The Undergoing

by C. P. Boyko

SHE WAS TWENTY-TWO and still a student, was earnest, optimistic, and ambitious, loved good talk but only participated when it stalled, believed in considering issues from every angle, privately respected her parents, laughed like a duck, and had lips that did not cover her teeth, so that she always looked credulous and surprised. He was twenty-three and worked unwillingly at a press-cutting agency, was restless, deprecating, and lazy, believed anything well written, despised his parents (who had money but would give none of it to him), and had a prominent Adam's apple and a gaze that never fell below the horizon. Neither of them had been in love before.

We do not fall in love so much as ski into it. The beginner finds it difficult to proceed slowly, let alone stop, once they are launched—and indeed, in their inexperience, often do not recognize the need for caution. They move so swiftly that hazards which might have deterred them if seen from above soon pass by in a beautiful blur. Battered veterans call this headlong dash "puppy love." It's fun while it lasts.

Within five minutes of meeting, Terence and Madison were exchanging philosophies. It was amazing how alike they were. She wanted to change the world, so saw in his grievances a kindred revolutionary zeal. He was a rebel and a loner, so saw her zeal as the vitriol of a fellow misfit.

"I know exactly what you mean!" he cried. "'Doing your part,' 'pitching in,' 'contributing to society' is not *necessarily* a good. If you don't believe that *society* is good, then it's actually better morally to do nothing."

"I know exactly what you mean!" she cried. "We've got to *remake* society from the ground up, using the new principles, the new morality. It's got to come from the people, and reflect their actual needs."

"Exactly! How much do people actually need? A house, a car, three meals a day? They could get all that in a two-hour workday—but they

wouldn't know what to do with their free time. They've never heard of Philosophy or Art. All they know is Boredom and Status. Well, *work* then, if you must—but give that extra money to someone who could use it!"

"Exactly! The future is as near as tomorrow, but we're not going to get anywhere just sitting around philosophizing and navel-gazing. We've got to act, we've got to *work* to bring it about. But try to tell that to *them!*"

"I know!"

"I know!"

Their happiness was suffocating; they had to turn away. For the first time, they noticed their surroundings. It was dusk, the flagstones were wet though neither of them recalled rain, and the trees lining the boulevard were in rampant blossom. They remembered that it was spring, and that the world was a very large place. The street they strolled down was not the usual expedient patchwork of their perceptions, but existed independently of them, seamlessly and luminously, like a scene in a lucid dream. They gazed in awe at Fairyland, and drifted closer together. After several minutes of effervescent silence, she took his arm—firmly, as if afraid he might run away.

"I don't usually hit it off this well with people," he confessed later, when their emotions had ceased to embarrass them so acutely. "In fact, I hate people."

"Me too, I hate people too."

"No you don't. Really? No. You wouldn't have agreed with me so quickly. If you really hated people, you'd have told me I was full of shit and that people are great."

"All right," she said, "you got me. I secretly love people."

"I knew it!"

"I'm a closet philanthrope."

They suppressed their laughter, as they had suppressed their joy, and felt funnier for it, like professional comedians.

Their opinion of "people" played a large part in their progressing entanglement. People, they agreed, were bland, timid, and drearily conventional —everything that Terence and Madison were not. They saw evidence of their own uniqueness everywhere. Other couples were shy and awkward, or

else they were tired of each other and hardly spoke. Indeed it seemed probable that no other couple in the world had ever been so honestly interested in each other, so minutely compatible. Other lovers had been goaded by loneliness and duped by their hormones; this alone was real.

They did not use the word "love," for the same reason that they avoided the word "God": they had seen it too often in print. As radicals and innovators, they deplored clichés and waged battle against all things hackneyed. They took nothing for granted, received no wisdom second-hand, but argued every issue out from scratch. Thus, for example, they decided that although a personal, human-sized deity was quite incredible, one could not rule out the possibility of a creative force in nature: something that would have about the same relation to an individual human as one person's hunger or sex drive had to an individual cell in their body—and which could therefore, for all practical purposes, be disregarded. They also concluded that finding the one person on the planet who best suited and complemented you was a mission of extreme importance but astronomical improbability—and that somehow they two, perhaps alone in history, had defied the odds and won the lottery.

The uniqueness of their feelings for each other demanded unique expression. They became of necessity poets, breaking new ground. He told her that everyone wore a different mask for different occasions, or in front of different people; perhaps they weren't strictly speaking masks at all, but aspects of their total personalities. With *her*, he said, he felt for the first time like all his masks were on at once, all the facets of his self active at the same time. She told him that with every other boy, she had felt reluctant to introduce him to her friends or her parents; she wasn't sure what they would think of him, or whether they would like him. With *him*, she said, she felt for the first time that it didn't matter what they thought; she was afraid, on the contrary, that *he* wouldn't like *them*.

He knew exactly what she was talking about. Always they seemed to be saying the same thing, in slightly different words.

They celebrated their singularity by emphasizing it. They made fun—of advertising, Hollywood, ungrammatical signs, Aunt Agony columns, and the

way people walked; they deplored—patriotism, drunkenness, television, etiquette, and public transit; and they flouted. They did not give thanks on Thanksgiving Day, and elected to do their remembering on every day of the year but Remembrance Day. They did not tip unless the service was exceptional (it was never exceptional). They only held doors for the downtrodden. They jaywalked. Sometimes they just stood in the middle of a crosswalk and kissed—making benevolent, edifying gestures at cars that honked.

They would have done more in this line if they could have; but Madison still lived at home, and Terence suffered from roommates. There was no place they could be alone. It was frustrating. How could they show the world to be a repressive, joy-killing place if they could not flout it by having sex?

They had both read and thought a great deal about sex, but neither of them had yet achieved it. They were now eager to rectify their negligence. Of course, they did not use the word "sex." Instead they spoke—or more often wrote, in long, allusive letters to each other—of the "dissolution of ego boundaries" or the "transcendent expression of an absolute sympathy." This lapse into almost mystical circumlocution was not, of course, the result of bashfulness, but of grappling with novelty. What they had in mind was unprecedented. What they were planning was not *sex*, but ecstatic physical and spiritual union.

They discarded several solutions to their problem as tawdry and temporary. What they needed was a room of their own, a place that only they would be allowed to enter, a place where no one could see them if they didn't want to be seen, a place where they could give their thoughts free expression, a still, safe, firm ground from which they could push off, reach out, and act. (They did not use the word "home.")

Terence did not believe that such a place existed—unless one had money; and he wallowed righteously in the indignity of their situation. Madison's bent was more pragmatic. She recalled that rents were cheaper outside the city. But what would they *do* there?, Terence wanted to know. How would they *eat*? Madison added up all their savings (so to speak), liq-

uid assets, and hopes of credit, and concluded that they could survive for five months in the countryside, without having to do anything at all.

Terence's restlessness battled his laziness—and lost. "But *then* what? We'll just be in the same boat again—but with less freeboard."

The answer came to them the next day, at a book shop. They browsed the stock with sad antagonism, like soldiers charged with selecting prisoners to be shot. "Have you read this one?" "Oh God. He's got more love of letters than of language. Have you read this one?" "Oh God. He's like a lion-tamer with his vocabulary. Okay, so you can control them—now what? Have you read this one?" "Oh God. It's a disgrace to the memory of Johannes Gutenberg." There were some books in the shop that they liked, but they avoided discussing these; it would have hurt too much to find their enthusiasm unshared. They also passed over in silence obscure authors, with whose failure they felt a certain solidarity. Instead they restricted their contempt to popular and canonical works, which apparently only they two had the clarity and originality of mind to find flawed. Scornfully they read aloud excerpts from various classics till the proprietor browbeat them from the store.

"I could do better than that," said Terence.

"Heck, *I* could do better than that," said Madison.

These words expanded to fill a hiatus in their conversation as they climbed aboard a bus, flashed their passes with sardonic formality at the driver, and sat as near the back as a group of gobbling adolescents would permit. When they reached their stop, Terence resumed: "You should."

"*We* should."

"Why not?"

"Well, why *not*?"

So they decided to become novelists. In five months they could write a novel each, if not two. Then, even if only one of those four novels became a bestseller, they would still earn enough to live on for another five months—if not a year or two. Soon their names would become known, and they would not need to write so much. They could take holidays; they could travel. Terence confessed that he was dying to see the world, that he was burning to experience life. Madison, in different words, said the same thing: She still

had much to learn about the socioeconomic conditions of underprivileged people in other countries. Once equipped with this first-hand knowledge, she would write even better, even more devastatingly persuasive and improving novels. Ever since the advent of Terence in her life, Madison had found school rather—academic. She was tired of endlessly discussing what should be done with the world; it was time to take action; it was time to *tell* people what should be done with the world. Terence knew exactly what she was talking about. Novel-writing appealed to him for the same reasons: it was artistic, it was easy, it was lucrative, and he would be his own boss. He hated bosses. He did not believe in being told what to do. Even in the matter of press-cuttings, he believed in following one's own daemon. He was ready to leave immediately—tomorrow, if possible. He seemed eager to burn as many bridges behind him as possible. His example was exciting, his enthusiasm contagious. So, to prove to her professors, her parents, and her friends the strength of her conviction, Madison dropped out a mere three weeks before graduation. She forgave them their dismay, realizing that guilt and envy had made them defensive of their own safe and stodgy lives.

They packed everything they needed into two suitcases and caught a train south. The world seemed to sit back and stretch its legs as grey tenements and smoking factories gave way to rolling hills and fields in flower; the very birds in the trees seemed to sing tribute to the young couple's courage. They had *escaped*. Terence stuck his head out the window to inhale the fragrance of freedom and received instead a swarm of insects like a fistful of gravel in the face. The pain and embarrassment soon faded, washed away on the wave of their happiness, though the welts lasted several days.

When at last they had reached their destination and found themselves alone in the cabin they had rented by the lake, their triumph was too palpable; it made them giddy. So they walked into town and busied themselves with grocery shopping—"stocking the pantry," they called it. But even this simple domestic ritual seemed on this day freighted with symbolism, charged with an almost erotic significance—which they attempted to defuse with mockery, by parodying the stereotypical male and female. Terence hitched his thumbs on imaginary suspenders, nodded authoritatively, and

called Madison "Mother" in a condescending drawl; while she became flustered, hectoring, and house-proud. They kept it up all the way back to the cabin, where she squirreled away their purchases while he lolled patriarchally, muttering advice from an armchair.

The game fizzled out over supper. They ate in silence; their gazes were skittish. Finally they laughed at their shyness and took it firmly in hand.

"Why don't we take off our clothes?," Madison asked in the same practical tone that Terence had once used to suggest they pee behind some bushes in the park.

"Well, why not?"

They did not watch each other undress, but presented a finished nudity, which proved all the more overwhelming.

Terence, trembling, said, "Why don't we have a bath?"

"Why not?"

They studied each other surreptitiously as Madison opened the faucets and Terence attended to the water heater. Terence had seen breasts before, but never so closely or so uninterruptedly. Each time a girl had taken her shirt off in his presence or field of view he had felt towards her breasts the way he'd felt as a child towards other children's birthday presents. Now he felt as if he'd been told that it was really his birthday after all. His internal organs swelled with gratitude. Madison meanwhile was overcome with awe at the casual, indifferent way that Terence flung his naked body about. Her own body was of course insipidly familiar, but it seemed inconceivable that anyone could ever come to take for granted such a strange, hairy, bony miracle of biological engineering as Terence's. His skin next to her bland smoothness seemed amazingly coarse and textured, almost iridescent, like the skin of a lizard.

The bathtub, which was hardly big enough for both of them, overflowed when they squeezed themselves in. The water was freezing; apparently the water heater, though noisily and dangerously lit, did exactly nothing. They climbed out, ran slipping and shivering to the bedroom, and jumped into the bed to get warm.

The rest came easily.

Madison felt as if she were remembering something important, something she had forgotten she had even forgotten. Terence knew that he had found home. He vowed never again to leave—and promptly fell asleep.

TERENCE AWOKE TO paralysis. Something vast, conscious, and malevolent was crouching on his chest, pinning his arms and legs, and sucking the air from his lungs. He struggled, as vainly as an ant crushed beneath a boot. His heart thudded as if intent on escaping this dying body. He shouted, but no sound came. He kicked and flailed, but could not move. It was exactly like a nightmare: he stomped on the brakes, but the road was icy and sloped downhill.

Then it was over. This happened most mornings lately, but he never remembered this at the time, and when the ordeal was over he no longer needed reassurance. Almost instantly he began to forget what it had been like. He was inclined to treat the whole thing as a metaphor. He turned onto his side, and, as usual, found Madison's side of the bed as cold and unrumpled as a reproach. If he felt sometimes like he was being crushed, he knew who was to blame.

He lay in bed a few minutes longer. He was not tired at the moment, but knew he would be soon. He was sleepy all the time these days. No amount of sleep or sleep deprivation seemed to have any effect; but sleeping through sleepiness was easier than fighting it, so he spent as many hours in bed as possible—despite Madison's silent, indirect reproaches.

He supposed that she supposed he had writer's block. But he was far too clever for that. He never faced a blank page directly. Instead of wrestling inelegantly with what words to write, he fenced with the question of whether or not to write at all. There were excellent reasons for waiting. But some people did not understand the concept of gestation. If he was not putting pen to paper, he was nevertheless *writing*. Thinking about what to write and planning how to write it was the biggest part of the work; writing was ninety percent inspiration and ten percent perspiration. Once he had his novel laid out in his mind, he could transcribe it to paper in a week or two. Madison

couldn't understand this because she was a hack. She had to think in ink. She used her pen like a walking stick, staggering blindly up the rocky hill of her ideas. He, on the other hand, soared high above his mountain, sketching the most propitious route. A walking stick at this stage would only impede him. And to set out too early, before the map was finished, was foolhardy and counterproductive. He would laugh when Madison encountered a wall or crevasse and was forced to turn back. And *she* supposed that *he* had writer's block!

In fact, Madison supposed no such thing. On the contrary, she assumed, whenever he was not actually in sight, that he was quietly producing in another room. And because her own production felt so slow and so faltering, she assumed that he was effortlessly prolific. She resented and envied and loathed his productivity—but not half as much as she loathed her own constipation. She worked—if you could call it work!—eight to ten hours a day, every day, till her mind became inflamed and allergic to language; and still she had so little to show for her efforts. A thousand words, six hundred fifty words—two hundred words! One day she had actually crossed out more than she had added. This was not work; this was an illness.

She felt that she was the only person in the world not working—probably the only living creature. Her writing table stood under a window, and outside that window there unfolded, for her moral instruction, a daily pageant of industry. Honeybees plied their routes, jackdaws built their nests, ants did with relentless purpose whatever it is that ants do, and next door the neighbors weeded, hoed, mulched, and pruned their perfect garden into perfect order and fruition. Madison and Terence's cabin had a garden too. But theirs had been neglected and gone to seed—hideously, crepitatingly to seed. It was like a single organism now, a leafy, tangled, almost visibly breathing organism, bursting perpetually from the pod of its own rotten carcass. It was a living rebuke; she could not have felt more ashamed of her indolence and neglect if that garden had been her own bruised and starving child. She could not show her face to the neighbors.

That was another reason she envied and resented Terence: he mingled effortlessly with the locals. At least she assumed he did. She had once seen

him sprawling naturally over the fence and chatting to the gardeners next door, and she had often seen him strolling lackadaisically in the direction of town; her imagination had filled in the rest of the picture with convincing detail. Terence liked it here. Terence fit in here. She loathed him for that.

But not half as much as she loathed *here*. There was no hot water. Instead of a toilet there was a hole cut in a splintery piece of plywood and a bucket. The electricity was temperamental. The food was strange—the produce sweet and crisp and disconcertingly flavorful—so they subsisted on canned foods or ate at the restaurant in town. She did not trust the water, which tasted funny even after ten minutes of boiling. She knew she was malnourished, if not actually poisoned, because of the strange compensating cravings that came over her; sometimes she just *had* to eat three soft-boiled eggs slathered with corn relish, or a pot of pea and ketchup soup, or a bowl of salted uncooked oatmeal swimming in vinegar.

Then there were the insects. The countryside was infested with insects—and not just the aloof, industrious kind, but intrusive, predatory bugs, bugs with feelers and pincers and poison sacs, bugs too large to kill and too small to see. She was covered with their bites. Every time a breeze or a breath stirred a hair on her skin she slapped and clawed at the spot, but the scurrying, burrowing insect was always too quick for her.

"Look." She rolled up her sleeve and rotated her arm under Terence's eyes like meat on a spit. "Bed bugs."

"They look like mosquito bites."

"They're itchier. And bed bugs bite in a line. See?"

"I don't think two points make a line."

But Madison, who was more mathematical, explained impatiently that *all* you needed to define a line was two points. And in any case, she had seen them: little red-eyed crabs scuttling along the perimeter of the mattress like jingoistic soldiers patrolling a border. When she had exposed them to the light they had stared up at her balefully before disappearing into the seams.

All the wildlife here treated her abominably. The birds would not shut up; they did not sing so much as repeatedly clear their throats, like old men with catarrh. One had even flown in through an open window, squawked

and thrashed about in the rafters for a few minutes, then flown back out—a message from the avian mafia, presumably. Squirrels too she discovered made horrific chittering noises to unhinge their enemies, and deer (she had seen a deer outside her window one dawn) stared at her with unmistakable malice as they tore out and chewed grass, as if to say: *This* could be *your head*. Even the dogs and the cats here had gone feral, and evidently recently. They still wore their collars, but with an air of bitter irony, like a bag lady sporting a broken wristwatch or a homeless former millionaire sleeping in his suit jacket. They were gaunt and scarred and dirty, their teats and testicles dangled obscenely, and they looked at Madison with weary resentment as one more thing they could not eat. She might have felt sorry for them if she weren't so afraid of them.

The people she did feel sorry for. They were so friendly they seemed servile—as if everyone in the countryside were angling for a good tip. There were not many cars on the roads, but what drivers there were treated Terence and Madison, as pedestrians, with the deference one might show a mad bull. Once she had gone into the pharmacy to buy condoms (just another item on the grocery list now) and found the pharmacist drinking a can of soda. When she spoke to him he threw the can, which was far from empty, into a garbage bin—as if he had been caught doing something disreputable, as if anything that might divert any part of his attention from her assistance was disreputable. And whenever she and Terence visited the restaurant, the family who ran the place insisted on seating them at the family's own table, which they vacated with gestures of grateful renunciation—though there were plenty of other tables, and the family had not finished eating, and their table was too big for Terence and Madison, and it certainly did not require seven people to prepare and serve a meal for two. But those who were not engaged in the effort stood at a maximally respectful distance and smiled and nodded with groveling approval at the young couple's every choice, then with hopeful solicitude at their every bite.

She told herself that it was not the locals' fault, any more than in olden times it had been a slave's fault that he called his owner "sir." They were servile because they had been subjugated for so long. Generations of bad

food, bad plumbing, bad dentistry, and insects had left them weak, dull-witted, docile, and industrious. They were like poor dumb beasts of burden who didn't even recognize their plight.

Clearly it was the novelist's job to rescue these creatures from the mire. But how was it to be done? She grappled with the problems that beset every didactic novelist. How to praise good and condemn evil while telling a fictional story, which does neither? The easiest way would be to create a mouthpiece character who could do the praising and condemning for her, in forceful soliloquy or Socratic dialogues with doubters. But how could she signal to the reader that these were in fact *her* ideas; how could she persuade the reader to take her mouthpiece seriously? Perhaps by making him likeable? But different readers, surely, found different sorts of characters likeable. She did not want to alienate those who, for example, found politeness, or eloquence, or good looks distasteful; she did not want to alienate anyone. It could not be avoided: she would have to dramatize.

But now the difficulties multiplied. Obviously, the good to be praised and the evil to be condemned must be particularized, must be personified. But once she rendered the good people good and the bad bad it began to seem implausible that the good would ever have let themselves become victims of the bad, who were obviously their inferiors. In order to make her victims believable, it seemed necessary to make them at least ignorant, or fearful, or weak—that is, less than perfectly good. Or she could hope to elicit the reader's compassion by making the hero-victims as frail and innocent and frightened as babes in a darkling wood; but then it became difficult to imagine them fighting their way out from under their oppression. And they had to fight. She couldn't simply give the villain a change of heart, or he would become the sympathetic character, the hero. No, the villain must be blackly and unrepentantly evil, and must in the end receive his comeuppance. That much was certain. But then a still more thorny question arose: Who was the villain? To be specific, who was responsible for the misery and stupidity of rural life? She did not know. But never mind; the personifications were symbolic, not actual. In the end she made her hero an honest overworked farmer who said little but expressed his dissatisfaction through sarcasm, and her vil-

lain a slick manipulative lawyer hired by a conglomerate of highway builders to bribe or drive off farmers from their land. She showed he was evil by making him chuckle a lot and lust after the farmer's wife. Nevertheless, she felt that with each page and passing day her thesis was becoming more and more obscured by a fog of dialogue, characterization, and event. She was also bemused by the fact that the lawyer, by buying the farmer off, would seem to be saving him from the wretchedness of country living. In order to get any work done at all, she had to thrust these doubts from her mind—but they were persistent, like affectionate dogs nuzzling the very hand that pushed them away.

Terence, still lying in bed, had a somewhat different idea of the novelist's job. He felt that writing had less to do with the crafting of sentences, the making up of stories, or the imparting of wisdom than with the sampling, the encountering, the undergoing of pure experience. The novelist's job was *to live*. He had to go out into the world as if deciding whether or not to buy it; he had to taste it, sniff it, heft it, palpate it, rub himself up against it, turn it upside down and let its contents wash over him; then, and only then, could he return to his garret sanctum and write about it, exactly as he had perceived it. The novelist experienced life so others would not have to. He was a sort of inverted Jesus figure: instead of dying for humanity, he lived for it. It was therefore his sacred duty to do and feel everything that a human being could possibly do or feel. He could reject no pleasure or pain that came his way, and must seek out all those that did not come his way. He must walk every path, learn every song, love every kind of person that had ever been born. Terence, still lying in bed, did not feel as if he were getting much work done here in the countryside either.

But he refused to feel guilty. It was not his fault that there was nothing to do here. Despite his lassitude—or because of it—he had walked every dusty inch of the village, read every sign, looked into every shop, and spoken to every yokel in a ten-mile radius. From Frederickson at the hotel pub he had learned how to play pinochle; from Eloise the school librarian he had learned finger knitting; Hastington, who had taken over Old Jastvyk's farm, had taught him how to operate a combine harvester; Patchmatt had given

him an introduction to the principles of compound pharmacology; Webbing next door had instructed him on the advantages of organic gardening; and Bubbie Katiele at the restaurant had inflicted upon him, in overlapping installments, all six nations and eighty-nine years of her life story. Hours and hours of useless talk! Not one thing Terence could write about! Yet he drank it all in with desperate distaste, like a man dying of thirst guzzling sea water. His boredom drove him first towards the locals, then away from them, sent him careening like a pinball from one tedious lesson or tale to the next. Sometimes the momentum of the repulsion carried him right out of town and into the surrounding fields and woods.

It was the end of summer. Insects clicked and whistled and buzzed in deafening profusion, sounding when he closed his eyes like thousands of ramshackle refrigerators. The brittle yellow grasses held their seed pods out to the wind, which never came. The brown trees creaked like floor joists; their brown leaves shook their heads slowly, No, no, no. The dry earth gave off waves of languorous heat at the exact pulse rate of his own heart. All of nature seemed to be slowly drawing and holding its last fevered breath, before the long lingering death rattle.

He lay down in the tall grass beneath the trees and watched the branches sail across the sky and wondered what it would be like to be dead. Not so bad, he thought, and fell asleep.

MADISON AWOKE TO the sound of screams. She was half out of bed before she realized that it was not the babies screaming, but Terence.

She was about to punch him awake—but he was already quiet. She loosened her fists and lay back down, congratulating herself on her self-control and her compassion. Then she changed her mind, and her forbearance became vicious. She only refrained from pummeling him so that he'd get pummeled worse by his nightmares. This was the third night in a row he'd woken her and the babies (the babies were probably awake and getting ready to bawl any moment now!), and with the ear infections and the teething none of them could afford to lose any more sleep. If he was going to wake

them all up without even waking himself, the least he deserved was troubled dreams. Then she felt a pang of conscience and changed her mind again. He was the one to be pitied, after all; they were his nightmares, his screams. And they were not his fault. She decided to stand vigil over his slumber and shake him gently at the first sign of any further distress. But, alas, none came. His face was placid, his body limp and soft. Even as she drifted back to sleep her resentment returned. He made her worry for nothing!

When morning came she found herself in a bad mood, which at first she tried to defuse with physiological explanations. She had not slept; she had not eaten; she needed a coffee. But the line between internal and external causation is a thin one, and soon she was crossing it. *Why*, after all, hadn't she slept? Or eaten? Or had her morning cup of coffee? The answer was not far to seek.

"Sorry," said Terence. "I didn't realize this was the last cup. I'll make some more."

But she didn't want more; she wanted her original share. Was that too much to ask? Then she realized that she was being unreasonable, and tried to withdraw peacefully from the incipient argument by waiving her rights. She'd changed her mind, she said; she didn't want any coffee after all. But Terence saw this as a martyr's pose, and insisted irritably that it was no trouble. He got up and began banging pots and spoons and coffee tin. She did not like being made to feel like a moody, demanding, manipulative prima donna, and ordered him to stop. Terence threw his hands in the air and reeled about the kitchen, slapping the floor with his feet, unable to believe that they could be fighting about something as stupid and petty as who had drunk the "last" cup of coffee. Madison began to explain that that was not what they were arguing about at all, but before she could get the words out she was overwhelmed by insulted indignation. Did he really think she was the sort of bird-brained nag who picked a fight over something as silly as that?

"Why are you *yelling* at me?"

"I'm *not* yelling!" she yelled.

Terence made choking spluttering noises, tried to detach his head from his spinal column, threw his cup of coffee at the wall, and juddered like an unbalanced washing machine across the apartment and out the door—which he took care to slam, so the neighbors would know who the wronged party was.

After this she stopped trying to defuse her bad mood and started instead to fortify and embroider it with justifications. These came readily to mind, in orderly single file, as if they had been waiting in the wings for their cue.

First there was the matter of money. There wasn't enough of it. She could not believe how much more things cost when you were buying for four people; surely something more nefarious than straightforward multiplication was involved. Even well before the arrival of the babies, she and Terence had stopped going out to dinner, movies, or concerts altogether, because she could not accept that the price of these outings should be, for a couple, double what it had been for herself as a single woman.

Terence, of course, refused to worry about finances—which was why she had to; and *that* was why he didn't have to. It wasn't fair. She wasn't parsimonious by nature, and didn't appreciate being cast in the role of tightfisted housewife. She hated what he had made her become. And she didn't find it helpful when he advised her to "relax."

She wasn't allowed to fret about money because she wasn't bringing any in: it wasn't her parents who supported them, but Terence's. But Mr. and Mrs. Loach, she was sure, had never intended to *support* them, only to help them out a little. Anyway no one could seriously expect four people to subsist solely on what the Loaches gave them. When Madison tried to suggest this to Terence he became defensive, and twisting her words, said that if she had such an overpowering lust for luxury she could get a job as easily as he could, more easily, probably—implying by his tone that there was something sordid about being employable. She would almost have considered it, just to get out of the house and away from him and the squalling babies occasionally, if not for her resolute sense of fair play. She was not going to be the only breadwinner, by God. She was not going to support his leisure with

her labor. Though he claimed to be working on a novel (the same novel he had been working on for three years?), she no longer considered novel-writing real work, because she knew there was no money in it. Her own novel had been politely rejected by every single publisher she had sent it to. Did Terence think he'd have better luck? If he needed a hobby, let him pursue it in the evenings and weekends like every other responsible father. And would it kill him to mind his own children once in awhile? And what did *he* have to be having nightmares about anyway?

Meanwhile, Terence's rage had passed. It had served its purpose: it had got him out of the house. Consciously and officially, he could only write at home; but in actuality he found it nearly impossible. For one thing, he was easily distracted, and was inclined to blame this on the little sounds his family made. Even when the babies were sleeping, he could (he believed) hear their boisterous breathing in the next room. He certainly could hear Madison flipping the pages of a book—which she did with infuriating irregularity, so he could not even get used to it, as one could with a clock or a dripping faucet. When, from time to time, the apartment did fall silent, the suspense became deafening. He could still *feel* their presence on the other side of the wall; it seeped into his consciousness like a black fog, and made him feel watched and hovered over and judged. He could never forget that he was not alone, and no one, he believed, could write unless he was utterly, absolutely alone. But when Madison did take the babies out for a walk or a doctor's appointment, his relief was so great that all tension left his body; he became too limp to move or even think. He basked bonelessly in the sensation of freedom and possibility that solitude brought, and dreamed of all he would do if only he had more hours like this. Then he would spend the rest of his idyll, however long it might last, regretting that it must end so soon. So that by the time he heard Madison return, cautiously scraping her key in the lock and loudly shushing the babies, he let out a sigh almost of gratitude —for no one likes to wait long to have their pessimism vindicated.

Thus it was only when Terence contrived to get himself expelled from this writer's paradise that his outrage at the injustice and inconvenience became great enough to actually spur him to work. He entered a noisy café or

crowded pub and gawped, appalled, at the hardship he had been reduced to —then sat down and began spitefully to write.

He was spiting his parents, who with their paltry allowance had finally chained him to the life of mediocrity and muddle they had always wanted for him. He was spiting Madison's parents, who looked at him as if he had raped their daughter, and who wouldn't even acknowledge their grandchildren until Madison completed her worthless university degree. He was spiting the babies, who smelled bad and made a lot of noise. And he was spiting Madison, who had become the very things she had once mocked: bland, timid, and drearily conventional; flustered, hectoring, and house-proud. She who had once said that the most important thing was to live with intensity and integrity now scolded him for putting leftovers in the fridge before they had cooled sufficiently, and nagged him to get a job. A job!

How had it happened? Who was to blame? Had she lied to him, had he lied to her, had they both lied to themselves? Had everything changed, or had they merely been blind to realities? As his spite modulated gradually into melancholy, his pen began to move more slowly, and he settled into a contemplative, reminiscing rhythm. The novel he was writing was about the countryside.

He remembered their cabin, and the view from the windows of the pastel lake in the morning. He remembered every lane of the town. He remembered the dim shops and the graffiti carved into the legs of their table at the restaurant. He remembered the wide fields and tangled woods, the farms and the school and the post office in the bakery. He remembered the people, and he remembered, not their clumsy words, but their stories.

Memories are ideas, and ideas are often lovelier than reality, because they are simpler and therefore seem more perfect, like objects bathed in soft moonlight. Memories therefore are often lovelier than the buzzing hubbub of present experience. Terence remembered their life in the countryside, and because his memories were beautiful he believed that they had been happy there. For five wonderful months, at least, they had lived intensely and had loved each other.

Sometimes, as he wrote in that noisy café or that crowded pub, he was jostled; and before he looked up he would finish his sentence with an especially distant and determined air—while vividly imagining the young woman with large eyes who had been watching him all this time and had finally mustered the courage to nudge him and ask him what on earth he was writing about so intently.

By the time Terence returned home several hours later, Madison had gone through countless cycles of anger and pity, blame and forgiveness, self-justification and self-loathing, before arriving at last at a precarious resolution to empathize. Falling in love, she told herself, might be like winning the lottery; but staying in love was more like a weekly paycheck: one had to work for it. The only problem was that whenever she took the trouble to see things from Terence's point of view, she soon realized that he could be doing the same for her—and obviously wasn't. If she was going to put herself in his shoes, he could damn well put himself in hers! And so empathy backfired: because she could understand him, she was unable to understand why he couldn't understand her; her tolerance made her intolerant of his intolerance. Then she caught herself being intolerant, and cursed herself—and the cycle started all over again.

When he came in, she gritted her teeth and forced herself to be kind. She sat down beside him and touched his hair. "Bad dreams last night?"

He withdrew his head, as if to focus. "Huh?"

"You were shouting again. In your sleep."

He stared past her. "I don't remember," he shrugged at last. "It's too late."