

DEDE CRANE

Inviting Blindness

SHE HEARS THAT JOHNNY has built the children a tree house. A distraction perhaps, to fill in her absence. It's something the kids have been bugging him to do for years. It's the tree house that helps Nancy believe she's made the right decision. The tree house, with its pulley system and trapdoor slide sounds like any child's dream. Danielle described it in one of her letters. *It's brown with yellow shutters and a blue door that has a crooked sun painted on it. Charlie knocked my elbow, that's why it's crooked.*

Duty bound in this way, nearly every Sunday of their married life Johnny takes Nancy and the kids to his parents' house for dinner. Nancy feels like she's being forced to attend weekly mass. Under her mother-in-law's damning eye, she has an irrational fear of being exposed as a heathen or charlatan, the one among them who doesn't believe.

Johnny's mother, Janine, is Québécoise and likes to correct people when saying her name.

"No, no, no. The J is pronounced soft like the Zsa in Zsa-Zsa Gabor. Janine."

After forty years in British Columbia, she still puts emphasis on the last syllable of each sentence so that everything out of her mouth sounds like a rhetorical question. *They say there is not enough rainfall? And that we can no longer water our lawns?* A former dancer, her poise seems deliberated to Nancy, overly aware. The angle of her bunned head atop her neck, the placement of each bony finger, how one careful foot is placed just forward of the other. Nancy's own mother had, at the age of thirty-five, turned graceless with MS and the disease's resulting frustration. Nancy,

the second eldest amongst three brothers, had been well-trained at an early age to keep house and pick up after the boys, including her father.

"Slobs every one," her mother would say defeatedly.

Sometimes Nancy thought her mother secretly invited illness as an excuse to not work so hard. Escaping to college brought Nancy the much fantasized luxury of having to think only of herself. But college carried a new load of shoulds and time frames. A year-and-a half later, she quit.

Occasionally, Johnny's brother, Adam, shows up at these Sunday dinners. Today Adam arrives just as they sit down to eat. His dark-blond hair, roughed up in feathery tufts, looks as if he's just rolled out of somebody's bed. One never knows whose.

The kids give him a boisterous, "Hi Uncle Adam."

Janine narrows her eyes at her youngest son, then tells him to take off his jacket and hang it in the front closet. He keeps it on and sits down.

"Hey Adam," Johnny grunts in their understated camaraderie.

Nancy smiles and lifts a hand. Their father, Fred, having begun eating, doesn't seem to notice the late arrival. Adam looks at them all in turn with wordless nodding, a slippery smile on his lips. He pulls up a seat beside Nancy, chairs are shuffled over, and Janine rises, muttering under her breath about fetching another table setting from the kitchen. As he reaches across Nancy for the rolls, his breath radiates peppermint.

"I grew these steaks in my garden," says Fred suddenly, his grin lopsided, as if half of his face has stopped working.

"You didn't, Grandpa," says Danielle, loving this worn-out game of his. "Steaks grow on cows."

Fred laughs too long and too loud, a strand of meat caught between his top and bottom teeth. The kids laugh both with him and at him. Nancy chews her food and tries not to look.

"Your grandchildren won't know what to believe," chides Janine, plunking down fork, knife and napkin in front of Adam. "Best, perhaps, you should just not talk."

Fred appears not to hear his wife, but is slurring when he speaks next. His former joviality tainted with rebellion.

"And I also grew the corn, the potatoes and those fat little carrot thumbs. Eat up or I'll have to put them back in the ground."

"No," Charlie squawks, both thrilled and nervous that adults can be so silly.

Danielle pops a carrot in her mouth and chews with quick rabbit teeth, making a chattering, clicking sound that sends nervy shivers down Nancy's neck.

"Stop it," Nancy mouths, stern eyed, across the table to her daughter.

Danielle covers her mouth with two hands and keeps on chattering.

At Janine's urging, gardening is what Johnny's father took up after receiving a golden handshake at work. A gentle, likeable man, he'd worked there too long to be simply fired and robbed of his full pension. Early retirement satisfied everyone. After three straight summers and an impressive garden, Fred's enthusiasm for vegetables is waning in the same way it has for everything except booze.

"Pass the salt and pecker," Fred barks, helplessly scanning the table.

Nancy suppresses a laugh as Janine makes a sound like spitting.

"They are in front of your face." Janine's rising punctuation sounds almost sinister.

Danielle and Charlie giggle and exchange looks. Nancy watches Johnny's eyes dart from parent to parent, his composed face absorbing every nuance of their mutual pain. Johnny—the child that holds the family together, the strained seam of a worn garment that long ago lost its shape. Now he'll make conversation with his mother to keep his dad from speaking and angering her further. After this endless rosary of Sundays, Nancy knows his pattern well.

"Cougar scare down in the cove yesterday. Did you read about it?" Johnny says to Janine.

He doesn't wait for an answer and she doesn't interrupt.

"One of those houses that back up on Mount Doug Park. An elderly woman was sitting there watching TV when she noticed a cougar staring at her through the window. Scrambled out of her chair and the cat bares its teeth, swats the glass, then disappears."

"Really," Janine says with exaggerated interest.

"At school the kids had to stay in at recess. Didn't you Danielle?" Nancy offers.

Janine doesn't bother to turn her head in Nancy's direction.

"Yes, and I wanted to play Pirates on the jungle gym," Danielle pouts, remembering.

"I came up on cougar once," Fred says grandly, gearing up for one of his stories.

"So how come we've never heard about it," accuses Janine, putting her fork down with a cold clink against her plate.

"Never thought to tell it before." Lips pursed and frowning, Fred's grey eyes swerve around the table. "There's plenty you don't know about moi."

Charlie, who's tired of eating and is playing under the table, begins quiet repetitions of *mua*, sounding like an injured duck. Nancy tries to nudge him quiet with a foot while a distracted Fred, looking to place the distant duck sounds, loses the thread of his story.

"Yes, so, what's the tall tale, Fred?" Janine brings her napkin hand to fidget beside her cooling food, another thing to blame her husband for.

"What?" Fred sits up straighter.

"Your story?" She wags her nose. "About the cougar?"

"Oh, yeah, well," the energy drains from his voice as his body slumps in his chair. "Just that I almost ran over one in the boat. Was swimming between islands."

He says this so off-handedly Nancy believes him. Even Johnny and Adam check their father's face to see if this one might be true.

"Anyone for more corn? Danielle, there's lots more corn. Boys?" says Janine.

She seems to try her best to avoid mentioning Nancy's name. Nancy, after all, had married her favourite child and would have to pay. She makes Nancy feel like Mary Magdalene, the whore, lowering her son's status to that of mere mortal.

Fred reaches for his cigarettes. His full head of white hair is a sunny blond in the front, a nicotine job from bending over his crossword puzzle or game of solitaire. Making an ashtray out of the rest of his dinner, he's stubs out the final sizzling butt well before the rest of them are finished eating. Then he disappears without a word, retreating to bed at seven o'clock, the sun still screaming daytime. Nancy knows he had his first beer just before lunch, at eleven sharp.

"Grampa goes to bed before me," says an astonished Charlie, poking his head out from under the table to watch Fred's retreat.

"He's up very early in the morning," Janine replies, staring down the little boy.

"Come eat some more dinner, sport," Johnny interrupts.

Johnny was the one who followed in his parents' footsteps: job in management, married with kids, respectable home in the suburbs. Like his father, he loves sports. They had both played hockey for their universities and spend most visits watching a game together, heckling the ref, calling the players by their first names. Adam, younger by two years, is the dreamer, the rolling stone, women floating in and out of his life like smoke. He does contract work as a surveyor, just enough to get by. What he prefers is playing guitar and writing songs. He plays in a band over on Salt Spring, lives on North Pender where he's bought a rough four acres and built his own small cabin.

"How's *your* garden?" Nancy asks Adam, leaving Johnny and his mother to talk in low tones at the other end of the table.

"Chard made it through the winter and I've got some transplants started. Broccoli, zucchini, cantaloupe, tomatoes. Still have lots of sweet cider if you want any."

"Sure, next time we're up for a crabbing expedition."

His flinty-blue eyes linger absently on hers as if forgetting there's a person behind them.

Stoned, thinks Nancy.

Adam doesn't drink but smokes a lot of dope which he grows scattered amongst his pole beans and peas. Keeps the edges round, he once claimed with Peter Pan surety. He has a small runabout and the kids love to visit and help set his crab and shrimp traps, hauling them up every couple of hours to screech at anything trapped inside.

Something brushes against her bare leg and she feels goose-flesh rising. She glances at Adam, who's concentrating on rolling a log of corn in the swayed back of butter, ensuring all sides are equally doused. An inscrutable smile on his lips.

The red numbers on the digital clock say 2:35 when Nancy hears the rumble of their ageing Subaru pull into the carport. She listens for the time it takes for Johnny to get out of the car and shut

the door again. This is how she's come to measure how much he's drunk. It's a miracle he hasn't lost his licence. Says he takes the back roads. "Never any road blocks."

"No, but there's you," she'd said.

"Can't hurt steel," he countered, turning around to flex his bum, making the muscles jig up and down.

Nancy manoeuvres out from under Charlie, who, as usual, has slipped into bed with her, robbing her of her few hours of freedom. She can feel the sting on her calf where his toenails scraped in his sleep. She should carry him back to his own bed, she tells herself, before Johnny makes it upstairs. Like a large and friendly dog, two hundred pounds of carelessness could badly injure a small child. Johnny'd never forgive himself. She left a glow of night lights to guide him, one in the stairwell, others in the hall, the bathroom and one to the side of the bed.

Five-year-old Charlie is a good fifty pounds. As she lifts him over her shoulder her lower back seizes in spasm.

"Shit," she hisses.

Hearing Johnny fumbling in the fridge for a last beer, she grits her teeth and keeps moving. He won't find one. She hid them in the basement, behind the dryer. As she lowers Charlie into his bed, pain tears down her right leg. She drops him with a thud onto the mattress and his eyes squint open.

"Go to sleep," she says as blood rushes hot to her face. She knows she'll lose it if Charlie dares follow her back to her bed. Maybe Charlie can see it in her eyes for he sighs and rolls over, yanking the covers over his shoulder.

Hobbling to the medicine cabinet, Nancy takes two muscle relaxers and lies back down. Thirty-three years old with a bad back. Jesus. Why did she let him talk her into having the second? One was already too many. Why hadn't she been more careful?

Johnny's feet come heavy and arrhythmic up the stairs. As he rounds the corner into the hall, he falls against the wall and the house shudders. There's the sound of glass breaking as the framed poem on the hallway wall, Johnny's first gift to her, falls off its nail. The light goes on in the bathroom before piss tumbles into the toilet. She pictures the stray droplets she'll have to clean off the walls and floor tomorrow. He forgets to flush, then turns on the tap, full force. A clatter of a toothbrush to the floor. Nancy can't move now without pain bolting down her leg, and as Johnny plops

his weight onto his side of the bed, it jars her into momentary hell. He giggles as he takes off his socks.

"Nance, you wake? Got a goal for ya, sweet love. A beautiful thing. Roger rogered me the puck," he snickers, "from behind," another snicker, "up the boards and ha!, I flipped her over the masked man. Beauty shot, Nance. Jus for you."

He wrestles free of his pants and falls back on the bed.

"Go to sleep, Johnny, it's late," she says, thinking how he'll be impossible to wake up tomorrow. Sunday is supposed to be her day off from the kids. He's supposed to take them to the park, a movie, McDonalds, anything to give her a break. Instead she'll be playing Candyland for the millionth time, cutting crusts off toast, watching her brain cells die.

"Do ya love me, love me true, tell me and I'll get a goal for you," he rhymes.

"I love you, Johnny, but I'm tired and I pulled my back."

She tries not to cry.

"Poor honey," he flops over on his side, "let me rub where it hurts." His arm comes club-like to thwack against her waist.

"Ow! No!"

Johnny snatches back his arm and it hangs dangerously in the air.

"Sorry, girl. I'm sorry, so sorry, I'm sorry. I got a goal for ya," comes his fading apology, "always for you." Rolling onto his back, he's instantly asleep. Mouth slung open, acetone rings his breath.

Nancy closes her eyes. She pictures his liver as a lump of deep red coral, parched and pocked full of holes. This level of drunkenness used to occur only a couple of times a year, on special occasions—New Year's Eve, the final old-timers' tournament each spring. But things have shifted. First it was the monthly poker game with the guys from the office. Then the past eight months, it's been every second weekend.

Johnny's father is an alcoholic, as was Fred's father before him. Maybe the lineage went on for generations for all anyone knew. Johnny assures her that he has forewarning and therefore choice on his side. She believes him. Mostly she believes love can cure anything. They just need time together. He needs a vacation from work, she needs to get away from the kids. They need to make love under the stars, swim naked in a midnight lake. It isn't too late to recapture those days.

After confiding in her brother about Johnny's drinking, he told her to withhold sex for a month every time Johnny got drunk. She promised she would. But when the time rolls around, the kids asleep and the house softly theirs again, she's so grateful for her man's sober hands, so in need of his raw voice in her ear, she inevitably gives in. His hangover and the guilt that accompanies it seem punishment enough. And the last thing she wants is to end up cold and bitter like Johnny's mother.

Besides, Johnny's the kindest person she knows. He's funny and understanding, loves his kids like crazy. Unlike her, he's happy to get up in the night and tend a sick or frightened child. Charlie had been a colicky baby and Johnny would pace the floor with him in his arms, singing him back to sleep with "Norwegian Wood" or "Angel of the Morning." Nightly he reads to them or makes up stories using the kids as the central heroes. Every Friday he arrives home from a week's work with something to show for it, a surprise of some kind—pistachio nuts, a harmonica, newly-minted pennies.

Nancy takes care of the family's needs but Johnny satisfies their desires. And unlike her, even when drinking, he never loses his temper.

As Johnny begins a wet, sonorous snore, Nancy stuffs the pillow around her ears and waits for the painkillers to kick in.

They plan an early visit this particular Sunday, hot as it is, so the kids can swim in their grandparents' pool. Johnny is inside watching the rest of the hockey game with a half-lit Fred. Danielle and Charlie play tag in the shallow end while Nancy, wearing a bikini for the first time in years, is stretched out on a pool-side lounger. She wonders if a tan will diminish or accentuate her stretch marks. She'd avoided stretch marks with Danielle, nightly rubbing vitamin E over her expanding gut, but that same technique failed with Charlie. She reaches for her *O* magazine, Oprah, in a swirl of pink chiffon, filling its cover. *It's Never Too Late to Reinvent Yourself* reads the bold yellow headline. Nancy studies Oprah's eyes for clues.

"Watch me!" Charlie yells in his squeaky voice, jarring Nancy from her thoughts.

She lifts her sunglassed face to watch his flailing attempts at floating on his back, nods and returns to her magazine.

"Watch this," he squeaks four seconds later.

Nancy waves a hand without looking up.

At the pool's far end, Janine is picking raspberries in Fred's garden. For the past couple of summers, Fred forgot the garden completely once the seeds were in the ground so Janine has taken up the weeding, watering and harvesting. She's the type who rarely stops "doing," especially when Nancy is around to notice.

"Are you keeping an eye on Charlie?" comes Janine's voice over the fence.

Nancy waits to reply, seeing if it might force her mother-in-law to call her by name.

"I think Charlie needs a close eye," Janine calls, louder this time, her voice a rigid sing-song. Still no name.

"He's wearing a life-jacket," Nancy replies while reading *letting go of one's habitual ways isn't easy but is often necessary in order to move forward*.

"Then I could use a little help in the garden."

Can't she stand to see anyone relax?

Nancy puts down her magazine and tells the children she'll be over in the garden with Gram. As she opens the gate, Janine hands her a bucket and jabs the air with her index finger to indicate the section she wants picked. The ripe berries slide off easily between Nancy's fingers. She eats every fourth or fifth berry, closing her eyes to savour the tart sweetness.

"They will always choose the bottle over you, you know that," Janine says apropos of nothing.

The raspberry on Nancy's tongue turns tasteless. What?

"Johnny is well aware of his tendency ...," Nancy starts to say.

"They will always choose the bottle over you," Janine repeats, more succinctly, baring her teeth around each word, still plucking berries into her plastic bucket.

Nancy doesn't respond. It's an exercise in pointlessness to argue with this woman.

"He certainly does love those children though," Janine adds. "They might be his salvation."

Nancy's gut churns. Is she implying Johnny loves his children but not her? That she would never be enough to keep him from becoming like his father? She takes a calming breath, closes her eyes and lifts a blind face to the sun.

"Watch this," calls Danielle from the diving board.

She wiggles her tiny backside in preparation, steadies herself with two arms pointing downward like an elephant's kindergarten trunk, and drops into the water. When she surfaces and swims to the pool ladder, Janine waves a fist and cheers. Nancy gives her daughter the thumbs up sign.

"I did it!" Danielle yells. "I'm going to do it again." She scrambles up the ladder to trot back to the diving board.

"Look at me," Charlie shouts from the pool's other end.

Nancy squints at his tinny-sounding voice. He holds his nose and pushes his face into the water. Kicking his feet well below the surface, he travels a few inches ahead before popping up with a gasp.

Janine claps berry-stained hands up over her head.

"You're a real swimmer now," Nancy waves.

"He's got a ways to go yet," Janine mumbles like a curse and plunks a berry into a fresh bucket.

Every Thanksgiving the family gets together at Adam's, taking the ferry over early Saturday and staying overnight to leave Sunday afternoon. This year Fred has refused to leave the house and Janine insists he can't possibly be left alone.

"Your mother's such a martyr," Nancy says to Johnny.

"I don't know. Fred's pretty out of it. Probably burn down the house."

"He could use a good scare."

Johnny stops and looks at her, as if surprised she could be so harsh.

"He's a good guy, Nance, just got a little lost along the way."

"I know," she says, inadvertently shaking her head.

Since Janine usually brings the side dishes, Nancy is now responsible for those as well as pie. On Thursday, Johnny learns he has to train a new employee all weekend, so he won't be going either. Nancy figures they might as well cancel altogether, but Adam is insistent.

"You can't leave me all alone on Thanksgiving," he tells her over the phone. "Think of it as a holiday, Nance. Come kick off your shoes, I'll entertain the kids. Besides, I grew pumpkins this year and have a huge one for each of them."

The line about the shoes gets to her. That and the way Adam said it. Utterly carefree and unfettered. The same easy way he says everything. The sound had released her jaw muscles, muscles she hadn't even known were clenched.

After an enormous dinner, games of hide-and-seek and several wrestling matches between the kids and Uncle Adam, Nancy gets Danielle and Charlie into their pajamas, then sets them up with a movie in Adam's king-size bed. Then, knowing Johnny will be out watching the game at the pub, she tries calling home anyway. At least he'll be dependent on cabs or a friend to get home, she tells herself, since she has the car.

It's a mild October night, she and Adam slumped in canvas recliners on his deck, army blankets over their legs. Like an old couple on a cruise ship, thinks Nancy with a smirk, but surrounded by huge Douglas fir instead of ocean. Well-used candles flicker small shadows around the deck and Joni Mitchell's *Blue* oozes from the speaker positioned at the open door.

"God, I haven't heard this album for ages," she says, sipping her wine.

Adam reaches into his pocket and eases out a white sliver of a joint.

"You used to listen to Joni back when I first met you," he says. Using a lighter, he drags noisily on the joint, then passes it to her.

She's flattered that he remembers such a thing. She takes the joint and hesitates. When was the last time she'd been stoned?

"Relax," Adam says in his slow, kick-back voice. "The kids will fall asleep in my bed. Your work's over."

Your work's over. She repeats the words in her head three times, like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, leans her head back and takes a long toke. Stars wink happily overhead. They say nothing as the joint goes back and forth, her thoughts gradually replaced by sensations.

"How long did you nurse your kids for?" Adam says, popping the silence.

"Longer than I cared to," she answers, thinking it an odd question. "Johnny read somewhere that nursing for a least a year made for higher IQs. So the answer is a year and a day. Though I slipped in some formula when he wasn't watching. Why?"

"Lucky kids," he answers.

Confused, she lets go a bubble of laughter, enjoying the sudden slipperiness of her perceptions. Adam's really the better looking of the two, she thinks, studying her brother-in-law's profile, but Johnny has the better body, broader in the chest, more muscular.

"Janine brags that she nursed for six weeks, just long enough to pull up her uterus." He pauses. "Now there's a gruesome image."

Nancy snorts out a giggle.

"Seems Johnny was a colicky baby. Is that the word? Colicky? It's hard to say. You kind of have to clear your throat when you say it."

Giggles are cuing up in Nancy's throat. "Charlie was too," she manages.

"Janine used to strap him into a baby seat and put him on top of the dryer. She'd toss a handful of pennies inside, turn it on to drown out his crying, then go back upstairs and vacuum."

Laughter is packing down into her chest like gunpowder. Though this part isn't really funny.

"He ended up with a herniated belly-button."

"Terrible," Nancy articulates with some effort. Then picturing Johnny's little pillow of a belly-button, her voice scatters into jumpy laughter. This becomes hysterical stomach-grabbing laughter, soundless and open-mouthed, before cracking into a strangled cry. Adam says nothing and Joni Mitchell is drowned out by helpless weeping. Nancy has no idea how long she keeps it up.

Hiccupping to catch her breath, she leans her head back, her eyes and mouth open to the now starless black hole of a sky. Whatever sounds are coming out of her seem generously absorbed by forest and sky. A tree reaches down its soft-needled branch to stroke the hair from her face, before a blush of skin is sweeping her wet cheeks dry. A heavier hand sinks onto her chest as if to weight it down, and her eyes close. The heated breath of his mouth sows small kisses around her hairline and brow, then lower.

"We shouldn't," she says as Adam's hand slips to the exposed skin at her waist.

He places his mouth over hers, his lips yielding in the same soft way as Johnny's. He holds her face with both hands, cupping her jaw, something else Johnny does. These familiarities are some-

how confirming, but it's the differences that make it impossible to stop.

Nancy decides to stay Sunday night too and, despite his hangover, Johnny misses the kids so badly that he blows off work and takes the ferry over that afternoon.

Just before Christmas, Fred suffers a series of small strokes that turns him into a one-hundred-and-eighty-pound baby. Janine feels she has no choice but to surrender him to a nursing hospital. Announcing her decision that Sunday, she doesn't appear the least sad or upset, only resigned to practical necessities. The day after her husband of forty-seven years is gone, she has the house fumigated.

It isn't a week before the understaffed nurses give up trying to hoist Fred out of bed and into his wheelchair, leaving him bedridden.

"If you're not going to help us," Johnny overhears a nurse admonish his father's helpless face, "then you're on your own."

After that, Johnny finds it excruciating to visit unless Nancy and the kids are with him. Fred's face is now permanently slack-jawed, his hollowed cheeks hauling down eyes that are restless and scared. As soon as they enter the fetid room, his eyes light up with hope. He tugs spastically at his covers, trying to get up, and Nancy catches the word "ready" amidst his slurring. Danielle and Charlie both talk at once, showing Grandpa their latest drawings and telling stories from their week. Johnny helps him drink juice through a straw while Nancy keeps her nausea at bay by staring at Shirley Jones singing on the TV in an old musical. Apparently Fred had loved Shirley Jones. After ten minutes Nancy insists on taking the kids for a walk to give Johnny and his dad time alone.

One morning, Fred is found in the middle of the floor with a broken hip. Somehow he'd managed to climb over the protective rail.

"Mind over matter," one of the nurses says. She sounds unimpressed.

Johnny's the only family member present when Fred dies two nights later. He'd relieved Janine, sending her home to sleep, and Adam, camping in Washington State, is unable to be reached. Johnny holds his father's hand for nine hours straight, absorbing

the confusion in his baby wide eyes, listening to the scarred inhale that arches his chest off the mattress.

When Johnny leaves the hospital the next morning, he heads straight to Duffy's Bar. Nancy doesn't see him again for two days.

At the funeral, Johnny weeps openly, the children clinging to his legs as if they're stanchions. Nancy cries at the sight of him. Janine stands with arms crossed, her nose in the air like a sniffing dog. Adam hangs outside for most of the service and leaves early. At the lilac and cream-coloured reception, Janine talks non-stop into Nancy's ear about selling the house, what a realtor says it's worth, and the advantages of condominiums. She talks about getting a cat.

Janine insists they have Fred's car, a white Chevrolet, one of those nondescript American models with a tacky bourgeois name—*Celebrity*. Ten years old, it's in mint condition, used to drive to and from the liquor store and little else. Johnny doesn't want it at first; "an old person's car," he calls it. Nancy figures he doesn't like the thought of taking up his father's seat behind the wheel. He's superstitious that way. But their van is going on fifteen years and two-hundred thousand miles. They have a big mortgage to pay off. They can't afford to turn down a free car.

The velveteen upholstery is maroon and stinks of tobacco. They find a half-empty gin bottle stashed in the far corner of the trunk, which Johnny decides to leave as a kind of souvenir. The car has power steering and brakes and surprisingly rapid acceleration. Just a gentle press of the pedal propels the car into action, never failing to jolt Nancy to another level of mindfulness.

Johnny is playing Lego with the kids, constructing "the castle of all castles, impenetrable to dragons, armies, and sorcerers' spells, due to small but effective anti-sorcery antennae placed at each corner of the roof."

He cuts a large oval-shape out of cardboard for the castle's mote and Danielle takes it to the coffee table to colour blue before adding green crocodiles and black sharks. Next she's going to make the characters in her dad's ongoing narrative—Dragon, Evil Sorcerer and Noble General—and tape them to chopsticks. Charlie eggs his father on with questions.

"How strong is the general?"

"Stronger than Batman and Superman put together."

"How big is the dragon?"

"Twice as big as our house, with a temper ten times worse than mommy's," Johnny jokes, knowing Nancy can hear from the kitchen.

The kids don't laugh and Nancy turns the faucet on, pretending she hasn't heard.

Losing her temper is something she doesn't talk about, because as far as she's concerned, that person, that other Nancy, is someone she doesn't know and doesn't want to know. Those blind, face-twisting rages last a matter of seconds but are long enough to strike out at a child, with accuracy and strength. She remains aware enough to avoid the face and cries afterwards. Charlie cries too, yelling, "I hate you," in his high-pitched voice. She leaves the house after, leaves her young children alone and walks whatever the weather, for ten, fifteen minutes.

"Does he breathe fire?" Charlie asks.

"Just smoke." Johnny laughs. "Like Uncle Adam."

Saturday night and Johnny and Nancy have been invited to a party in the neighbourhood, a friend's fortieth. The couple has a son, so kids are invited too. Charlie loves going to Max's because Max is two years older and has Play Station. All day he keeps asking if it's time for the party yet.

"Not until dark," Nancy recites, until she just stops answering.

Though it's only four blocks away, they take the car since it'll be too late for the kids to walk back afterwards.

A couple of oversized glasses of wine and Nancy's enjoying herself. The food is great and there's a charismatic fellow, a professor of Asian studies, who's manically funny. The kids have stayed downstairs for nearly three hours without bugging her. She can almost recall what it feels like to be childless. Some people are actually dancing out on the deck. April, the first spring party, and everyone's expectations of fun run high.

It isn't until nearly ten-thirty that Charlie is tugging at her skirt, complaining that there's something in his eyes.

"You're sleepy," she says, hesitating to react to his outstretched arms. She sighs, puts down her glass and picks him up.

Downstairs she tells Danielle it's time to go, but the kids are just beginning a spy game and Danielle begs to stay.

"I'll come with Dad," Danielle offers as a solution, her eyes feverish with hope and fatigue.

Or I could stay and Johnny could leave, Nancy thinks bitterly. But in truth she's tired; Charlie had come into their bed in the middle of last night and she hadn't been able to get back to sleep. What with all the wine, she isn't going to last much longer.

Charlie wiggles out of her arms.

"I want to play too," he says, suddenly wide awake.

"We could both come with Dad," Danielle repeats. "Please."

"I'm going to walk home," Nancy whispers in Johnny's ear. "I'm exhausted. Danielle and Charlie want to stay and come home with you."

"Sure Nance, we won't be long," he says, then turns to kiss her behind the ear. Shivers rise in a crown around her head.

She likes the idea of having the house to herself for a change. Johnny has been sticking to beer and his eyes are still present. It's four quiet residential blocks to home, no traffic, no stop signs. Nancy thanks her hosts and leaves. Halfway down the driveway, she glances back at the house. Visible through the picture window is the birthday girl waving a bottle of champagne in each hand. Johnny'll be fine, Nancy tells herself, turning away. He got wasted last weekend so she has a week's respite.

She walks home along silent streets, moving in and out of glaring pools of streetlights, then back into blackness. As she rounds the corner, the street lamp in front of their house flickers like a strobe light. It buzzes angrily at full brightness for three blinding seconds, then goes out. She stands in the dark until her eyes re-adjust, then goes inside. After a hot bath listening to the *Best of Joni* tape Adam bought her, she rolls onto the mattress with a groan. With the house so perfectly quiet and still, she falls instantly asleep.

She's wakened by a sound like a shot, the walls quivering in its wake. The clock reads 1:21. She's up and outside, naked under her sheer cotton nightgown.

The broken streetlight has resumed its mad flickering and Nancy feels part of a slow-motion nightmare, unable to respond at proper speed. She sees and doesn't see Johnny walking in jagged

circles, apologizing to no one, his father's car a metal mouth clamped onto the base of the lamp-pole. The neighbours are appearing in spills of light from their doors, tying on robes, hurrying forward. On the grass, pebbles of glass crunch under Nancy's bare feet, making tiny cuts she can't feel.

"Someone call an ambulance," she shouts. "Where are the children?" This she says no louder than a whisper.

A man finds Charlie under the hedge and rolls him gently onto the grass. Nancy's arms are shaking so much she can't touch him, only huff broken syllables in his ear.

"It's o kay Char lie. Help's com ing."

He's unconscious, the skin on his face like bits of curled red ribbon. She stumbles back as someone comes over with a cloth that smells of rubbing alcohol. It'll sting, she thinks to herself. Johnny's crying now, a big baby stumbling towards her in the blinking dark. His foot catches the curb and the tower of him falls to the ground and remains there. This isn't my life, she repeats to herself. This isn't my life. She tries on a smile.

Someone finds Danielle behind the front seats. Apparently she was lying down in the back when thrown to the floor, the impact breaking her collar bone and wrist. In a small dazed voice, she calls for her dad.

Nancy can't move from her glass-riddled patch of grass. She lifts her eyes to stare into the blinking streetlight, causing the world around her to go black.

Charlie spends weeks in the hospital, plus later surgeries, to resolve the puzzle of his face. Nancy stays until he's able to smile without pain, until he can sleep through the night without waking and clawing her with crazy hands. She gives Johnny an ultimatum. One more binge and I'm gone. She needs to know if he can do it, will do it ... for her.

In September she plants bulbs around the property, enough tulips and daffodils to make passing cars slow down. October first, a Sunday, after returning from spending the day shopping downtown, Nancy finds Johnny passed out on the couch downstairs, the gin bottle barely hidden under the table. By Thanksgiving she's gone.

Dear Mom, Every day when I wake up I think you're still here, upstairs making coffee for Dad and dollar pancakes for me and Charlie. Dad can't make them small like yours, so he makes goofy animals or the letters of our names. My D is the hardest letter to make because the middle gets filled in.

Dad gives us five dollars for every A we get on our report cards. I got all A's so I got twenty-five dollars. Charlie doesn't get letter grades in grade one so he got a loonie for every check mark on his report. Cchecks mean good, X's bad. He only got two dollars. He got a lot of X's. Dad has to meet with the principal.

I think Charlie just acts mean to get attention. I have to hit him sometimes cause he takes my things without asking. You know how he is. I only hit him when the sitter's here. She doesn't get all upset like Dad. Charlie's face looks pretty good now. The scars have turned white then the doctor says they'll disappear as new skin comes.

Daddy's taking us to Vancouver for Thanksgiving weekend. We're going to the Vancouver Aquarium and to Science World too. We're going to stay at a hotel with a pool and hot tub. Then we'll go to Grammy's on Sunday for turkey. Uncle Adam is busy working and can't see us this year. Will you have turkey where you are?

I have a math sheet to do and there's a new episode of the Simpson's on soon, so I have to go. I love you and I know Daddy does too. He hasn't broken his birthday promise of no beer. And he's fixed the moldy part in the bathroom like you wanted him to.

XXX + O Danielle

Nancy keeps Danielle's letters in an urn she's made herself. Throwing pots on a wheel is what keeps her sane. Her place is more pottery studio than anything, and she sells what she makes at Pender's Sunday market, alongside Adam's cider and any extra vegetables from the garden. Having her own studio has been a fantasy for as long as she can remember. Together she and Adam have converted the old barn at the far end of the property, so they can each have their privacy.

After dropping out of college, Nancy had lived in an artists' co-op where she'd learned about ceramics, glazing techniques, and how to use a kiln. It was there she met Johnny. He was the house poet and life was simple.