck, loped up the steps to the store, hand already out to push through the door.

She led the boy to the edge of the porch and stopped to fiddle with her shoe. She wanted Crapface alone when she went in. She knew he always kept people talking.

But the man was out again in no time with a length of black hose tied in a coil. His hand already on the door, he looked down the road, then back at her and the boy. "I can take you where you're going if it isn't far."

She shook her head. With her hand on the boy's shoulder, she steered him up the steps and into the store.

Crapface had become a toad, leaning like a toad—all shoulders and elbows—across the spread of his newspaper on the counter. He looked up, taking in her legs and the boy, and she saw that he had no idea who she was.

His eyes flicked out the window at the truck driving off. She knew he was wondering how she'd got there and where she was going. Another unwilling recognition: how you could leave a place you never wanted to see again, and years later still know exactly how the people thought.

"Yes?" he said, never too forward with a stranger.

"Iona Laird. On the Fifth Concession. Where is she?"

He blinked his toad eyes, sensing a fly, looked from her legs to the boy to her face again. "Don't tell me," he said. "How many years ..."

He swivelled his head on his no-neck, probably meaning to call his wife to come down and see, but she didn't give him a chance. "What happened?" she demanded.

His toad mouth broadened even more. "You didn't think you could stay away for years, no one knowing where you were, and everything would just stay the same 'til you—"

"What happened?"

He fixed his eyes on the boy. "Her legs," he said finally. "Couldn't even walk anymore. Feet hurt like hell, but she wouldn't go to the doctor. By the time the pain got so bad

she had no choice, it was too late. Her toes were black—like meat gone bad and left too long.” He squinted his eyes. “Smell was terrible. Gangrene halfway up her foot. They had to cut it off.” He nodded slowly. “And then they took the other one too. Same thing.”

She felt the boy’s shoulder stiffen under her hand. But other than that he didn’t react and, when Crapface looked at her, she didn’t say anything.

“She’s in a home now. You want to know where?”

“No.”

His toad eyes gleamed under their folded lids. “I guess you don’t.”

She turned to leave, not interested in whatever else he was ready to guess, when he added, “Funny, you just missed a Laird. Guy who drove off in the pickup. He bought the old Noel place, down on the Fourth. Says he’s not related to your lot. Never even heard of them.”

She let the screen door slam on his words.

Her mom mostly always stayed in bed anyhow. Still . . . no legs.

She didn’t know what to do next, except get away from the store and that old fucker. Walking as fast as she could, still dragging the bag, she tried not to catch her heels in the pocked country pavement. No better than hardened gravel it was. She finally slipped off her shoes and gave them to the boy to carry, a pointy spike in each hand. But then he wanted to take his shoes off, too.

“No.” And then, “Fuck!” She’d stepped on a stone that jabbed her instep.

She’d counted on leaving the boy with her mom. Even if her mom was an alky, she wasn’t a bad person. She never hit her or was mean. At worst the boy would have the life she’d had—which was still better than Children’s Aid. Children’s Aid were Nazis. Talat always said so.

She had to keep shifting the bag from shoulder to shoulder as they walked. She didn’t look at the fields or the long, cigar-roll hill. The nightmare landscape of her past. Like a nightmare, too, she and the boy were the only things moving. The trees took forever to approach, to grow taller. She didn’t even know where she was headed.

Across a field of corn, she could begin to see the old Noel place—where Crapface said the guy with the truck lived. He'd built a new barn but the house looked like an old box with a roof, forgotten in the rain and wind. The veranda was gone, leaving the front door level with the tops of the weeds. She thought of their old house she'd burned down.

Clutching the boy's shoulder for balance, she slipped into her shoes again. Instead of a driveway, tire tracks flattened a path that curved to the barn where the truck was parked. A narrower aisle through the weeds led to the upturned crate in place of steps by the side door.

She dropped the bag on the ground, knocked, and waited. "Hello," she called through the screen. Inside her shoes, her feet prickled. Her back and shoulders ached from carrying the bag.

"He's here somewhere," she told the boy as she took a wary seat on the crate. Her heels were high enough to keep her bare legs off the splintered wood. She leaned back against the sun-warmed door.

The boy looked across the field and toward the barn. Slowly he sagged against her and she let his head nod, then rest in the crook of her hip and her leg. She closed her eyes and felt the breeze from the marsh on her face. Off in the distance, she heard the whine of a chainsaw. Now that she'd stopped moving, the pills made her limbs heavy.

She woke to the boy moving and a man's voice. "So you came to visit."

The man stood before them in rubber boots, the piece of hose he'd bought at the store dirty now. His hands were dirty too. His high, thin chest balanced on a bracket of bones. She couldn't see his expression against the sun.

"I'm a Laird too," she said. "That was my mom up on the Fifth Concession."

"She's been gone since before I came. I've been here two years."

"I've been away six." She'd only calculated it yesterday. How soon after she arrived in Toronto had she met Talat? How old was the boy?

He nodded. She assumed he'd heard stories. He'd have to

be deaf not to hear the way people talked out here. But all he said was, “Do you want to come in?”

The door opened into the kitchen. She felt lightheaded—from the sun, a bit stoned—and sat on one of the chairs at the table. The boy leaned against her legs while Laird washed his hands and the hose, splashing water on the counter and as high as the window. The kitchen was a collection of odds and ends left where they’d last been used. Tools on the counter, a bucket on the floor, a mop against the wall, a teapot, and a mug on the table. He must live alone.

Laird turned off the water and reached for the towel hanging off the oven door handle. “I don’t have any juice or pop,” he said, “but I’ve got cows’ milk.”

She looked at him. Did he think they were stupid? “Where *else* does milk come from?”

“Well, there’s goat and probably other kinds. I’ve got a couple of cows.”

“Cows?” The boy’s voice was small. She wondered how he’d spoken.

“Cows,” Laird confirmed. Again that note of fond pride.

“Not for me,” she said when she saw him taking a third glass from the cupboard.

“You want some tea?” he asked. She shook her head.

The boy sipped at the glass Laird brought him, then pressed his lips. He didn’t like it. Laird saw and took it from him. “It’s not what you’re used to,” he said. “You need one of these.” He reached across the counter for a round metal tin. Inside were cookies. The boy looked for a long moment before he solemnly chose one. She took one as well since Laird didn’t move until she had.

Now he looked shy. “Linda made them.”

“Linda,” she said, more a statement than a question.

He mumbled into his cookie, then cleared his throat. “Linda Brandon.”

She vaguely recalled a chubby girl from high school. Still living out here and not married yet, the church bake sale must be her only social event—and Laird, from the looks of it.

Still pink, Laird went to the refrigerator and took out a large

pot. “Do you want to stay for supper? I’ve got some stew.” Already he was scooping potatoes from a brown paper bag on the floor and dropping them into the sink.

She didn’t answer. She watched the boy edge closer to Laird. His head barely cleared the rounded edge of the sink. He seemed mesmerized by the sight of Laird scrubbing potatoes under the tap. He stood close, his shoulder almost touching Laird’s arm.

When Laird moved to the counter and began chopping the potatoes into chunks on a board, the boy suddenly piped up. “Aren’t you going to peel them?”

“I washed them good, didn’t you see?”

The boy thought, then said, “Talat always peels them.”

The words jolted her—hearing the boy say the name he hadn’t said all month, saying it now to a stranger, saying it as if Talat was still somewhere in the world peeling potatoes. All month he didn’t ask what had happened, where Talat was or if he was coming back. He’d seen Talat on the floor and their panic. One tab, one line, one something too many. The ambulance took him away with the red blanket pulled over his face. She closed her eyes, teeth clenched, felt how the air—the torture of still being alive—raked her nostrils. Another pill would help. Her hand groped at her pocket.

From the distance inside her head, she heard Laird ask, “Talat?”

“He cooks potatoes.”

Laird’s knife didn’t pause its rhythm. “And you like to watch.”

Her eyes flew open. She didn’t want to hear what the boy might say next and hoarsely she whispered, “He had an accident.”

Laird looked at her. “Will he be all right?”

No. She barely shook her head, only then seeing how the boy watched her. Grey eyes. Talat’s eyes. She looked away.

“I’m sorry,” Laird said as he went back to his chopping.

*Sorry.* The simple word nearly burst the sob in her throat. She bit hard with her teeth. Let nothing out.

Laird finished with the potatoes and lifted the pot to the stove. He glanced out the window and said, “I’ve got to do the cows. It’s time.” And, turning to the boy, “Will you come?”

The boy had sidled away from the sink to lean against her legs again. She willed her hands on the table to lie still. Not push him away. “Go on,” she said. “You’ve never seen cows.”

“You come too,” the boy said. Eyes on her face.

She didn’t look. She watched Laird, who watched the boy.

“Someone has to stay with the stew,” Laird said. “We’ll go, you and me. I’ll show you the cows.” His hand caressed a shape in the air. He smiled. When he moved to the door, the boy followed. He didn’t look back.

Both blonde, they could have been father and son. Still at the table, she watched them through the screen door until they were out of view. She moved her foot against the bag containing the boy’s papers, his clothes, and his toys.

She stood then, and went to the window, seeing how Laird matched his stride to the boy’s tripping steps. When they got to the barn and Laird swung back the door, they stopped. Laird seemed to have to coax the boy inside.

Immediately she kicked off her shoes, grabbed them to her chest, leapt for the door—when she heard a noise. The pot of stew bubbling. She dashed for the stove. Turned it off. Didn’t let the screen door slam. Ran as quickly as she could down the tire tracks through the weeds to the road.