

ELISE MOSER

Coral

DAP-DAP PUT CORAL IN THE trunk of his car and drove her to Halifax. Coral didn't mind the trunk so much; Dap-Dap put her Snow White comforter and the pillow from her bed in there for her; if she curled up she could sleep fine. There was a rust hole in the edge of the hood near the lock, just at her eye level; she figured out that if she folded her elbow under her ear it lifted her head up just enough so she could see right through. The hole was about the size of a penny, with ragged flaking edges; there wasn't much to see out of it, but it let in a thin beam of light and a little air. It was stinky in the trunk but Coral didn't mind that; it was the same old cigarette, dirty metal and motor oil smell she'd always lived with. Maclean smelled like that too, specially his hands. His fingernails were always grimy. At first Coral hated that, but then she got used to it. It got to feel familiar.

They stopped somewhere on the way; Coral woke to the rush of cold air and a confusing sound which was almost human, but then she opened her eyes and realized the top of the trunk was flying away from her and the sound was the strange round hinges of it, complaining. She felt herself rising up out of the car, Dap-Dap's strong big hands around her ribs. She couldn't figure out where they were until Dap-Dap carried her around the side of the building and she realized that they were parked all the way at the back of a roadside McDonald's, the dirty back wall and the blunt side of a dumpster walling out any other view.

Dap-Dap took Coral into the bathroom of the gas station with him, stood and looked at her while she waited for him to wipe her; finally he seemed to realize what she was waiting for and handed her a wad of toilet paper, saying, you're a big girl now, you can do that yourself, and then turning his head as if there was something to look at on the opposite wall. She tried her best; she felt a few drops run down the inside of her leg and dabbed at the spot, arching one leg out like a spider. Finally she dropped the sodden paper in the rust-stained toilet bowl and pulled her panties up

crooked; Dap-Dap pulled her little jeans up with a quick, business-like jerk, stuffing her shirt into the elasticized waist. Then he scooped her into his arms, startling her by scraping her face against his rough unshaven cheek on the way up, and ducked back out with her, trotting to the car with Coral bumping up and down against his chest.

Dap-Dap closed her in the trunk again for a few minutes and then came back and opened it; he stood against the waning light like a looming statue and Coral just lay, curled, her fist damp against her slack mouth, looking up at him. He shook a paper bag he was holding, but Coral didn't know what he wanted. Finally he sat on the edge of the open trunk cavity and pulled her into a sitting position and handed her a big paper cup with a straw poking up from its top. The cup stank of sugar, like a mouthful of bubblegum. Coral tentatively sucked the straw. Nothing came. She sucked again, feeling her cheeks pop inward with the effort; finally a thick little drop came onto her tongue. She peeked upward at Dap-Dap to see what he wanted her to do but he wasn't watching her at all; he was pushing food into his rolling jaws. Coral could hear the loud sound of him breathing through his nose. She always hated that sound, which Dap-Dap made any time he ate. Or when he was good and mad, like at Mummy and Maclean.

Before he took her to Halifax in the trunk, Dap-Dap was very mad. He even called Maclean a bastard, which made Coral giggle breathlessly into her hand where she was crouched behind the couch, listening to the grownups fight. Mummy yelled, Dad! and quickly stood between Dap-Dap and Maclean, one hand on each man's chest, looking quick at Maclean's face like Coral always did, to see how mad he was. Mummy loved Maclean most of all.

Dap-Dap was breathing all snorty then, and when Maclean turned around and stomped out of the room, slamming the door, Dap-Dap was still breathing at Mummy. He yelled shame on you, and Mummy burst into tears and sat down on the couch so fast Coral had to duck to avoid being bumped by the mound Mummy's back made through the upholstery. Usually *give you something to cry about* meant getting smacked, but Dap-Dap made Mummy cry just by saying shame on you. Then Maclean slammed back in and stood in the doorway and yelled at Dap-Dap, you interfere with either of my women and I'll break your fuckin' neck, old man. Coral imagined Maclean crunching Dap-Dap's wrinkly dappled old neck between his big hands like a chicken wing. She usually had to laugh when she heard someone say *fuck* but this time it just sounded scary, and she was worried for Dap-Dap until he stalked out through the kitchen, still breathing loud. When he picked her up at daycare the next day, not even letting her tell her

teacher Karen she was leaving with him, she was happy at first, seeing that his neck was all in one piece.

Dap-Dap gave her a hamburger of her own, and Coral ate about half of it before she gave up. Her mouth was smeared with ketchup and the sandwich was falling apart in her hands. Dap-Dap picked up the still-full milkshake cup and shook his head; he took a deep noisy breath through his nose, stood up on the gravel, and wiped his hands on his pants. He wiped Coral's face roughly with a balled-up paper napkin and then pointed into the trunk, meaning that Coral should lie down again. She felt the tears sting her eyes as she lay on her side and pulled her legs up into her chest. It was too boring in there, and she was starting to miss home. She didn't like Dap-Dap that much; he was okay, but he bewildered Coral, with his scraggly cheeks and his strange head which was halfway bald and halfway tufted like a discarded teddy bear. The lid of the trunk came down and Coral took a deep snaggly breath in preparation for a cry, but the trunk popped open again and she swallowed the crying fast, before Dap-Dap could see her getting ready. That was one thing she had learned from Mummy and Maclean: no crying. Dap-Dap thrust a cardboard box of fries at Coral but he was dark against the dusk outside and she didn't see what he wanted her to do; he stood there for a moment and then he gently pushed the box into Coral's half-curved fist where it lay on a fold of comforter. Then he smiled a rusty smile and said go ahead, you can eat them, and tentatively passed a half-curved hand of his own along the side of Coral's face. She felt that was creepy; it made her shrink a little. That was when she asked him where they were going. He hesitated, then said, Halifax. Then he slowly lowered the dark until the jaws of the trunk were closed again.

Coral was surprised. She wasn't normally allowed to eat a whole box of fries her own self. But she was beginning to see that things were very different with Dap-Dap than at home, where, for example, she never had to get in the trunk at all. She felt the gravel spin out from under the wheels of the car as it pulled onto the road. The car body made a vaguely fishy movement as it picked up speed. The tears she'd been starting to cry earlier had melted away in her throat, and now instead there was water in her mouth for those fries. She put one warm salty stick between her lips, felt the grease spread against her tongue. The fry smell layered itself onto all the other old and dirty smells in the trunk; it was the best one.



When they stopped driving, Coral opened her eyes wide and tried to see what Halifax looked like. It was pitch dark out and Dap-Dap pulled her out of the trunk in a big pile with her Snow White comforter rolled around her and her pillow stuffed in between their two chests. He jogged with her straight from the trunk through a doorway and into a room. It was a funny place, just a bedroom inside the front door. Dap-Dap sat Coral on the bed and started rummaging around in a plastic bag he had put down next to her. He pulled out a satiny rayon pyjama top and, removing Coral's ketchup-streaked shirt and her jeans, drew it around her and began to button it for her. Coral wanted to laugh; the pyjama top was comically big. But she was afraid to laugh; smelling of cigarette smoke with an aftertaste of fried onions, it was Mummy's, and she didn't want to be in trouble for wearing it. Dap-Dap seemed puzzled by the discrepancy of sizes between the pyjama top and the child, but after he breathed through his nose for a minute he just shrugged and rolled the sleeves up until the fat circles hung around Coral's elbows. They went into the bathroom together and brushed their teeth with the same toothbrush; Coral was glad Dap-Dap brushed hers first because his teeth were few and far between, and coloured an unpleasant brown. He brushed too hard and poked the inside of her cheek with the hard plastic of the brush.

After tooth brushing, Dap-Dap led Coral back to the bed and sat her back in her comforter nest, and then picked her up, comforter and all, and tucked her in at the head of the bed with her own pillow behind her. Then he took off his pants and slid under the bedspread next to her and clicked off the light. In the sudden dark Coral had a spasm of fear; she wondered if Dap-Dap had grimy fingers. She thought about it, but she couldn't remember what they looked like. She shrank further into her Snow White comforter. Dap-Dap seemed to be going to sleep though, his breath shucking through his nose.

As she lay propped on her pillow in the dark, she began to be able to see the room more. There was a glow around the edges of the curtain that hung before the window, and Coral found that if she stretched her neck and cocked her head she could see a slice of the neon sign outside. It had pink letters. One was "o," which she knew because she had started to learn the letters of her name. Also she realized after looking for a while that the blinking of the light over the bit of parking lot and bushes visible through the edge of the window was due to a streetlight that kept going on and off. She put her forefinger in her mouth and absently sucked at it; it still had the memory of grease and salt.

Coral had slept an awful lot in the trunk, and so lay wide awake in the bed next to Dap-Dap. She watched the light outside, counted the

illuminated bars that lay stretched along the wall of their room across from the open bathroom door. She listened to most of a funny song that came from the window of a car that stood in front of the office of the motel for a couple of minutes; then the car pulled out onto the road again and drove away, taking the music with it. She cleaned a bunch of wax out of one ear with the nail of her little finger and also made six different messy braids in her bangs (which all came out again because she didn't really know how to braid yet). She wanted to get up and walk around, which is what she did when she was alone in her own room at home, but she was afraid to get out of the bed because Maclean made it a rule that when she was in bed with him she could not get up until he said so, or he would give her something to cry about. Dap-Dap *seemed* fast asleep; Maclean sometimes did too, but if she tried to slip away he always grabbed her leg or her arm and held it tight, even without opening his eyes, until she lay back down again.

Coral stretched her arms up as high as she could and her fingertips felt the edge of a picture that was hung there above the headboard. She felt its edge and then realized she could make it swing away from the wall, just a teeny bit, and she experimented with that. There was a low sheen on the wall borrowed from the light that leaked in at the window edges, and because of that Coral saw that she could make the shadow that lay behind the picture slide up and back down a little by moving the picture away from the wall and then letting it fall again. She practiced doing it just a little, then a little more, then less again. Then she pulled it too far out and it slipped from her fingertips and hit the wall with a solid thud, and Dap-Dap woke up with a wild snort. Coral froze. For a second Dap-Dap just lay there, then he passed his hand over his face and barked at Coral. What the hell are you doing, he asked. Then: Go to sleep. Then he closed his eyes again but Coral could tell from under the Snow White comforter that he wasn't sleeping; he wasn't making that breathing noise. Finally he sighed and said, aren't you sleepy? And Coral whispered no.

Dap-Dap sighed again and then sat up in the bed. He smelled like old shirts. Then he threw off the bedspread and sat on the side of the bed, pushing himself up with his hands opened out on the bed on either side of him. Coral saw him looking around, heard him knocking something, and then a star of light bloomed so bright she had to close her eyes; she opened just one, just a little, and saw that Dap-Dap had turned on a TV she hadn't even noticed. He came back to the bed and handed her the remote and said, leave the sound off. Then he turned on his side, his back to Coral, and soon began to snore again.

Coral pressed the arrows and the numbers like at home and saw strange pictures of all kinds pass across the screen. Nothing familiar—but interesting all the same. She wondered whether, if she ever went home, Maclean might be willing to let her watch the silent TV in bed instead of what they usually did. She tried to think about how it would be to stay in Halifax forever, with Dap-Dap, but it made her chest hurt. She wasn't sure why exactly. She wanted Mummy, but it was an obscure feeling that felt far away and lonely. She tried to figure out if it would be better to be with Dap-Dap and without Maclean if it meant not being with Mummy. It was too hard for her to sort out. She found that if she changed the channel fast enough the whole room echoed with blasts of light.