

*Dorothy Speak*

## **Altered States**

*Dear Aggi and Blaine,*

*When I think of the months of our friendship—six in all, if one wanted to count—there is only one thing I want to know: did you befriend me because you felt sorry for me (a widow), or because you thought you could use me (did you imagine I could be so easily bought?), or because you were bored with each other (as well you might be)?*

*I never felt or demonstrated anything but love for the two of you. When I met you, I could not believe that I had finally discovered two people who were intense enough for me. I found your eccentric lifestyle, your non-conformity, your godlessness, and Blaine's scorn of the critics, refreshing. Little did I know that you were using me to get what you said wasn't important to you, that you were playing some kind of tasteless game with my feelings. I tell myself it must have been the thin mountain atmosphere that made you act that way. A deficiency of oxygen to the brain. And I think it is possible that, having lived so long away from civilization, you do not practise or even remember the rules of common decency. You are just like those ecologists who have such a high regard for the wilderness, yet when it comes to human beings . . .*

*And I wonder if you are aware that you spoiled the mountains for me. I will never be able to drive up into them again, nor can I bear to look across the city and see them shining in the distance, like white castles in the sky.*

"On the bus back from Calgary," Aggi told us, her cheeks flushed with excitement, "I saw a man with a gun hidden in his pocket. He was sitting two rows ahead of me, across the aisle. I became aware of him when the hair on my neck stood on end. That's always a sign. He was about forty-five years old, with very short hair, like a soldier. He was wearing a blue wind-breaker. Oh—and muddy industrial boots. I had this odd feeling and then I visualized the gun clear as day through the fabric of the jacket. It was a small revolver. Then I had a premonition. I saw him getting off the bus and going into a stucco bungalow. I saw him shoot an old woman. You don't believe me."

"Of course we do!" we protested, laughing nevertheless.

"You think I'm crazy."

"We believe you! Honestly!"

Often Blaine and I would be enjoying a beer in the cabin when Aggi swept in this way, out of the sunshine, a swirl of full, heavy skirts and black-fringed shawl, jangling with cheap, noisy bracelets. She dressed like an exotic gypsy. There was no end to the bizarre clothes she could pull miraculously out of what seemed to be a bottomless suitcase, just as a good magician is able to draw an endless string of scarves from a black hat. She'd been living with Blaine for I don't know how long, yet everything she owned was still in this big old leather suitcase shoved into a corner beside the bed. She could tell me the history of every blouse, sweater and scarf she owned, all of which she cared for as though they were artifacts. Things that had once belonged to her dead grandmother, to her mad aunt, to unknown women who'd left behind in bus depots or on park benches these cardigans and jackets, in the pockets of which she'd found grocery lists, love letters, newspaper clippings, baby photos, embroidered handkerchiefs, hair pins, tubes of lipstick, sleeping pills.

I'd originally come to the mountains to look at Blaine's paintings, but I was easily distracted by Aggi. I could sit for hours on the rocks beside the river listening to her stories, or hearing her describe the potions she made from her herb garden, while behind us Blaine chopped wood or stapled canvas onto sturdy wooden stretchers or cleaned his paint brushes, shaking his head at Aggi and complaining of the bunches of flowers she had hanging from the cabin ceiling to dry.

"Only Aggi would want to grow a garden upside down," he said. "Can't you do anything the normal way, Aggi?"

She knew the name of every wildflower, grass and shrub that grew around the cabin. She was one of those people who didn't seem to come from anywhere (I think her father had been a salesman) unless it was from a strange country of witchcraft and primitive cures. At the same time, she seemed to be from everywhere at once because, through telepathic powers, she had connections with spirits and dead people all over the country, connections with people she didn't even know except by name. There was someone named David, for instance, who spoke through her at seances she conducted for a bridge group in the village.

"You'll have a long life and an active old age," Aggi said, turning my hand over to read my palm the first time we met. "See these little lines crossing the life line? They mean you have a lot of worries, maybe relating to this star marking, which shows you've recently had a serious crisis. However, notice these little tributaries moving upward, indicating that you have strong recuperative capabilities. I see that your head line is long, deep and straight and it runs directly across the palm. That shows you have a logical mind and a realistic outlook. This forking here in the middle indicates development of an important new interest in your life around now. Let's see the heart line," she said, following it eagerly across my palm with the tip of her finger. "Notice how it begins under your middle finger? This means you have a pragmatic approach to love, and when it's straight like yours, and parallel to the head line, that means romantic attachments for you often begin as intellectual friendships. These crosses here show that you suffered an emotional loss recently, in your late-thirties."

I was in fact forty, though sometimes people, looking at my bony sternum, my thickly freckled forearms and ragged hair, had taken me for a woman a decade older. I was slender and small-boned, though I'd noticed my hips beginning to spread, giving me an accommodating look common to some middle-aged women. I'd been told that the taupe eyeshadow I hastily applied in the mornings made my eyes look muddy and that my general fondness for browns left strangers with an impression of old dry leaves.

These of course were the remarks of jealous people, people who also told me that I was cold and humorless. I cannot say that I had a great many friends at the gallery. It is not easy to be a successful, self-supporting, self-made female curator trying to carve out a reputation in an obscure public gallery on a cultural frontier. I'd found

that most people are lazy and do not like to have to think and therefore must be pushed and shoved or stepped over when they get in your way. At the risk of sounding conceited, I would tell people that, with little formal education, I'd built a small, bright reputation for myself as an art historian. By discovering and exploiting the hitherto unresearched phenomenon of Canadian drypoint print production between the wars, I'd developed a specialized expertise that had earned my exhibits venues in Germany, Bulgaria, Australia, Norway.

But everyone knows that success is not a guarantee of happiness. I was single again and in need of friends and Blaine and Aggi had taken me in like a stray cat. I had thought that, following the breakup of a marriage, it would be natural to hate your partner, but it seems that this is not what happens. Sometimes, sipping wine on my suburban patio, or walking through the silent white exhibit spaces of the gallery, I would feel such self-hatred rising in my throat like yellow bile that it choked me. I felt something foaming and heaving inside me, an ugly, volatile, disgusting, ulcer-like growth resembling a brainless monster from a horror film. At such times, I wanted to vomit my insides out, vomit until I was empty of organs, intestines, blood, until I was like a clean, hollow brass vase.

Whenever I felt this way, I got into my Datsun and pointed it northwest to where the snow-covered summit of Mount Assiniboine floated in the distant sky like a cloud. It was a spiritual catharsis for me to watch the brilliant glass city diminish in my rearview mirror and to make the slow climb on a hypnotic strip of twisting highway, a wedge of Brie and a bottle of red wine on the seat beside me. Not far from the gates to Banff National Park, I'd negotiate my car down a bumpy track and arrive at the cabin to find Aggi, the fair sorceress, wrapped on cool days in a thick sweater, perched on a rock beside the cobalt river, and Blaine setting one of his four-by-five landscapes against an old stump to dry. In contrast to the pale, lithe Aggi, he was dark, flinty and angular as the mountains rising around us like stony gods.

Then we sat by the Bow river and talked, the evening light so miraculous and the air, pure as ether, carrying our voices across the river to sing back at us off the cliff face, so that I sometimes wondered if I was in the middle of an acute dream. On one side of me, Blaine reached into the river with a powerful arm to pull a bottle of wine

from the rushing waters. On the other, Aggi, her sundress, whiter than white, giving off its own light like the vestments of a priestess, sat with a big metal bowl in her skirt, peeling peaches, her hands dripping with juice. For a moment, I was convinced that the fresh, sweet smell of the fruit came not from the peaches but from Aggi herself, from her own golden skin. Aggi was the ripe, virgin fruit, the sunny flesh.

Some nights, if I could not make myself return to the city, to my empty bungalow on a street called King George, Aggi and Blaine would invite me to sleep on the extra bed, which also served as a couch, while they retired to the four-poster screened off by old flowered drapes in a corner of the cabin. I would lie awake long into the night, listening to the alarming, gentle sound of racoons moving in the woods and hearing the springs of the mattress creak as Aggi or Blaine turned over in their sleep. I would hear Blaine's heavy breathing and I imagined I smelled his good, honest male sweat.

Aggi read palms at a booth in a corner of the farmer's market in a nearby village, outlandishly dressed in one of her long flowered skirts, a head scarf, a pair of gold loop earrings, a large black mole painted in the corner of her mouth. Beside her in a box, her medicinal potions in little glass vials with cork stoppers were offered for sale. She had a reputation as far away as Edmonton as a gifted astrologer. She pestered me until I agreed to write away to the hospital where I was born to ascertain the exact time of my birth. When the answer came back—10:25 p.m. British Summer Time on July 4, 1950 in Fulham, England—she snatched the letter from my hand and set to work. In the following weeks, when I arrived at the cabin in the early evening, I found her at the scarred tressel table, poring over the tiny figures in her ephemeris, punching numbers into her calculator as she computed Greenwich Mean Time, the daily motion of the planets, the position of the twelve houses of the ecliptic. It all looked very complicated to me.

"Really," I told her, "you shouldn't go to the trouble."

"It's no trouble," she looked up, searching my face. "You want me to do this, don't you? You want your horoscope."

"Of course," I quickly assured her. "Yes, of course."

One evening, she finally handed me a thick horoscope, elaborately drawn and colored, complete with appendices.

"This is a deluxe version. I worked harder on this than I have on any other horoscope," she said with the grave confidence of a witch doctor certain of her science. "I hope it helps."

"So you think I need help?" I raised my eyebrows. She was a bit presumptuous, I thought. I liked to believe I knew myself pretty well.

"Let's see it," said Blaine, trying to snatch the horoscope from my hands, but I stuffed it into my bag. Aggi swatted him with her ephemeris.

"Every neurotic housewife in the village has one of Aggi's horoscopes," he said.

"That's a sexist remark," I told him and Aggi agreed.

I took the horoscope home with no intention of ever looking at it. Yet, time and time again, I couldn't resist drawing it out from where it sat like a lodestone on the bottom shelf of my night table. At first, I made the excuse that it was not myself I was trying to discover, but something of its author, Aggi. Flipping through the appendices, I puzzled over phrases such as these: Saturn opposition Uranus—the basic need for order and restriction is in conflict with the desire for expansion and growth. There may be continual difficulties posed by the demand for change on the one hand and for stability on the other. Uranus conjunct sun—the orb is wide and the aspect is separating. There is an exceptionally strong need for independence and a desire to follow an original and unusual life style. Mercury quincunx MC—mental tension leads to need for intellectual stimulation in career. Moon quincunx Pluto—need for emotional and domestic change and renewal. Pluto in the seventh house—relationships are dominated by deep expectations influenced by the past.

It was ridiculous, I told myself. What did this have to do with me? Nothing. Everything. The more I read, the more confused and paralysed I became by thoughts of the energy of the stars, the importance of timing, the mysterious congruence of daily events and the gentle current of chance running through life. I began to realize that one must swim out into deep waters if one is to be buoyed up, if one is to catch the momentum of the flow and I wondered if it was because I'd been ignoring the natural harmonies of the universe that I'd lost Ivan. Nightly, I dreamt of the stars propelled like the skilful balls of a juggler through their silver trajectories and sometimes I too, I was

spinning through black space, nearly colliding with the white-hot planets.

More than once, cursing Aggi, I flung the bundle of charts and papers across the room, then went and picked them up and read them through again. Often I was on the point of tearing them to pieces or putting a match to them, but I couldn't carry through. I buried the horoscope in the back of her closet, under boxes of old clothes and paperback novels, but found myself digging it out again the very same day. The horoscope haunted me. It was like a thousand interlocking pieces of a complex puzzle laid out perpetually on a table. One cannot resist reaching out to turn the pieces this way and that, only to find that they are interchangeable and that a complete picture can never be made.

*Dear Aggi and Blaine,*

*It is not a pleasant thing to have to tell people that your husband killed himself. It reflects. People think that you did not make enough compromises to keep him alive. They have a distrust of survivors. I have been asked, "Don't you feel guilty that you're still alive, while Ivan is dead?"*

*Do you have any idea what it is like to come home on a fine summer day and find your husband shot dead in the bathtub—a man you did not love, but nevertheless, your husband? You cannot know what it is like to lose someone you never loved and cannot mourn. Mourn? How could I mourn someone who had rejected me so completely? And yet, I used to say to people after Ivan died, "If I could just get rid of this terrible feeling."*

*In our marriage, Ivan was the sensitive, vulnerable, weak one. I was the strong link. One pays a price for that. And now I am paying again. I could accuse you of cowardly, immoral behavior, but your shallowness would only make you laugh at me.*

*When I tell people that Ivan killed himself and they are wagging their heads at me with a mixture of pity and reproach, I become giddy. I start to laugh. Because the thing I am really thinking of is when, late in our marriage, Ivan accused me of lesbianism when I did not want to have sex with him. And this is one thing I am glad I never told you, because I see now that you would have twisted it, twisted it to your*

*own purposes. You would have said it was Aggi I was in love with and not Blaine, whereas the truth is I was in love with neither of you. The only think I can think is that all the time I knew you, I was not myself. I was in some kind of altered state . . .*

"Is there any sign of Ivan's ghost in your house?" Aggi asked me. This was two months after my first visit to the cabin. It was a cool, bright, windy evening in July, one of those gifts that sometimes descend in mid-summer. Aggi and I were standing in the clearing beside the cabin, before an open pit over which Blaine was roasting a suckling pig. I could not keep my eyes off Blaine's paintings, which, propped against trees and boulders, surrounded us like a palisade. I'd begun to realize that I was driving up there three or four times a week not to see the mountains, but to look at Blaine's pictures, which were stronger, more convincing and explosive than the real thing. I cannot tell you the excitement they gave me. He'd been photographing them that afternoon. He'd accumulated an embarrassing inventory and had decided to start looking for a dealer again, the prospect of which made him moody.

"You're going to scare her with talk of ghosts," Blaine frowned at Aggi.

"Don't worry about *me*," I said, amused. How gullible did he think I was? I turned to Aggi. "How would I know a ghost?" I asked, amused. "What are they like? Do they come wearing the proverbial white sheet? Or are they transparent, like the Ghost of Christmas Past?"

"You might hear footsteps," said Aggi, perfectly serious. "Doors opening and closing. Banging noises behind walls. Lights turned on inexplicably in the middle of the night. Conversations."

Sometimes Aggi was called on by clients to ascertain the presence of poltergeists in their homes. She'd exorcised a demon from a teenaged girl. She'd been hit by pots and chairs flying, apparently of their own will, across rooms.

"Aren't you ever frightened?" I asked her.

"Lots of people in town say Aggi's a witch," Blaine told me. "There were never any haunted houses in the area until *she* moved here. It's lucky for her they don't allow burnings anymore."

It was hard to imagine anyone calling Aggi a witch. At twenty-five, she had the height and radiance, the spontaneity of a gangly teenager.

She had pale eyes and lashes, hair like long, bleached grass. Her skin had the pinky-mauve tones of certain wildflowers. She smelled like glycerin soap.

"If I'm a witch," Aggi goaded Blaine, "what does that make *you*?"

"Bewitched," answered Blaine, turning the pig on its spit and Aggi threw the paper plates at his back.

"I came home from an appointment this afternoon," Aggi told us one day, "and for some reason I felt so tired. I'd been feeling strange all day. When I got here, I felt so *exhausted* that I just dropped onto the bed as though I were dead. I started to feel a prickly sensation all through my arms and legs and I heard a weird buzzing sound. There was this terrific pressure around my head and then I felt myself travelling through a dark tunnel. And when it ended I saw that I was floating a few feet above my own body. There was my grandmother walking toward a city of light, calling me to follow her. There were buildings of crystal and rivers of glass. When I saw this, I turned around and willed myself to re-enter my body. Then I felt myself give a jump and I sat up."

Blaine and I had come out from the village together just before dinner. By bizarre coincidences, we'd begun to run into each other everywhere. It was uncanny. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought it was something in the stars, that certain influential orbits were crossing paths. That afternoon around three, I'd been driving through the village on my way to the cabin and there was Blaine coming out the hardware store with a bag of screws in his hand. We'd gone to the local café for a coffee and gotten immersed in the kind of discussion about art that we couldn't have when Aggi was around. Blaine had seemed pleased to have someone to talk to about his work. He'd sat with his back to the street, his powerful hands like tools gripping his cup, his fingers square and the skin on his knuckles flat. My view of the street was blocked by his massive shoulders. I remember thinking that something beneath the restless, shifting planes of his body reminded me of the abrasive forces that had shaped the mountains behind him.

We put his bicycle in the trunk of my car, drove out to the cabin and, blinking from the brilliant summer sun, found Aggi trembling and euphoric in the dim cabin interior. After sitting all afternoon in the humdrum town, the ordinary, respectable, down-to-earth town, the

innocent town, her story seemed to me so preposterous, so sinister and annoying that I couldn't credit it.

"It was a dream, that's all," I told her.

"You've heard of astral travelling," she said.

"Something you ate for lunch disagreed with you," I insisted.

"I'm telling you," she said with calculated patience, "I left my body. I saw my dead grandmother."

"A city of light?" I giggled, winking at Blaine. "Was that heaven, do you suppose?"

\* \* \*

"Oh, come on, Aggi, have a glass of wine! Come on, don't be a spoiled sport!" This was me calling out the cabin window, through the screen turned silver in the oblique evening light. Aggi continued to sit on the rocks by the river and refused to come in. Behind me, Blaine lay on the couch, his black eyebrows delicately raised, watching me watch Aggi, or maybe just watching me. It was hard to say. I smiled at him self-consciously, remembering that the first time I met him, I'd been frightened. He'd looked dangerous to me, possibly even psychotic, for he wore his clothes awkwardly, like the mentally deranged.

"You don't think she's really psychic, do you?" I asked, coming away from the window and sitting down at the wooden table.

"I don't know."

"I think she's read too many books on the subject."

"Maybe."

"I mean, has she ever been tested? You know those card tests they do. Apparently only about one in a million people are truly psychic. They say eighty-five per cent of self-professed psychics are frauds.

"You're full of statistics tonight."

"They're just ordinary people who crave attention. Or they're slightly crazy."

"She's young. She's looking for herself."

"Is it that simple? Should we encourage her? Is it healthy?"

"What's the harm in it?"

"Hmmm," I said, dubious. "Well," I shrugged, looking on the bright side. "At least it's entertaining. I mean . . . sometimes she's so *droll*, don't you think?"

In July, I proposed doing an exhibition of Blaine's work. Aggi had asked me to do this when she and I had gone on a picnic to escape one of Blaine's dark moods. Since one of my shows had fallen through and there was a free gallery space coming up in November, I'd agreed. She'd said she was worried about Blaine because his unproductive periods were becoming more and more frequent. She blamed his lack of success on his abrasiveness, his independence, his hostility to dealers. He was impractical. He hated to see a price put on one of his paintings. It cheapened them, he said. He wouldn't listen to dealers' advice. Once, in a gallery, he'd flown into a rage and slashed all his paintings when his dealer suggested he paint smaller canvases. The large ones were hard to sell, he told Blaine. That was the end of that dealer. A law suit followed, because the dealer had gone to the expense of framing all the works for the show. Now Blaine was having self-doubts. He'd developed a bad reputation. No dealer would touch him. What he needed, Aggi felt, was some sort of recognition and a few sales. An exhibition in a public gallery might do the trick.

By the end of August, Blaine and I had narrowed the selection for the exhibition down to thirty works. I'd arranged to borrow pieces from local private collections. Framing was about to begin and I asked Blaine to come in to the gallery to look at the frames I'd chosen. It was the first week in September. We went to lunch in a nearby outdoor café and Blaine had to lend me his jacket, so unexpected was the arrival of autumn. There was the smell of wind in the air, as there always is at the change of seasons.

"Summer is finished," I said, raising my wine glass poignantly, for I was thinking ahead to the winter months, when frequent trips into the mountains would be difficult.

At the gallery, I gave Blaine a tour of the storage room, which was the size of a warehouse. So vast was the space, so high the ceilings, so threatening the silence in there, that if one were not careful one could be overwhelmed by agoraphobia. I showed him tall storage screens that could be pulled out on metal tracks to reveal rows of paintings hanging on hooks, banks and banks of cabinets in which works on paper were stored, shelf after wooden shelf draped with plastic behind which sculptures lurked eerily. We moved from one pool of dim light to another.

"It's very quiet back here," Blaine said.

"Yes, this is where I started my career with the gallery," I told him. "I was a cataloguer. I used to sit back here for eight hours a day and catalogue prints and listen to CBC on a little transistor radio. It's a wonder I didn't go mad."

"I notice you keep it locked," he said, observing a heavy ring of keys in my hand.

"Security. There are only a few of us who have a key."

I had noticed myself speaking faster and faster as he watched me with a curious, gentle expression I hadn't seen before. I was still talking when he pushed me down on what was, in fact, a work of art from a temporary exhibition. For a full year, we'd been trying to get the artist to take it away, but it was too heavy and worthless to move. People kept mistaking it for lumber. I was always rebuking the staff for standing on it to reach the storage shelves. It consisted of three long six-by-sixes painted black, and all the time that Blaine was on top of me, I was worrying that my blouse was going to get black from the paint and thinking, if it does, I'll find some way to explain it. I was thinking, too, that we could have carried out this act in much the same way in the mountains, with me lying possibly on an old fallen tree, and I wondered if this was why Blaine had chosen to push me down here, with my legs falling, oh so willingly on either side of a straight piece of pine. Had he been a sculptor rather than a painter, he could at that moment have moulded me like soft, wet clay into any shape or form that suited his uses, so readily did I capitulate, so powerless were my limbs, as though heavy with paralysis, to stop him.

Though I'd been at first surprised by his touch and somewhat dizzied by my backward descent to the dubious sculpture, I quickly understood that this was all part of the museological process, the task of getting to know an artist, of apprehending his work. Suddenly, making love in the cool, filtered, humidistatically controlled environment of the gallery storage room seemed the most natural thing in the world. And in the back of my mind I knew that it was time for the gallery to acquire one of Blaine's works, and that I would hang it on the storage screen near this very spot where we had lain.

I wondered what my staff would think if they were to discover me in such a position; would they still accuse me of being rigid and uncompromising? And Aggi—had she had a premonition of Blaine descending on me, his shoulders throwing an oblique shadow across my

face like that cast by a mountain? At this very moment, did she feel a prickly sensation on her neck? Did she hear a strange buzzing sound? Was her heart pounding as mine was—for after all, had she not asked me if I thought I might be telepathic, saying that sometimes she seemed to feel the very emotions and have the same thoughts that I was having? What I was really feeling was relief. Relief that Blaine and I were finally united, out of Aggi's reach. She could not touch us here, or interfere with her inane dialogue. I knew then that I was free to go home and destroy my horoscope, which had now been brought into question, for Aggi had not been able to predict this turn of events. In lying with Blaine, I had exorcised Aggi from my life, I'd broken the current of control. I would burn the horoscope. Aggi's spell over me was broken.

The surprising thing, of course, was that I had known all along that Blaine would appreciate my merits, that he would one day come to me. For didn't I understand his paintings, while Aggi refused to look at them, saying they were too abstract for her? Wasn't I mature, sensible, stable, predictable? Though not very pretty, was I not womanly? I had a narrow but cordial body. I dressed in a sane way, not in clothes pulled from a bag of tricks. I was neither gullible nor deceitful. I had credibility. I did not engage in childish fantasies, claim to correspond with ghosts and dead grandmothers and obscure communicators named David, or pretend to float in mid-air and see cities of light.

*Dear A and B,*

*I am thinking of the times that Aggi walked into the fields of the Kananaskis and picked out four-leaf clovers blind-folded while Blaine and I, crawling in the grass on our hands and knees, could not find one to save our lives. That is the only concrete evidence I ever had that Aggi had some kind of quirky gift. But a knack for finding clovers is not the same as PSI. If she was truly psychic, she should have known about Blaine and me. It would not surprise me if she is now claiming that she knew all along. And if she did know, if she did not care, what does this tell us about Aggi? Or if, to conjecture further, Blaine knew that Aggi knew and in fact this was a petty, sick plot cooked up by the two of you to get Blaine's art into the gallery, what does it mean about Aggi's and Blaine's relationship? If Aggi did know*

*and Blaine knew Aggi knew, does this mean that Blaine did not want or enjoy the affair?*

*Reflecting upon the salutation to this letter, I see the three of us as the points of a triangle and I am reminded of the mindless, annoying problems posed in my highschool geometry textbook. If ABC is an isosceles triangle and if the distance from A to B is X, and the distance from B to C is Y, what is the distance from C to A?*

In mid-October, just after sunrise on a Saturday morning, my phone rang. It was Aggi.

"What are you doing? Are you in bed? Stay there."

"Why? Aggi, what *is* this?"

She said, "Listen, Catherine, listen carefully. I had a precognitive dream. You were out walking and you were crushed. *Crushed* by something heavy falling on you. I couldn't make out what it was but it killed you. A voice in my dream said, 'Get up!' and I did and went straight to the phone. Thank God you're still there."

"Where else would I be at this hour?"

"It was something big falling on you, Catherine. Maybe a tree. Is it stormy in town? Is it windy? Don't go out."

"I was going to come up to the cabin. I have something important to tell Blaine."

"Don't come, Catherine. Promise me. Don't get out of bed. If you stay home all day the risk should pass."

"Aggi, this is ridiculous," I said and hung up.

I got up and looked at the weather. The sky was clear. How could a tree be knocked down on a day like this? Maybe a tree being *cut down* by somebody. Oh, stop it, I told myself. I couldn't take the warning seriously. It was another of Aggi's weird pranks. She was being melodramatic again. She was testing me. She wanted to keep me away from the cabin, that might be it. Maybe she'd found out about Blaine and me.

I showered and to kill time I made myself a big breakfast, which I ate while reading the morning paper front to back. By ten o'clock, I was restlessly pacing my patio, looking at the sky. I went out in the car to a local grocery store, did my week's shopping, brought the food home and packed it away in the cupboards. By the time I'd eaten lunch, I was sure I was being made a fool of. I got in my car again

and set out for the mountains, though by now a strong wind had blown up and was whipping yellow leaves against the curbs of my neighborhood.

In downtown Calgary, while waiting for a traffic light to change, listening to my car radio and thinking that there couldn't be a more brilliant and harmless autumn day than this, I was caught in the face by a blinding flash of sunlight reflected off a large, smooth object which, in the periphery of my vision, I saw spinning through the air, descending, descending. In that moment of white light, I saw Aggi in her white sacrificial vestments, a yellow ring around her body, like the sun. My hand went to my eyes.

The marble panel blown from the office building beside which I was parked did not strike my car. It fell on the street inches from my door and cracked into five pieces. I stared at it a moment, uncomprehending, and then I started to shake. Aggi had done this, I thought. She was a witch. She had the power to kill me. The oncoming traffic was halted and people came running onto the street. Behind me, cars had begun to honk their horns. The light was green, I managed to get the car in gear and move forward. Dazed, I drove slowly into the mountains. I should have gone home but I didn't have the power to turn my car around. At first I didn't even see the landscape, I drove as in a dream. But gradually I picked up speed and by the time I reached the cabin the numbness had been replaced by anger. When I entered the cabin, something in my face made Blaine rise from the couch and come toward me.

"Where is she?" I said, looking around. "I'm lucky to be alive. Did you hear her call me this morning?"

"Oh, that," laughed Blaine. "Aggi's always calling people with warnings and nothing ever happens. I told you, around here they think she's crazy."

"But I was almost killed, don't you understand?"

"You're trembling," he said, concerned, taking my shoulders and running his hands down my arms.

"Are you listening? Aggi tried to kill me. I'm certain of it. She said it would be a falling tree. She said it would happen while I was *walking*."

"Calm down."

"I thought I'd be safe as long as I was in my car. It was a trick. You've got to leave her, Blaine. She's dangerous. She's completely mad! Where is she?"

"She's not here. She's doing an exorcism, remember? It could take days."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

"She told you about it."

"I forgot completely. Really I did."

"You're in no state to travel," he said. You need rest. You're going to stay here with me tonight."

It was a personal triumph for me to lie in the big bed with Blaine, as in a flowered cocoon, the curtains pulled cozily around us, thick quilts heavy as stone heaped on against the chill of the mountain night. Blaine had come to me at the gallery half a dozen times. Now I lay with my arm across his broad chest and knew I'd been foolish to fear that Blaine had been making love not to me but to the institution. There was no need anymore to worry that our love, like the sensitive materials in our storage room, might shrink or expand, warp, crack, become brittle or desiccate outside the climatically controlled conditions of the gallery.

I put off breaking the bad news as long as I could. "The exhibit has fallen through," I told him. "I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do about it. It was out of my hands. A decision of the board. They're worried about our deficit."

He didn't speak or turn to me. We were enveloped in the kind of devastating darkness one experiences only in the country.

"Are you disappointed?" I asked, propping myself up on my elbow, but I couldn't see him and his silence was as deep as the darkness. "You can't be more disappointed than I am," I said. "I feel terrible about this. It has nothing to do with your work, I assure you. There will be other opportunities. As soon as the budget is balanced. In a year or two. Are you angry with me? I'm sorry, but there was nothing I could do. Don't be angry."

\* \* \*

It was a week or so before I had a chance to get up to the mountains again, for I was working every evening at the gallery, doing

five-year budget projections. By this time I felt calmer about my near-miss with the marble slab, putting the accident down to pure coincidence. Repentant about having called Aggi a witch (I hoped Blaine had not repeated my words to her) and determined to tell him that an exhibition of his work figured strongly in my five-year-plan, I was anxious to see them. When I arrived, I gave a little gasp of surprise to see the cabin looking lonely and deserted under a dusting of snow. Since September, a ribbon of smoke had been curling up from the chimney, but there was none that day. I got out of the car only to find the cabin door locked. That's odd, I thought to myself, for, in true pioneer spirit, Aggi and Blaine had always welcomed anything that blew in through the door.

I waited there for three or four hours. It was a grey Saturday afternoon late in October. I walked around the cabin, shivering in my thin jacket, for there was a wind blowing down from the snow-draped mountain peaks and across the purple river. Standing on tiptoe, I peered through the windows at the dim interior, but all seemed innocent and in order: Aggi's flowers were hanging from the ceiling, the quilt was on the bed, a few of Blaine's charcoal sketches were tacked up on the walls. I picked my way into the trees on the edge of the clearing, calling out "Aggi!", "Blaine!" though my voice, small and silly, fell at my feet. Already the woods seemed muted by winter's muffler. I went down and looked in the river as though I expected to see a bottle of wine on the chill, nestled in the rocks.

Again, I circled the cabin, following the track of small, precise footprints made by my own pumps sinking into the fresh snow. I looked for signs of violence, a witch-hunt, the village rednecks come out to run Aggi off the place. Eventually I went back and sat in my car. I put the heater on to dry my feet. Later I turned on the radio, and then, at dusk, my headlights. And all the while that I sat there with a terrible feeling rising inside of me, I told myself that at any moment Blaine and Aggi were going to appear, waving to me cheerfully, walking side-by-side into the yellow pool cut in the woods by my headlights. By the time night fell, I didn't care if Blaine didn't love me anymore, as long as I saw them both again. I said to myself that they had not vanished overnight, though I had heard there were people who could do this, people who are able to pack everything they know and believe in one small portable bag and disappear.

Soon after this, I made a visit to Blaine's dealer. This was a little humiliating, but I could not keep away. I made my way to the bright, carpeted space on a busy street in an old neighborhood. I followed the dealer, a small, young man with a meagre beard and heavy black frames on his glasses, around the gallery while he hung pictures for a group exhibition. I had heard that he was wealthy and gay. His delicate shoulder blades sticking through his rust-colored suit for some reason made me think of a squirrel's skeleton. He told me that Blaine and Aggi had gone deeper into the mountains. Before they left, he'd sent a truck out to the cabin to pick up the last of Blaine's inventory. While he was speaking, my eyes went again and again to one of Blaine's recent paintings, which leaned against the wall, waiting to be hung.

"Did they leave a forwarding address?" I asked. "A box-number?"

The dealer shook his head. "They said there was no one they wanted to hear from."

"I see."

He stopped, with a painting held out before him, and scrutinized me, taking a little concerned gulp of air. "Perhaps—," he said, "the next time he gets in touch with me, if you have a message for him—?"

"Thank you."

*Dear Aggi and Blaine,*

*The thing that I cannot get over is that you, like Ivan, left without saying goodbye. Even people who hate each other, who get legal separations and vow to draw each other's blood in court say goodbye. I could never do that to anyone, not say goodbye. I am a loyal sort of person. Once I'm committed, I do not betray or abandon. When a person leaves without saying goodbye, they might as well be dead.*

*I have gone over and over it and I cannot think of anything I could have done that I did not do. Didn't I admire your art, Blaine (though I now see that it was passionless and unoriginal), didn't I find you a dealer, and didn't I offer to get Aggi a job at the gallery? There would have been more future in it than in fortune-telling. Sooner or later you're going to realize that you don't get ahead in this world by stargazing or running away, but by hard work, pragmatism, common sense. When that happens, don't come crying to me.*

*Now I am sure that Aggi has planted ghosts in my house. Five mornings in a row, I got up and found playing softly on the stereo a record I have not pulled out in years, one of Ivan's favorites, the record sleeve left in the arm chair. Finally I packed up the whole collection and took it to a second-hand dealer. I am afraid to wake up in the morning and find, as I often have lately, the kitchen light on, though I am sure I turned it off before I went to bed.*

*Whenever I was around Aggi, I was conscious of a cloying excess of optimism and naïvete. Let me tell you both, it is easy to be naïve. That is the coward's way out. To people who tell me I am too serious, I say, Life is serious, isn't it? Am I expected to laugh? If so, at what?*