

Cecelia Frey

Tamar Ferouin Amongst the Savages

Horowich pushed open his back gate and stepped carefully into the alley. He was an old man who walked slowly and who, even on this balmy, cloudless June morning, wore a black coat and a peaked cap. Thrown across one shoulder was his bottle sack, burlap, looking somehow ridiculous in the way it hung limp and empty. When he returned in a few hours it would be full, gorged with bottles and tins. This neighbourhood could be counted on for a good haul. The hand that held the sack was permanently stained by nicotine, vegetation and earth, general wear and tear. His smell was of old tobacco, old boiled meat and cabbage, and ultimately, simply plain old Horowich.

Watching him, through a breakfast nook window across the lane, was Esther Helge. She was a woman of medium height, broad but spare. Her arms resting on the table were lean, the veins prominent. She always wore stockings and precisely laced oxfords, even around the house. Although her government pension was small, she allowed herself a permanent wave every six months and a blue rinse every six weeks. Every morning she dusted her face lightly with powder and spread her lips efficiently, one sweep each direction, with lipstick. For, while she scorned women who tried to look younger than their years, she knew that if she did not continue making an effort something terrible would happen, she was not sure what, but something vague that seemed always around her ready to pounce, something that involved total confusion, a destruction of intelligence and order.

Her grey eyes were more steely than usual as she appraised Horowich's sack. Its advance on its morning round of alleys and garbage tins, she saw as a retreat, both literally as it disappeared down the lane, and also in the way it conveyed to her a sense of just how low a human creature could let himself get. Horowich, the ragman, he was known on these streets. He must have had other names at one time, but no one, not even Walter, knew what they were. His life, his other life, if he had had one, had happened so long ago that perhaps even he did not

remember it. Why he was known as the ragman when he collected bottles and tins, Esther did not know, nor did she care. What she did know was his smell, that it was brown and evil, and the look of his hands, his jagged black fingernails. Sometimes when she was out with Gertrude, the only way she would go out anymore in this neighbourhood, and to get to any other place she would first have to pass through this one, they would meet him, and then they had to stop and talk. Gertrude would talk to anyone, smile at anyone. Esther knew with certainty that some day her sister was going to regret doing this.

It was true that Gertrude had been acting friendly for more than sixty years and nothing had happened yet, if you discounted Walter, who as far as Esther was concerned was disaster enough for any one woman. At the moment Gertrude was in the kitchen, a cupboard area separated from the table by a counter. She was smaller boned than Esther, but fleshy, her flesh bouncing in the same rhythm as the plastic cylinders that covered her head and had come loose in the night. Her grandchildren played around her knees, in her pathway. One cried and lifted his arms. Forgetting about eggs and toast, Gertrude bent to pick him up, tossed him up onto the soft cushion of her shoulder. With the exertion, her breath came in short gasps. That woman, Esther decided, is going to drop dead from a heart attack one of these days. Her own fault too, letting herself get like that. Low thyroid, Gertrude called it, but Esther knew that was just an excuse for being fat and for being so slow about making breakfast.

Not that Esther would have minded getting her own breakfast. And she was quite willing to help. But Gertrude always told her to sit down and rest her legs. Esther knew that Gertrude said that to get her out of the way, but she submitted to the subterfuge. There was not room for both of them in the small kitchen U. Gertrude would constantly be running up against her the way she did with people, as though she did not know where her body ended and the other person's began. Esther remembered how, as children, she and Gertrude had shared the same bed, in winter cuddling together for warmth like puppies. No longer could Esther recall the feel of another human body, but she did not mind. The very thought of flesh touching flesh she found unnerving. When by accident she and Gertrude brushed arms, hands, she felt something like pain on the surface of her skin, a sensation that made her almost feel like weeping.

She did suppose, to be fair, that Gertrude's flesh did fill out skin and wrinkles. She looked down at her own forearms folded across each other. Her skin was empty, hung down from the bone and spread in narrow folds on the table top. She didn't like to look at it. She moved her eyes to the distinct numbers on the face of her watch. Seven

fifty-two. She wondered if Walter would ever come to the end of yet another one of his anecdotes in which he played the leading man and if Gertrude would ever get that food on the table.

Not that she was hungry. She was never really hungry any more. And she never let herself get really full because that would mean discomfort, even indigestion. She only knew that one boiled egg and one piece of toast would get her through to lunch without her feeling faint. There had been a time when she was ravenous for meals, would heap her plate, stuff herself, stretch her stomach. Satiated, she would push back from the table feeling that she would never need to eat again, only to be starving five hours later for supper. But that was when she had chored for people, when she was young and on the farm, when she could feel her body, feel its needs and satisfactions. Now everything blurred into sameness.

The reason Esther wanted to get breakfast over with was so she could go up to her room, the only place in the house where she could expect even a minimum of peace and quiet, and accomplish something. Already that morning she had been inspired. It had come to her just like that, in between buttoning the front of her dress and arranging her hair and face before the mirror. Quickly, she had jotted it down. "High cliffs towering to reach windy heights of undeniable truth." Now, watching Walter's mouth open and close like a trap, she wondered if indisputable would be better. She decided to change it as soon as she could get to her room. She was sure that this time she was really onto something. The way that line had come to her all of a piece, leaving her slightly awestruck, seemed an omen. Not that she ever had much trouble with first lines.

Beach, ceach, deach, leach, she thought. But it was no use. Walter's voice like radio static, Gertrude's slamming of cupboard doors, those children... Why Gertrude thought it necessary to raise her grandchildren after raising six of her own, Esther could never hope to guess. In her opinion, it was extremely irresponsible of Janine to keep having them, especially since she had never bothered getting married. Esther suspected, although when she brought the matter up Gertrude always looked away, that there was more than one father involved, too. But, Esther realized, Janine was like that. Nobody expected her to be responsible. There was always somebody around for people like Janine, somebody else to pick up the pieces. And you couldn't blame Janine, either. She only took after her mother. Gertrude had been like that, too. Soft, pretty Gertrude, with large brown eyes and curly dark hair.

For a long time, when they were young, Esther had wondered who Gertrude looked like. Then when their mother died and Esther was

cleaning out her things, going through her trunk, no one else in the family felt up to it, she found some old pictures, pictures of people left in the old country, an aunt, Esther supposed from the name on the back of the photograph, the aunt who in family legends did such beautiful handwork. People like that, like the aunt, like Gertrude, were allowed illusions of romance, allowed pretty clothes, parties, flirtations. People like that were not expected to hold down a job for more than a few weeks at a time, were not expected to use what little pay they did get on anybody but themselves. It had not seemed Gertrude's fault that all the fellows were after her. Even when she had become pregnant and married Walter, somehow she still seemed innocent.

On the other hand she, Esther had never been allowed illusions. She had always been too efficient. She had always done what was expected of her, even at the age of fourteen when she was hired out to an elderly couple on a neighbouring farm. All her money, fifty cents a day, she had handed over to her mother on Sundays, her afternoon off, when her brother came for her with the wagon and took her home to help catch up with the mending and scrubbing, to help make Sunday dinner. Not that Esther had ever minded. On the contrary; for her mother's sake she would have done ten times as much work. She blamed her parents for nothing.

Later, though, it had turned out that life was not always drudgery, that there was time for something else. That was after the old couple retired to the city and Esther moved along with them, after they died and through the minister of the church Esther got employment as a live-in domestic. Sometime then, during those early years in the city, at one of the places where she had worked, she started her secret scribbles. Was it because of loneliness? Because of some unfulfilled yearning? She did not know. It seemed as though some large force had compelled her to jot down notes to herself in the evenings, late evenings, often after she was in bed. She would have to swing herself out of the warmth, her feet onto the cold floor, rummage for a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper. After awhile she started keeping a pencil and paper beneath her pillow. Esther felt satisfied that, unlike other people, she had no illusions. What she kept hidden, to bring out and look at only when she was alone, usually in the dark of night, was a harmless hobby.

She took a sip of coffee to settle her nerves. The coffee had no taste as far as she could tell. And she did not like the thick porcelain mugs that Gertrude called cups. They were crude, ugly. In later years, in those last houses, Esther's lips had become accustomed to fine china. Towards the end she had worked in some pretty ritzy places, as she liked to tell Gertrude. She had learned about serving food properly and speaking in a low voice.

Walter, who was sitting directly across the table from her, was talking about what *he* had told the foreman he could do with the four day work week. Esther, resigned to watching Walter's long red face and his wisps of white hair that seemed to move with his jaw, did not like the four day work week any more than he did. That was why he was at home on a Friday morning. Starting the day with Walter gave Esther indigestion. Not that she disliked him, exactly. But once, when he had been to the beer parlour after work, he called her 'that skinny dried up old maid sister of yours' to Gertrude. Esther prided herself that she did not hold grudges, and she hoped she was above minding what a silly old fool said when he was drunk. It was just that she felt better knowing that he was safely down a sewer pipe or driving around in the city engineering truck.

"How d'y'want em?" Gertrude's girlish, high-pitched voice rang through the sound of her banging a pan onto the stove and sliced across Walter's story. Why Gertrude had to ask that question every morning, Esther would never know, since she always had boiled and they always had fried. But she realized that Gertrude was like that, talked just to hear herself, even though it was exhausting for the people who had to listen. Esther felt suddenly tired, oppressed. What was it? The sameness? The inevitability? She took a deep breath but could not seem to fill her lungs. There seemed to be some sort of blockage, as though the air came bang up against something solid and immovable. She pressed the bones of her chest with the outspread fingers of one hand. It's this house, she decided, so narrow, poorly ventilated, so close to the other houses, never any air in it or around it. For some reason, this made her think of Horowich. Somehow he seemed to be part of all this, part of her discomfort, of everything that closed her in.

She was not against men, like some people, like Walter, thought. She had, at various times in her life, had men friends. Once there had even been passion; afterwards she decided it had not been love. But that was something she did not allow herself to think about, because in the end it had been undignified, shameful. But if a nice, refined gentleman came along, she would be more than willing, she would enjoy going out occasionally to a café for supper, to a band concert on a Sunday afternoon. She had always enjoyed playing whist. But there simply were no men like that here. Here there were only Walter and Horowich. Esther's thin lips turned down at the edges. Her nose wrinkled as though even at this distance and through walls, she could smell the man who to her was always a dark figure, waiting in shadows.

That was how he had appeared to her the first time she saw him. Shortly after she had come here to live, she was walking in the evening with Gertrude. They had walked past Horowich's small front yard. Up

until then Esther had been enjoying the walk immensely. That was before she really knew what this neighbourhood was like, that many of the houses had been abandoned by their owners and neglected by their tenants, so that the ones left with neatly clipped lawns and small flower gardens along their fronts seemed outnumbered and defensive, obviously about to lose the battle of their order and decency to future chaos. Esther did not really mind houses being small and plain, old and cramped together. Many old neighbourhoods were like that, and actually, she felt more comfortable around those houses than in the suburbs where everything was bare and seemed to be made of plastic. And she liked the quiet people, most of them old, who puttered about in their yards with trowels and watering cans, the people who belonged to the neat houses. One evening she noticed an old couple kneeling together near their flower bed. This made her think of a painting she had seen once of people kneeling in a field at sunset, giving thanks after the day's labour. Esther did not even mind poverty. At least she knew there was nothing to be ashamed of in it. Her mother had taught her, all of them, that. Esther did not mind people who were poor as long as they were clean and respectable. It was the other ones, the young men with ratty long hair, dirty jeans, the children with that musty smell, the young woman who lived down the street. She had a big stomach and flapping rubber sandals and never seemed to comb her hair or go to the dentist. She was always screeching at her dirty, snivelly children who seemed to teem from the doors and windows of their run-down house at all hours of the day and night. When the lights were on you could see through the window, straight through the living room into the back kitchen, see into the filth and clutter, see the beer bottles and overflowing ashtrays piled up on the kitchen table. These were the people that Esther could not help but despise, the ones who seemed to have lost respect for themselves as human beings, or maybe never had it in the first place. People without even the decency to pull their blinds and lower their windows on their depravity, but exhibited it as though on a stage for all the world to see.

But Horowich did not exhibit himself that way. He did not like to waste electricity. He preferred darkness. He had once told Walter, Walter was faithful in his reporting, that in the old country and later here during the early years, there was no electricity. When it was dark, it was dark. And unless he needed light for something specific, he did not bother with a lantern. He had always sat in darkness to smoke his evening pipes. He had never learned to read the language of this country. "You don't need light for thinking," he had said to Walter. "It's all up here," he had tapped his head, "like a picture show."

The evening of that first walk had been warm, early autumn. The air was rose coloured from dust and smoke and smelled of dry leaves. Horowich's yard was patchy with crab grass and weeds, bordered by a broken fence. Walking just in front of Gertrude and Esther was a young girl with fat thighs, her thin, short skirt riding up on her legs. The women were half way past the yard when they noticed Horowich on his covered porch. His rocking chair was still, his body limp, his face relaxed, sullen. His head, his eyes were following the girl. He eased his trousers from his crotch. Even then, Gertrude called out good evening. Horowich nodded. Then as they passed, Esther felt his eyes, first probing the spot between her shoulder blades, then lowering. She straightened her back, stiffened it, but somehow that was not enough against him. She still felt uncomfortable, but what she could not understand, could not explain, was that the feeling was something more than discomfort. She actually felt somehow threatened by his eyes.

What she had seen and heard of him in the two years since that walk only confirmed her first opinion. He was a nasty, disgusting old man. And she said as much to Walter when Walter leered and made such remarks as, "You should be nice to him, he's the type to have a fortune hidden in the mattress." Then with a smirk, "But first you gotta get close to the mattress..." Usually when Walter said these things it was after he had arbled over to Horowich's shack, for that was all it could be called, usually on a Saturday night, and then come home several hours later smelling like a brewery. The next day Walter would be full of insulting suggestions. Esther wondered if Horowich planted them in Walter's feeble brain. She supposed Horowich would like someone like herself, someone to nurse him in his old age. Even if she was not as young as she used to be, even if sometimes now the kerb edges caught her unaware, she was still in better condition than he was. But she had had enough of nursing people, and besides, she would never stoop so low as to have anything to do with someone like Horowich.

Esther was now breathing in short gasps. Her throat was tight. She sat up straighter and thrust back her shoulders and tried to expand her chest. It might help if Walter would stop talking for just one moment, she thought. Her mind pushed on. He thinks he's so smart. He thinks he knows everything. But he doesn't know anything. Wouldn't he be shocked if he did know. Might be so shocked he'd shut up for a minute.

If he knew what she did in the privacy of her room. With a table knife slid between the wall and door frame. He'd think I was crazy for sure, she decided. No danger of his ever finding out though, since he never read anything but the evening newspaper, and all he read of that was the page about the day's murders, robberies, rapes. Anyway, she

never sent anything in under her own name. If it ever got published it would be too embarrassing. She always used the name Tamar Ferouin. Many years ago she had seen that name in a novel she was reading. Esther thought then that it was an exquisite name, and she had never had any reason to change her opinion.

Thinking these things, her mind was carried. Booth, looth, she mused. Walter's voice faded. The sound of Gertrude's pots and pans dimmed. One of the children spilled his milk but Esther did not notice. How about lo' the? she wondered. No, she liked things to be neater than that. Sooth, tooth...that milk, she must get a cloth. Would Gertrude ever finish slamming things around? As for Walter, she knew that he could go on forever.

Finally, finally, alone. Esther's room was small and square, with one double window that faced out onto the front street. In the room was a bed, a bureau, a trunk that doubled as a night table, and a chair. Through her life, as she had gone from house to house, she had tried to carry with her as few involvements as possible.

She sat down on the chair, a plain wooden one before the window. The sun felt good on her legs, warm like a heating pad. Her legs ached sometimes now, not ached exactly, just felt weak and drained. Yellow current of life, she thought, closing her eyes. Warm streaming particles... Through the open window she could hear street sounds, traffic, barking dogs, cries of children who for some reason were not in school. She contemplated closing the window, but the air was so pleasant. She took a breath and started again. I feel like a golden sponge, she thought, filled with bubbles of weak... She could not think of the word she wanted. She remembered her dictionary, a small one that she kept hidden beneath her mattress because she knew Gertrude sometimes came into her room without telling her. She opened her eyes and turned her head sharply towards that place on the mattress. Was it still there? Would Gertrude, someone, have taken it? Of course not. She was becoming foolish, a foolish old woman. She thought of Horowich's mattress, what it might be like, of his hidden gold which, of course, did not exist except in Walter's greedy imagination. No, she squeezed her eyes tight. She would not let herself think these things, think about Horowich and Walter during these precious moments she had set aside for herself, for her work. It was sacrilege to think of such things, those men, this place, during this special time. But how could she help it? There, now, were the voices, intruding, Gertrude and Walter having one of their several daily fights, spats. How those two could have lived together all these years, could live together now, Esther did not know. People who fought like that, said such things to each other, terrible things, how could they forget all about it a few

minutes later and go on as though nothing had happened? Silly, stupid things too. Always small things. Like now, the walls in the house were so thin Esther could hear nearly every word, they were shouting about Walter's collection of burnt-out fuses and Gertrude's collection of old movie magazines. And, in addition to them, there were the children, the two youngest who did not go to school. They, also, had their daily rows, and besides that, were as noisy in their playing as in their fighting. Esther let herself have a moment of despair. Again, she opened her eyes.

For a few moments she stared, unseeing. Then she found herself thinking, I should clean it out, and discovered that she had been looking at the top of her bureau, at a small wooden barrel from her mother's kitchen, used then for tea, now stuffed with odds and ends, old letters, pens, paper clips, hairpins, needles and thread. On the bureau, too, were a few old pictures, one of her parents. They were standing before the farmhouse wearing their Sunday best. Her mother's large-knuckled hands hung heavily, gracelessly, down. Those hands, always red, the skin always split, always garden dirt in the torn cuticles. A picture of her mother flashed into Esther's mind. She was standing in front of the iron stove, stirring something in a big black pot while a mess of ragged children scampered about her staunch thighs and her wide ugly bare feet.

No. No. Esther shook her head as though to clear it. Freedom, she thought. Freedom and beauty which the soul may feel, perfect and whole. Perhaps that was why the memory of gulls was so meaningful. Soaring freedom. Yes, she could write about that.

Esther tried to keep from doing it, but it was as though a strong hand pushed her head down so that she was looking at her own feet. While she had never liked her looks, her body or her face, she had learned to ignore them. But she had never learned to ignore her feet. Her feet were the one thing that in all those grand houses had always given her away. She had her mother's feet, flat and shapeless. As a girl she had lain awake nights wondering how she was ever going to get through her life with such feet. And yet, here she was. She had made it. Of course she had made it. Thanks to no one but herself. Thanks to her own effort. She had always been a good worker and no trouble, and the only reasons she was ever let go were when people moved or died. Even when they moved they had sometimes taken her with them. Once, the last place, where she had been more like a paid companion, the people took her with them on a yacht for a three month cruise. All in all she thought she had pretty good memories, but she especially liked to remember the yacht. Yes, she had made it. Still she had always felt handicapped and now sometimes found herself wondering what sort of life she might

have had if she had been born different, under different circumstances, to city people, established people. Esther looked through the window, towards the sky, flawless blue, looked through the branches of the poplar that dominated the front yard, that sucked all the good from the earth so that nothing else would grow for several feet in any direction, so that the grass was always only a scab on the dirt. And in spite of the tree's efforts, its instinct, to grab everything, all the earth's nutrients, for itself, its branches were spindly, its leaves sparse, pitted and deformed by insects.

Suddenly, as though stuck by a pin, Esther sat up straight. Her body became rigid with determination. To work, to work, she scolded herself. Enough of this laziness, this wool gathering. She must not let her mind start drifting like that. Those gulls, now, the ones she had seen from the yacht, soaring over the choppy waves, or the calm stillness. True, when you saw them up close, like on the rail, they were dumpy and clumsy looking. Still, in the air they became beautiful. Graceful. What were some words she could use - web-toed, aquatic, heavy, awkward. But those were not poetic words. And those birds had eaten, had survived on, garbage thrown off the boat. They were scavengers. Esther shuddered. She wondered about whales. Whales might be better. She recalled seeing three of them together once, racing and frolicking. The way they had dived into the waves, and the way the sun had made their wet backs glisten! How could she work that up?

Poised, ready to leap, Esther's mind once again was disturbed, this time by the creaking of the stairs and footsteps shuffling in the hallway outside her door. Automatically, furtively, her eyes went to the mattress.

"Esther?" It was Gertrude's voice, calling through the door.

"Yes?"

"Me'n Walter are goin' shopping. You wanta come?"

No, she did not want to go. She wanted to stay home and get something done. But she would go down to see them out and to lock the door after them.

She stood on the back porch and watched them leave, each carrying a child. As they walked along the path to the garage, Gertrude pressed her body against Walter. He accepted her naturally. For him she was expected, perhaps even inevitable. Esther looked away quickly, as though she had seen something she had no business seeing, as though she had been spying on two people through a crack in a closed door.

Esther watched Walter's car until it disappeared. At the same time she saw Horowich, his bag now full, walking his slow walk. As the car passed him, he stopped and held up a hand. Then he turned his head and looked toward where Esther stood alone on the step. She went

inside, closed the door firmly after herself, pushed in the lock. Then she stood without moving, her hand on the doorknob. In a few moments she heard what she was waiting for, someone, a presence, outside on the porch. She heard the heave of a heavy weight up the steep narrow steps, the rasping of breath drawn in a throat. Then the knock came, three solid raps with the knuckles of a hand, a man's hand, not as strong perhaps as it used to be but still strong, stronger than her hand.

At first she decided not to answer. He would go away. I don't have to answer, she thought, I don't have to open this door. She stood in the heat and the silence. The clock ticked on the wall. She could scarcely hear it for the noise of her heart. She felt that surely Horowich could hear her heart through the door. He would know she was standing here, that she was hiding, that she was afraid. Then she saw the absurdity of the situation. She was an old woman, no longer attractive to anyone. Likely all Horowich wanted was to borrow something, Walter's gardening tools. She forced herself to open the door.

They were face to face, looking at each other. She had never really looked at him squarely before. When she was with Gertrude, she always averted her eyes or looked to the side of his head. She had never let herself think about the way he looked, that is the details of his face. Now she saw small threadlike purple veins running beneath the coarse skin of his cheeks and nose. There was something about his mouth, something violent. His teeth...

"Good day, lady." His voice was harsh, sounded rusty. Nodding his head, he lifted his cap and bowed slightly.

Esther tightened her lips. She looked down. The bag of bottles was on the porch, at his feet. His boots were cracked, his trousers baggy. Esther tried not to breathe in. His smells, male smells, were too strong.

"Excuse me please," he continued. "But I been thinking. I'm all alone, see. You, you're all alone, right? I got that house there. All paid for. I got my pension. I do all right. You'd be surprised, too, how much them bottles bring in." He gestured.

Walter, thought Esther. Walter put him up to this. During one of their drunken orgies. Maybe, even, there was money bet on it. It's their joke, she thought, or maybe not a joke. Walter never did want me here. It was Gertrude made him take me in. "Don't..." she raised a hand as though for protection. The other hand was at her throat. She backed away. Her heart beat in ragged, irregular strokes.

Horowich took a step forward. He was in the house. "But it's lonely, y'know. An' I miss the cooking. So I got to thinking. Two old guys like you'n me... They tell me you come from a farm, too, a long time ago, but... like we're the same, you an' me..."

"No... no..." Esther kept backing up until she felt the corner of the kitchen counter in the small of her back. As she retreated, Horowich advanced, so that he was standing close over her. His body, his smell, was all around her. His breath was on her face. He was standing so close she could not lower her head. She was forced to look at his face, look at his eyes. What she saw there was recognition, instant and shocking. It was then her heart seemed to burst. Because of the rush of sound in her ears, she could not hear. Because of the blackness, she could not see. Pain, at first soft and large, floated towards her until it was right on top of her, bearing her down with its weight. She reeled against something, felt hands reach for her. She wanted to hold onto something, wanted to hold herself up, but there was only Horowich. She felt herself slipping down. The pain became immense.

When she came home from the hospital, she spent most of her time upstairs, on her bed, making her way down slowly, like a child, one step at a time, only for meals. Gertrude had wanted to make a bed for her on the living room couch, but she said, no, she did not want to be that much trouble. In reality, she knew that she could not take such a constant dose of Walter and the children. And she realized, to be fair, that likely they did not want to see that much of her, either. Anyway, it would not be forever. Against Gertrude's protestations, Walter had said nothing, had sat silently looking into the distance out of the hospital window, Esther had put her name in for a room in a government subsidized nursing home. But the list was long, the list of other people like herself, people who could no longer take care of themselves, account for themselves. Gertrude helped her dress in the mornings and undress at night. Esther's right side did not work the way it should. When she had first woken up in the hospital her arms were crossed and lying in a heap on top of her body. They did not seem to be part of her. She could not feel them, feel anything. She could not remember anything, even Horowich at first. But after awhile some feeling had seeped back in, into her arms and legs, into her brain, although now her body would not always obey her brain's demands, and there was a blackness at the edges of her vision. And never since that day in the hospital when she had asked the nurse for a mirror, never did she look in mirrors.

She could not sew, could not work with her hands; she could not read for long. At mealtimes she caught the children staring at her in fascination, staring at the side of her mouth. Then she would realize there must be a trickle of soup there. No longer could she think consistently, coherently. She felt that she had been betrayed, betrayed by her body, by herself. She had not known that such a thing could happen to her.

During a day in late summer, when she was lying on her bed a light tapping sound came at the window. Her bed was placed so that she had only to raise her head to see. It was a branch of the poplar, and she thought how the ragged leaves were like old lace. Lace-leaf, she thought. She liked the sound of that and wondered if it was a real word. Lattice-leaf, she thought and liked that even better. For the first time since what everyone called her 'accident,' she remembered her dictionary. She wondered if it was still there beneath the mattress and thought that maybe Gertrude had found it when she changed the bedding. Slowly, Esther moved her legs sideways. Leaning on the bed for support, she knelt on the floor. Sliding her good hand between mattress and spring, her fingers groped for only a moment before they found what they were looking for.

She settled herself back on the bed and opened the book. Her eyes ran slowly and laboriously down the black columns of words until she found it. She stuck her finger at the place. Lattice-leaf, a submerged aquatic plant of Madagascar, broad leaves consist only of veins which float just beneath the surface, tiny white flowers. She set the dictionary aside, on top of the trunk. It did not matter any more if Gertrude saw it. She would tell Gertrude to give it to the children. Maybe they could use it in school. Exhausted, Esther lay back against the pillow. She opened her mouth. It felt like she had been to the dentist and half of it was frozen. She had to will her lips to move. Madagascar, she whispered, lingering over each syllable.