Past Lives

by C. P. Boyko

I

After the doctors had come the "visitors." The gypsy woman was only the latest in a long line of such guests. There had been an acupuncturist, a dietician, a herbalist. There had been an animal magnetist who did nothing but pass his hands up the length of Grete's body, a gemologist who did nothing but place heated stones on her spine, a university student who did nothing but rearrange the furniture. There had been an astrologist who believed that sickness was only the result of neglecting to petition one's guardian planets and stars for good health, a reiki master who believed that it was due only to blockages of one's life force energy, and now this gypsy, who believed that it was caused only by unhappy memories from before one was born.

It was the *nothing buts* and the *onlys* that aggravated Lloyd most. More than their glib confidence, their unctuous assurances, their arrogant faith in the universal effectiveness of their own pet nostrum, more than their magical thinking, their dismissive ignorance of hundreds of years of medical science, their self-serving professional allegiance to miracles, that is, to those things which by definition could not happen—more than all this, what irritated him about these people was their shared conviction that there was at bottom *only one thing wrong* with Grete. The doctors they had gone through had shared many of these weaknesses and others besides—their tendency to treat their patients like walking case studies, their scattershot liberality with pharmaceuticals, their faith in the totemic power of diagnostic classification—but at least none of them could be accused of oversimplifying the problem. They had been trained in the complexities of the body. With biology there was no need for theology.

There had once been a time, thought Lloyd, before the microscope,

perhaps, when the body had been nothing more than what it appeared to be: a scaffold of bone, a knot of muscle, ten pints of blood, a swath of skin to hold everything in. Back then, you could be forgiven for believing that there must have been something to make it all go. But as we came to know our bodies and to recognize that an arm was more than an arm, a leg more than a flank of meat, the idea of some divine breath bringing that meat to life became less necessary. We went from seeing ourselves as a phantom in a lump of clay to a ghost in a machine to nothing but an echo in the engine room.

The soul was an insult to the body. It took credit for all the body's accomplishments—denying that biography had any basis in biology, that philosophy had any link to physiology, or that metaphysics owed anything to metabolism—and blamed the body for every pain, fatigue, grey hair, and sneeze. But Lloyd had watched his wife's body grow frail and thin, had seen fevers break over her in waves, seen the violent spasms of retching, the heaving shudders, the turbulence in her guts churning right below the surface of her grey skin, and he knew that she was more than a little spark, a little flame. The belief that all Grete's ailments could be cured by treating some single, underlying vital principle was, as far as he was concerned, a throwback to the primitive animism of the soul. It was the most childish sort of wishful, and wilful, stupidity. In belittling biology it belittled the body, and in diminishing her body it diminished Grete.

Mind you?

Lloyd said nothing, gazed down at the bath mat for a few moments without blinking, then shifted his eyes again randomly, as though he'd been too deep in thought to realize he'd been looking at her.

Privacy, she muttered.

His knees began to wobble; he gripped the towel bar for support. Frowning, he took a slow deep breath through his mouth without visibly parting his lips. She was embarrassed by the smell, didn't like it any more than he did. But it seemed worse lately, even with the gluten-free flour, and that bothered him. It was as if even the blandest food was being converted

to poison inside her.

Her posture changed, or her breathing.

Done?

She grunted. Without looking at her, he tore off a strip of paper, bunched it into a thick wad—she'd complained once that she could feel his "every little finger" on her—and swiped it between her legs.

Enough already. Genug.

He dropped the wad down between her legs, draped one of her arms around his neck, and lifted her to her feet. Was it his imagination, or was she a little heavier? Or maybe she was weaker, and clinging to him more tightly. More likely she was only being uncooperative, letting him do all the work as punishment for having looked at her.

With her free hand she grasped impatiently at the walker. He held her by the waist and twisted himself out of the way.

Okay?

Ja ja, okay.

Once she was secure, he reached down for her trousers. He tied them loosely; the sharp granite cliffs of her hips would keep them in place.

Eng, she complained. Too tight.

He loosened the knot, retied it in exactly the same spot. He waited, almost eagerly, for another word of complaint. But not today. She was already trundling through the door. After a quick look down inside, he flushed the toilet and followed her.

Hands, she trilled.

He went back to the sink.

She muttered imprecations, but waited.

And the light behind you, she reminded him.

Today was the visit from the gypsy.

Mrs. Jolliet was not, in fact, a gypsy. That was only his word for her. Something about the whispering looseness of her clothes, the black cataract of her hair, the wind-chime jangle of jewellery that accompanied her every move-

ment made him think of vagabonds and campfire smoke. To the best of his knowledge she was a bank clerk in Encaster who had once been married to a tax accountant there. He should never have let her in the front door.

But he'd been discouraged, worn down to complicity, by the change that had come over his wife. Her search for a cure had become an undignified grasping at straws. Her desperation seemed less to him like overripe hope than curdled fear. He had never known her to show fear before, least of all of something as banal as death. He'd believed her to be too strong, too smart, too proud to succumb to that childish, superstitious dread. It was as though she had told him, at the end of a long day spent defusing landmines, that she was afraid of the dark.

He remembered the look on her face when the war had first reached them in her rented room above the theatre, the night they heard the first bomb drop, the ripping sound of the explosion both obscenely close and laughably distant, like a pornographic playing card held out at arm's length. He sat up, as though a spring in his spine had snapped taut, and stared stupidly at the window, which was of course covered over with mismatched squares of black cloth and black cardboard, and made somewhat less austere by colourful matchbooks and scraps of lace and the yellow cellophane in which he'd wrapped his immortal beloved "Blues in Thirds." Then he turned and looked down at Grete. She hadn't moved, but her eyes were now open. Her expression was not one of fear or even concern but almost, he thought, puzzled satisfaction. She looked like someone, on having woken, trying to recall the details of some beautiful dream. As it turned out, it hadn't been a bomb at all, but the scheduled demolition of the old train bridge. But in her apartment above the theatre, neither of them had known that it wasn't the end of the world.

It was happening to him too. These sudden bursts of isolated memory, moments without significance dredged up for no reason, random frames of his life that should never have been stored, let alone restored. Grete was not the only one who was sick.

Once, years ago, he had been stricken by the thought that nothing of his life—not a jot or a tremor of the rich uniqueness of his existence—would be

preserved unless he wrote it down. Now, it was the idea that perhaps nothing, not even the most mundane event, could ever be completely forgotten that filled him with dismay.

They were late. The gypsy woman was not the sort to slavishly adhere to hours of the clock: he supposed it would detract from her self-image of intuitive mystic if she were to make appointments by the same mechanical means as everyone else. But most Sundays she—and the daughter and the dog—appeared before two. Today they were late, and as a result Grete was in an especially sour mood. She made him change her clothes twice, first because the material was itchy, then because she was too cold: the furnace was always on, the house was always the same sweltering temperature, but she had caught a glimpse of the thermometer through the kitchen window during lunch, and so knew it was cold out *there.* So for the third time that day he laid her out on top of her bare mattress—last night's sheets were already in the washing machine—and she played dead while he stripped the clothes from her tiny body.

Ach, gentle, she said, and, Ach, privacy.

I don't enjoy this any more than you do, was all he could bring himself to say. He would have liked to tell her that he had no desire whatsoever to look on what remained of her body. He would have liked to say that he considered the sight of her less a privilege than a penance. What irritated him most was the way she presented her shame as coyness. Don't look, she whined, as though there were nothing he would rather do, as though he were a dirty old man desperate for a peek. He might have forgiven this pretense if it had only been a habit. But she had never been coy. She had never had that mincing *pudeur* of other girls he'd known, with its implication that men were all a little nasty, a little dirty, for wanting to look—and so, by extension, was the body they wanted to look at. She might have thought him somewhat silly, somewhat tedious, but she had never expressed any surprise that he should take pleasure in looking at her. The most she had ever shown was a sort of bored bemusement that his gaze never grew sated, despite all

the hours it spent feasting. She would never have accused him of lecherousness, as she seemed to be doing now. Now that no man, not even her husband, could have found her attractive, now that she had withered and shrunk, *now* she behaved like a shrinking violet. It was yet another of the deceptions she'd perpetrated on herself, and as these added up, the less of herself there remained for him to recognize.

He rolled her onto her right side, folded her left arm up like a chicken wing, poked the hand through the sleeve of her blouse, and eventually persuaded the rest of the arm to follow. She offered neither resistance nor assistance. He wondered, almost cheerfully, how undertakers managed. But corpses didn't groan if you handled them too roughly or not roughly enough, didn't sigh impatiently through their teeth, like someone hissing at an incompetent performance of her favourite play. He rolled her onto her back and buttoned up the blouse.

The ordeal of getting dressed for company was over, but it had taken its toll. She called for her wheelchair. But she was not content to lie flat on the bed like a dead thing while he fetched it. He had to sit her up and help her latch on to the walker first.

How much egg nog is left? she demanded when he returned.

I don't know. Half a litre.

We bought four litres last week only.

Maybe more, maybe a litre. Why?

But he knew why. It was a familiar, indeed formulaic argument. He would buy something that she did not like or could not eat and she would indict him for gluttony, for not leaving her any.

You drank three litres in less than even one week?

The incredulity in her voice was strained, but he did not consider this a mitigating factor. On the contrary, he was annoyed that even her cantankerousness was put on, even the fights she picked she picked out of habit.

It's been over a week, he said, as per the script of the argument. At least ten days, he added, though of course he had no more idea how long it had been since he'd last made the trip to the grocery store than she did.

Not the point. You take always more than your share.

He lifted her up and transferred her to the wheelchair. She remained folded in the same seated posture, her dangling legs bent at ninety degrees, as he swung her through the air.

You know as well as I do you can't drink that stuff.

Not the point, she screeched, finding her indignation through repetition. What about company? What of visitors? If Madame Jolliet or her child today wants a glass of egg nog? And there is none?

Half a dozen rejoinders flooded his circuits at once, blocking one another at the bottleneck. Neither the gypsy woman nor her daughter had ever accepted any offer of food or drink in all the weeks they had been coming; if despite precedent either the woman or her girl were to request of all things a glass of egg nog, there was still at least a litre left that he could serve them; if he didn't drink the stuff, no one would; if he was seriously expected to leave untouched her half of everything they brought home, it would all go to waste; the very idea that there was "his share" and "her share" was simply idiotic, because no matter how much or how little either of them consumed they could always get more; and why did she insist on calling the woman, like some kind of Gallic oracle, *Madame* Jolliet, when she had quite clearly introduced herself as Mrs. Jolliet, had said that the name belonged to her dead husband, who had furthermore been Polish, and that she herself had come from a long line of Irish tailors? And as for the "child," she was obviously at least twenty and more likely halfway to her thirties, and why did a twenty-five-year-old woman follow her mother around like a shadow or a halfwit?

Grete was still enumerating the parallel universes in which one and a half litres of egg nog might be insufficient when the doorbell rang. She stopped talking, then announced:

This shirt is too scratchy.

The girl was alone on the doorstep. From deep within the scarves and hoods that seemed designed to protect her small head less from the cold than a heavy blow from some blunt object, she peered out at him almost beseech-

ingly. Lloyd stood there, hand on the door, and said nothing. For some reason, his heart was thumping.

My mother, the girl said at last, and there was in her voice an apologetic tone that almost endeared her to him. She had to run back to the car, she said.

He nodded.

After some thoughts and second thoughts, she elaborated: She forgot something. In the . . . car.

She turned her entire body and looked back in the direction of the street. Not like someone illustrating the location of the car to which she'd referred, but like someone waiting for a bus craning her neck out into the street in hope of seeing it approach. Perhaps she was only a child, he thought.

Come in.

She spent a few moments parsing this suggestion, scanning it for subtext, then nodded, and finally followed through on this unspoken agreement by stepping through the door. He regretted offering to take her coat when he saw how firmly ensconced within it she was; not for three or four minutes did she succeed in liberating herself. He waved her in the direction of the reading room, where, as she knew as well as he did, Grete received her visitors. He watched her make her way down the hall, charmed by the thought of the two of them struggling to make small talk. With her winter things off she looked twenty again, twenty-five.

The mother, Mrs. Jolliet, entered the house without ringing the bell, evidently taking her daughter's entrance as an extended welcome to herself.

Oh, she said when she saw him, as though surprised and even a little disappointed to find him of all people here of all places. Then, with a visible effort, she modified her expression till it seemed to say that she should have known better than to expect anything else.

He did not offer to take her jacket.

She avenged this rudeness by asking him to take her "Popsy" for a moment.

He took the clump of teeth and fur between his hands and held it there

while the gypsy, with a roll of her shoulders and a toss of her head, shed her coat—which, from the look of it, had been made out of three or so dozen Pomeranians just like Popsy.

Mrs. Jolliet scooped the dog up into her arms again and, after cooing and running her hands over him to ensure that he had not been physically damaged by the ordeal, lifted her head and aimed her grey eyes at Lloyd. He counted this look of hers—a look of pride and readiness and courage and almost preemptive defiance—among the several hundred things he disliked most about her. She was always challenging him with this look, letting him know that she expected nothing better than the worst from him and that she was prepared to withstand it.

Perhaps, Mrs. Jolliet began, with a show of struggling mightily, as whenever she spoke to him, to find the words that would penetrate his peculiar brand of wilful obtuseness, perhaps you will be joining us today?

No thank you, he replied cheerfully enough, taking special care not to pause after the "no."

But surely you won't be going for a walk in *this* . . . this . . .

He waited while she grasped about for a synonym for *weather.*

. . . In this *weather*? she at last spluttered triumphantly.

I have a warm coat. The fresh air does me good.

Mr. Pembroke, she murmured, dropping her voice by an octave, as well as lowering her head by about six inches, I understand . . . I *may* call you Mr. Pembroke?

Instead of asking on what possible grounds she believed he might object to being addressed by what was after all his name, he merely muttered, Yes, Mrs. Jolliet.

She nodded solemnly and took a moment to file this verbal contract away for safekeeping before continuing. I realize that you do not necessarily . . . *subscribe* to the possibility of prior existences. Ah ah ah—please. Allow me to finish. As I said, I realize that you do not necessarily subscribe to the possibility of prior existences. There is no need to deny it. You are not the first skeptic I have crossed paths with.

She allowed herself a throaty chuckle at the thought of all the skeptics

she had crossed paths with.

But I feel as though I should make clear to you, as I have to your . . .

She seemed to scan through some secret list of alternative and no doubt more exalted designations—*life partner*, *soulmate*, *co-pilot*, *better half*, *lady friend*—before settling finally, with manifest dissatisfaction, on the more prosaic *wife*.

I feel, as I said, that I should make clear to you, as I have to your wife, that it is not always necessary to go back as far as previous incarnations. Do you follow me?

He did not but felt no need to tell her this.

I mention this for three reasons. First, to allay . . . suspicions. Some find it less than entirely . . . convincing if the recovery work remains firmly grounded in the present incarnation. Do—

Yes, he said, comprehending now. She was making excuses for why the therapy hadn't progressed any further; why Grete was still dredging up memories from her present life, and not past ones.

In my experience many blocks, as I call them, go much deeper. But the cart must not go before the horse. I'm sure this expression is familiar to you?

I think I get the gist of it.

Let me put it another way. One must take things in the proper order. One should not get ahead of oneself. One cannot—

I understand.

It is necessary if the recovery work is to proceed to clear the most recent blocks first. That brings me to my second point. It can sometimes be beneficial, in these early stages, when corroboration and . . . supplementation are still possible, to allow others to . . . how shall I put it?

Corroborate and supplement.

Precisely. As I was saying, it can sometimes be beneficial to allow others to corroborate and supplement, insofar as possible, the recovered material.

You think I should sit in on these sessions and help fill in the gaps.

She made a face that said she preferred her wording.

I wish of course, he said, that I could be of some assistance in Grete's recovery work.

Mrs. Pembroke, she said, lifting her head and fixing him with the look of preemptive defiance, might not be the only one to benefit.

But you see, I have a terrible memory.

But that, she said with some bewilderment, is precisely where I come in. I am, she said, a *guide.*

Let me put it another way. I like my memory the way it is—terrible. Do *you* follow *me*?

She dismissed this with a sweep of her chin. That only brings me to my third point. During this work many unpleasant things can emerge, unpleasant in this initial stage not only for the one recovering but yes, their loved ones too, their family and friends, and yes, of course this material can arouse bitterness and resentment and what I have called a head-in-the-sand attitude. I of course often bear the brunt of this resentment and am willing to do so. But it is important to recognize that the memory worker herself—your wife, in this case—is not doing what you might think of as dredging up the unhappy memories out of any malice or mean-spiritedness. Spite has no place in the work, except as a sort of dowsing rod to show where currents of pain lie buried.

Mrs. Jolliet paused and, for the first time in his memory, looked unsure of herself.

You understand what I mean by a dowsing rod?

I think, Lloyd said, the memory worker is ready for you.

Feeling altogether too much like a manservant, he showed her into the living room, where Grete—predictably, he now saw—was doing what she probably thought of as regaling her young visitor with the weather report from January 1967.

The more her body forgot, the more she remembered. This bothered him, the idea that there might be two kinds of memory, one somatic, one mental: habit, the memory of muscle, and recollection, the memory of mind. The detail and clarity of her memories seemed almost to suggest that they came from some place outside the body, that they relied on something less frail than grooves worn in nervous tissue.

But he would not think like that. He told himself that deterioration

sometimes showed effects that looked like improvement, that illness sometimes mimicked health. He thought of idiot savants, swan songs, and supernovas, those dying stars that burned brightest before their collapse. All that Grete's recollections proved was that experience was etched deeply and that the mechanism that kept the past submerged until it was needed had, in her, begun to malfunction. Didn't the same sort of thing occur during fever, poisoning, insanity? It was only a sign of further decline.

Attention was precious; a person was at any given moment bombarded with so much information that any commentary from their past had to be exquisitely to the point; anything extraneous could only be a distraction. That was why memories were so difficult to revive: not because traces of experience faded or deteriorated with the body on which they were imprinted, but because it was to the body's advantage to keep its memories to itself. A crack had appeared in Grete's filter. It was a further symptom of an underlying physical ailment, and he could not blame it on the gypsy woman or her "therapy." He could not blame Mrs. Jolliet for his wife's transformation into the sort of dusty old chatterbox that he had always found repellent: the tedious bore whose every breath was spent reminiscing, the pathetic relic for whom current events were only shabby revivals of once brilliant and original productions, for whom every anecdote was a bashful request for one of her own.

Just outside town, Grete was saying, a horse froze clear through to the bone in under four and one half minutes.

Who, he wanted to ask, and not for the first time, who had had the scientific zeal and presence of mind to cut the beast open clear to the bone to verify this fact? And how had they arrived at so precise a figure as four and a half minutes?

Instead, as per custom, he waited for the visitors' polite astonishment to dissipate, then asked if he could bring either of them anything to drink or eat. The girl shook her head and smiled shyly at his knees, but the woman took her usual amount of time considering the question. By smoothing the dog's fur with her hands like it was some fuzzy crystal ball and staring into the middle distance as though consulting some unseen oracle, she was even-

tually able to arrive at a decision that was unlikely to imperil her or anyone else's spiritual well-being: gazing at him like he was a firing squad, she said that she believed that she would, in fact, if it was not too much trouble, like a glass of water. He said that he believed it would, in fact, probably not be.

Bring also those biscuits from Deanna, Grete called after him. And the cheese plate too.

I can help, the girl said, and sprang out of her chair—whether moved by the arduousness of the task before him or simply tired of Grete's tiresome reminiscing he was not sure. Perhaps she was not such a halfwit after all.

In the kitchen she tried to make herself useful, but it was done before he could say what needed doing. He handed her her mother's glass of water and looked around for something else that she could do.

Want some egg nog?

She hesitated. Is it light?

He didn't understand the question. Fairly, he said, thinking she meant the colour.

I love egg nog, she said at last, as though confessing to an obscene but not especially violent predilection.

He poured them each an egg nog. She took one without putting down the glass of water.

He watched her throat as she swallowed.

The body had an intelligence all its own. Even the halfwit had a certain grace and wisdom and health, could run and jump and sleep and swallow and fight off disease without a passing thought.

Perhaps she was twenty-five, after all.

II

What Lloyd remembered was that every Sunday afternoon he would walk to Molly's, the cafeteria where they would meet. They would sit at the counter or in a booth by the window and order malts. Then they would walk together to the theatre where she rented a room. They would enter through the alley door and sneak up the stairs, one at a time. Then they would take

each other's clothes off, the muddy sound of the matinee feature reaching them through the walls.

Every Sunday at two o'clock he would walk to Molly's. *Is there anything sweeter than walking to meet a girl for whom nothing is sweeter than waiting to be met by you? The very streets seem to usher you along with a hand at your elbow. A shop chime tinkles flirtatiously at the door that nudges it, a cloud skims over the sky on its way to see its lover, the wind nudges the lindens knowingly, and a leaf, mustering all its courage, detaches from its branch and diffidently approaches the sidewalk waiting coquettishly below. Even the other girls you pass in the street seem lovelier, as perhaps mountains appear more beautiful when your home does not lie on their farther side.*

It has become a custom, a force of habit. Every Sunday at two o'clock I walk the thirty or forty minutes to Molly's. The thought of what awaits me there renders the walk an exquisite torture and delight, one that I would fain cut short and fain prolong. The week leading up to each Sunday is like that walk—<u>is</u> that walk. The ambivalent gift of anticipation: waiting to see her, I am both not-yet-seeing-her and soon-to-be-seeing-her. And I am never, it seems, not waiting to see her—even when I am seeing her.

They would sit at the counter or in a booth by the window and order malts. *If I arrive first, I sit at the window and watch the faces as they pass, filled not with tenderness exactly, but a sort of gentle tolerance of all these poor slags and slatterns who aren't her, verging almost on an affectionate sympathy for them in their abject failure, their hopeless inability, to be her.*

If she arrives first she sits at the counter with her back to the entrance and orders a malt. She does not look up when I come in, so I must assume she does not look up when anyone comes in, and certainly does not look up, as I would, <u>each and every</u> time the door swings open to nudge the chime.

Not only does she not look up when I enter, she does not even look up to meet my glance in the cloudy mirror behind the counter when I sit down beside her. Instead she leans forward, arms folded like laundry on the countertop, and searches with slightly parted lips for her straw—unseeing, absentminded, pensive, aloof. But her posture betrays her: when I sit down, the muscles in her neck and back go taut. Her body knows I'm there. Only when she finds the straw does she look up and

smile (or rather, smile and look up). My heart, meanwhile, has been crashing about inside my head and trying to climb out my ears, as if the fate of the world—the fate of something much greater than the world, the fate of our love—depends on the outcome of that careless, unseeing, absentminded search for that straw. I smile back at her in the fogged mirror, lift one hand in a limp wave, and feel for a second almost angry that anyone should be permitted to be so lovely.

They would walk together to the theatre where she rented a room. They would enter through the alley door and sneak up the stairs, one at a time. *In no hurry but our own, with arms and fingers linked, we walk the six blocks to the theatre. We enter through the back fire door to avoid Mrs. Petrov at the concession. (The hand-printed contract G. signed specifies, in block capitals that give the lie to the euphemism, "NO VISITORS.") In the dark of the interior we separate —the phrase that invariably enters my head at this moment is "reculer pour mieux sauter." I go up first, so that if ever I am to run across Mr. Petrov I can maintain, with a degree of plausibility that might be weakened if G. were in her room, that I was only looking for a restroom, a balcony, a better seat. But that has yet to happen: Sunday afternoons the proprietors of The Empress Grande screen matinees back to back, not even pausing long enough to turn the house lights up, and Mr. Petrov is rarely, if ever, seen to emerge from the projection room.*

Her key clutched tightly in my left hand, the walls under my right reverberating with gunfire or saloon music or galloping hoof-beats, I grope my way up the steep narrow staircase blindly.

They would take each other's clothes off. *Sometimes we take turns playing dead, trying not to move or giggle, while the other undresses us. In the dim light of her garret we spend hours investigating each other's bodies, comparing skin, comparing scars. Here on the shin is where she was bit by a neighbour's dog when she was a child. Here just behind her right ear is where she was struck by something—a rock, a stick—while passing through a demonstrating crowd outside the factory where her mother worked. Here on her thumb is where she cut herself while chopping eggplant. And here below her knee is the coin-sized patch of glistening skin where for some reason no hair will grow. And here above her ankle is the slight concavity where I watch her pulse beat, and feel awe-stricken by the vastness of her heart's domain.*

They would take turns playing dead. They would spend hours comparing scars.

These were the details he had written down so that he would not have to remember them.

Downstairs, Grete was calling. He no longer recognized his name in her call. The consonants, which of course did not travel through the walls or up the stairs half as well as the vowel, had been dropped, and the remaining diphthong had been stretched into two distinct syllables, the first a grumbling remonstration, the second an alarmlike screech of rising indignation: "Oh-*weeeeeee*?" It sounded more like a yelp of pain or blame than "Lloyd." Maybe that was the point.

He tossed the notebook onto his desk with more force than necessary, pushed himself out of the chair, and trudged downstairs, placing his feet with more care than necessary. His idiot son-in-law, a doctor only in name, had recently told him that more broken bones occur among the elderly following new bifocal prescriptions, due to slips while descending staircases. He'd put special emphasis on the greater risk of descent, as if this were some esoteric riddle and not simply common sense and common experience that going down a flight of steps was a more precarious undertaking than going up one. Lloyd did not wear bifocals but saw no reason to make himself a vindication of any part of one of Eric's statistics. Grete called out twice more on his way down. He felt a moment's flush of sour pleasure at the thought of her predicament if ever he *were* to fall and break his bloody neck.

She was right where he'd left her, sitting in the wheelchair in the back sunroom, swaddled up to her chin in a cocoon of cardigans and shawls and crocheted blankets. With only her head thus visible, the look of reproach that welled up in her wet black eyes when he appeared at the patio door struck him as especially cold and inhuman, almost insectoid.

I am cold, she said, her voice heavy with exasperation at having to articulate what should have been obvious. I want to go in.

The wheels on the wheelchair were, as far as she was concerned, deco-

rative. Unless she was feeling her very worst, she refused to be rolled around the house like an invalid. He placed the walker before her and began unwrapping her arms so that she could hold on to it, but immediately she began complaining bitterly about the cold to which he was thoughtlessly subjecting her. He did not point out that the insulated sunroom was the same temperature as the rest of the house. The theme of his thoughtlessness sparked off a train of associations; as he half-carried her indoors, dragging the walker behind him with the heel of one foot, she began itemizing a few of the most salient or recent matters in which he had failed to think:

The back path still needs its shovelling off. It is an embarrassment looking like this.

As he guided her down the hall and into the bathroom:

You have not again called the pharmacist. You want I suppose me to become sicker with complications and contraindications?

As he moved the toothbrush around inside her mouth, avoiding as much as possible the flashing grey tongue:

You did not yet cancel the newspaper subscription. The two of us—ach, not so hard—we do not ever read one page or headline, you know.

And finally, as he helped her into bed:

Has this light been on all day?

He looked up. He supposed it had. They'd moved her bed, after she'd lost the ability to climb stairs unaided, into this room because of the amount of sunlight that it received. It was only at the end of the day, after the sun had gone down, that you would notice the far dimmer light.

He got up to turn it off, sat back down on the edge of the bed, and, as was his custom, waited in the darkness for her breathing to change. Only when he was sure she was asleep did he take off his own clothes and lie down beside her.

If it happened during the night, he wanted to be there.

He wondered how long it would take.

What would cease first: her heart, her lungs, her brain?

For how long after her heart had stopped would the pulse appear in the concavity above her ankle? For how long after they stopped receiving oxygen

could the cells in the farthest reaches of her body go on struggling?

Would the organs shut down one at a time? Would each cell have to die its own solitary death? Was dying—even peacefully, even in your sleep—more like a prolonged, catastrophic shipwreck than the flickering out of a single light? Was death as intricate and manifold a thing as life?

Or would everything stop at once, in an instant—like magic?

III

It was a six-hour drive from Winnipeg to Encaster—seven the way Morley drove—and she considered it a victory that they had spent the first three in silence. Isobel no longer cared to remember what they'd been arguing about—though whatever it was, it was not what he thought. She couldn't care less if he was hiding food from her, if that was in fact what he'd been doing—and it certainly looked that way, with the box at the back of the pantry behind the expired tomato juice and last year's inedible Easter candy. As far as she was concerned, if he wanted to go to the trouble of hiding her favourite cereal to ensure he'd get some before it was all gone, he was more than welcome. If it came to that, she could buy her own box and hide it in her closet, in the garage, in the trunk of the car. Nor was it ultimately his selfishness or the possessiveness of his behaviour that irritated her, his belligerent attitude that there was a "hers" and a "his"—she would draw a line down the middle of the apartment if that's what he wanted.

The argument was not about this thing or that thing or *about* any one thing at all. It was about the fact that with him everything had to *be* an argument. She could not express displeasure without him taking it as a criticism, an accusation, an indictment, and immediately launching into his defence or making his counter-indictment. Whether or not she had overreacted was not the point; the point was whether or not she should not occasionally be allowed to overreact. The point was that he was incapable of putting himself in her place, of imagining what she might be going through, of realizing that when she complained she was not necessarily asking for some explanation or expiation. She was expressing a mood, articulating a state of mind, advertis-

ing—though not in any vulgarly explicit way—the fact of her unhappiness. He was too thick to see that sometimes she was not after justice, but sympathy. At the very least a little patience, a little indulgence, a little liberty to be unhappy. Today especially, of all days, with her mother's funeral tomorrow.

Instead, he got his back up, and once Morley had his back up he could never back down. Even after two hours of arguing, ninety minutes after they'd originally planned to be on the road, he had still been, with the same mulish astonishment of the wrongfully accused, pointing out the disproportion between the lightness of the alleged crime and the severity of the prosecution, without ever once realizing what that disproportion proved: that it was not about a box of cereal at all. It made her want to scream. Instead, with the dignity of a martyr, she shut up. And he, the fool, did the same! As though that was what she really wanted all along, for the both of them to sit and stew in silence. Or perhaps he thought that this marked the end of the matter, that quiet was as good as peace. So, for her, each minute that passed like this was a victory, because it proved how little he understood her, how completely off the mark he could be. She nursed her anger like a seedling, taking care not to overwater.

The landscape was some help at first. The immense monotony of the prairies was like a persistent jab in the ribs, a constant reminder that nothing ever changed and that you were perfectly right to expect the worst, because that's all there was and all it did was come around again and again. The sky was as dumb and empty as a yawn, the bristling fields as flat and green as some giant's golf course. The sun did not move, did not seem to shine or give off heat or light, but simply hung in the air like a big white rock. The highway rolled under them like the reel of some interminable film; every song that came on the radio seemed to be playing for the tenth consecutive time; every service station they passed reminded her of a dozen just like it; every breath Morley took in through his whistling nose sounded like a sarcastic imitation of the one she'd just let out. At first it made her angry, but as the odometer turned over the miles her anger faded to depression and she found herself thinking about her mother.

"Turn here," she said, before she realized what she'd done, or what it

meant.

"Where?" Morley's voice was thick with disuse, as though he'd been sleeping. She wouldn't have put it past him.

She shook her head; it didn't matter. "Up here. Next town."

It meant their argument was over.

She remembered how to get there before she realized where it was they were going. Morley followed her directions mutely, taking them away from the highway and into the centre of town. Something in her knew the place, knew the route. She knew but did not remember the crunch of gravel under the tires, the smell of compost and french fry grease and burning cardboard, the low sun at the end of each street scrubbing the contrast out of everything, turning the town the colour of salted butter. It was all familiar to her, and the sense of recognition was all the stronger for being incomplete. If she'd been the one driving she might have taken these turns automatically and ended up at the house without any conscious recollection of how she'd gotten there.

"Here," she said. "Stop here."

She rolled down her window and looked up at the house. Nothing had changed. Only, in her memory, the air was colder. It had been autumn then, or winter. She didn't remember the old woman's name but the husband had been called Lloyd. He'd looked about half the woman's age. She didn't remember what the woman had talked about but she remembered her voice: the deliberate syntax, the curious word choice, the accent that only flared up when hectoring the husband.

Morley parted his lips with an audible effort. "Know the place?"

She pretended to be lost in thought of a particularly deep and troubling kind. After a minute she leaned back in her seat and said quietly, "I used to come here with my mother."

Morley smacked his lips knowingly. "One of her . . . whatsits?"

"'Clients.'" She handled the word like a soiled handkerchief, pinched between quotation marks. "Yes."

"What did this one have?"

"I don't know. Something or other."

He chewed on this for a minute. "This one get better?"

She did not reply. None of them ever got better. And if any of them ever had, it wouldn't have meant anything. If they got better, it was because the sickness had run its course. If they improved, if they died, if they stayed the same, it had nothing to do with her mother. But for some reason her clients chose to look at it in the exact opposite way. If they improved it was because Mrs. Jolliet had helped them, they got no worse because Mrs. Jolliet had helped them, they died only because Mrs. Jolliet had not been given enough time to help them.

She wished her mother had been a charlatan, a callous con artist. But she'd been as deluded as any of her customers. To the very end, no doubt, she'd believed that the waking dreams—the wicked daymares—that she induced were actual memories, real traumas buried deeper than flesh or bone. Her mother had a gift for facilitating fabulation, that was all. She should have visited the homes of blocked novelists, thought Isobel, not the dying. Somehow, during one of her vacant trances, she'd muddled the notions of reincarnation and psychoanalysis and come up with the source of all evil: submerged unhappy memories; and conversely, of course, its panacea: remembrance.

Isobel distrusted recollection, and not just because of what she'd seen when accompanying her mother on her visits. Memories were unreliable, but more than that, they were painful. And not only memories of painful or unpleasant events, but memories in general. The content didn't seem to matter. Happy memories left her feeling as despondent as awful ones. There was something intrinsically depressing about the past. The sight of this house, for instance, which meant nothing to her, where nothing special had happened to her, this place that was without happy or unhappy associations of any kind—the sight of this house filled her with gloom.

It seemed an insult that the house hadn't changed. The effrontery of places, she thought, staying so much the same while we break down and fall to pieces. Memories did that too: they stood still. They were the fixed points

along the shore that told the river how swiftly it was moving. Perhaps that was why they hurt: because they reminded her that she was travelling, always in the same direction, always away from something, always toward the same end.

The only difference was that no one lived here anymore. The grey paint was a little weatherbeaten. The grass of the front lawn was nearly a foot long and overgrown with dandelions and purple prickleweed. The house was empty. There were no lights on in any of the windows, which shone like glassy eyes with the reflected light of sunset.

She could feel Morley's watching her. Waiting, assessing, knowing. His silence was as blatant a demonstration of indulgent patience as if he'd said, "If you don't want to talk about it, we don't have to talk about it; but if you *do* want to talk about it, well . . ." Without having to turn around she knew he was giving her the same kind of look her mother had given her years ago, quite possibly in front of this same house. A look that said she knew what was best for Isobel but was graciously willing to let her come around to that knowledge herself. "If you really don't want to go inside, you don't have to go inside; if you really want to sit out here in the car in the cold, you can sit out here in the car in the cold; if you really don't want to come inside and say hello to poor Mrs. Pembroke, who gets such delight in seeing you every week, well . . ."

She got out of the car. That was something else that memory did: made you feel like you were sixteen again. Like the interim had been erased. Like everything you'd done and worked for, all the distance you'd striven to put between yourself and a place like Encaster, had been reduced to nothing. Like everything since had been a dream. Like all movement was an illusion. Like you were back where you started. And where you started was the only place you'd ever be, till the day you died.

The sun had mostly gone down, taking its yellows and oranges and reds with it. The cool air seemed somehow frantic, as though swarming with tiny particles or insects too small to be seen. Her head was swimming. She needed a cigarette.

This alarmed her. It had been some time since she'd felt a craving.

She'd been assiduously avoiding all the places where she used to light up—bars, cafeterias, the loading dock at work, Morley's balcony—because her body remembered those places and so prepared itself for the nicotine. It was this readiness that she felt as a craving—that emptiness somewhere between illness and hunger. To avoid this feeling, she'd taken to smoking in only novel and unfamiliar places, places she'd never return to anyway and so would not have to avoid. A place like this. The middle of nowhere.

But smoking in places like this had become a habit. So much so that her body could anticipate her—and prepare itself. The craving she felt here was indistinguishable from those she'd felt at any of her old haunts.

There was now, it seemed, no longer any place she could go, new or old, novel or familiar, to escape or forestall the craving. Her body was one step ahead of her.

Morley killed the engine and got out of the car. After a minute or two he came around to her side as though by accident and stood there, hands in his pockets, looking up at the house, beside her.

For the first time that day, perhaps that week, she felt an absence of animosity towards him, a feeling that might have been affection if it had not been so heavily tainted with sadness. It was as if part of her was grieving for the departed anger.

Grief. Perhaps that was all that memory evoked: the simple sense of loss.

She remembered—why?—standing in the kitchen with him, drinking egg nog.

She remembered his eyes on her.

She remembered being drawn to him, without being able to say why; drawn to his withdrawal, drawn to his skepticism.

You don't buy into this, do you, she'd said.

Do you?

She'd shrugged, not wanting to appear too eager, too hungry. I don't believe in the transmigration of the *soul* or anything, if *that's* what you mean.

He'd looked at her for a long time, till the smile on his face expired. Then he'd said something. She couldn't remember the exact words, but the

idea had struck her with force. He'd said something like: I think the soul would be too big to transmigrate.

She'd never thought of the soul as being big or little, or of having any particular size at all.

She'd been too dazed, too flustered, too flattered not to blurt out her own metaphysical aphorism, one she'd yet to share with anyone but her diary:

All I know is if there *are* other lives, past ones and future ones and what not, what's the point of worrying about *this* one?

Isobel felt an urge to tell all this to Morley, to explain to him exactly what was going on inside her. For a moment she felt as a visceral certainty the ultimate expressibility of every hue of emotion and shade of thought. This knotty sensation in her chest, for example, which was neither pleasure nor pain but something infinitely more complex: it seemed to represent both what Morley meant to her and the means by which she could illustrate that meaning to him. There was nothing that could not be said. She could tell him about the restlessness of the air, the craving for a cigarette, the accent of the Pembroke woman, the affliction of memory, which both proved and prohibited progress.

It occurred to her that if ever there was a lack of understanding between them it was due to nothing more complicated or nefarious than a lack of words. This time it would all come out in an effortless stream of luminous expression. She had only to open her mouth and begin.

She opened her mouth, but all that came out was a long, hiccuping wail.

"Oh Jesus," muttered Morley.

It was not too late. She could still explain. This too needed explaining, after all; this too was part of the explanation. Just as soon as she stopped sobbing, as soon as she got herself under control, she would tell him everything. Beginning, because she had to begin somewhere, with what was wrong. Beginning with that "Oh Jesus"—as though she was not entitled, not even today, to a few tears. She would begin by explaining what was wrong with that, wrong with him, wrong with her, wrong with them, and go on to

what was not.

She had opened her mouth to begin again when he touched her. He pressed his hand down heavily on her shoulder, less, it seemed, to comfort than to constrain, and something inside her reacted. Her stomach went cold; the muscles of her neck and back went taut. Her body knew what was coming if she did not. Before she'd even spoken a word she felt it preparing itself for the inevitable argument, the battle whose rules of engagement had been set down so long ago that they were beyond the grasp of memory.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here. They're probably calling the cops."

The house was not empty after all. A light had come on in one of the upper windows—or had been on all along, concealed by the glare of the falling sun.