

# FICTION

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CAROLYN ROWELL

## Fireweed

LATE IN THE SUMMER OF 1977 Frank Perkins lost his barn to fire. Thirty-five pigs went with it. The rest of his stock, including his two workhorses, Doll and Dot, eleven Holstein-Hereford crossbred steers, and a pleasure horse he was boarding for some summer people, were, fortunately, out in the night pasture when the fire started. The local volunteer firemen had managed to save Frank's house by dousing it with water. Even so, the edges of its tin roof had curled up in the heat.

Doris said Frank was some lucky. She'd seen flaming cedar shingles sailing away in the updraft from the blaze. They'd drifted in the still night sky, out over the dry fields, to land in the grass of the summer pasture. Some of them bumped into the side of the house. Some of them landed on the roof. Her granddaughter Angie ran around with a broom and an old wool blanket putting out grass fires started by the flying shingles.

She said it was lucky there was no wind or the whole forest might have caught.

Doris poured tea into a white mug decorated with pansies. The mug was stained brown on the inside, and Paul could taste chlorine and the bitter tannin of tea brewed too long. The kitchenette in Doris's apartment in the Senior Centre was sunny and Doris had a pot of salmon-coloured geraniums on the windowsill over the sink. Frank sat across from Doris. He was wearing his familiar green cotton work pants and a plaid shirt frayed at the cuffs and collar. He stared suspiciously at Paul, his mouth working around unspoken words and a tear beading in the corner of one eye.

Earlier in the day, Paul had been over to see the farm. The house had been pulled down in the early nineties. Standing in its place was an ostentatious brick house sporting a hash of architectural styles and a "B & B" sign. Across and below the road he had found all that was left of the barn—the stones of its foundation. One of the four sides of the foundation had caved in, leaving three sides open to the valley and the lake below. Poplars and birch, some of them twenty feet high, grew through the thin cracked cement of the floor.

Fireweed, mauve riding above the green, blossomed all around the outside of the stone. It grew in the hollow between the burnt-out stable door and the road. The wharfin, like a drawbridge over a castle moat, had once spanned this hollow, stretching steeply up from the road to the big doors of the second storey haymow. Angie and Paul used to run across the wharfin, dizzied by the height, feeling as if the poles of its floor might roll at any minute, roll and trap their feet between them. They ran across like loggers running along the backs of logs in a millpond.

Once, when Paul was eleven or twelve, Frank lost a wheel while backing a loaded hay wagon up the wharfin. He backed crooked and dropped the rear wheel of the rig off the edge. The load teetered. Angie and Paul and the rest of the kids, who were riding on the top of the hay, scrambled off and ran, squealing, into the barn. Paul remembered Frank stopping his tractor, which, counterbalanced by a full load of hay, had one front wheel spinning uselessly in the air. Frank got off and walked into the middle of the gravel road, where he took out his pipe and lit it. Pushing back his straw hat, he said with a slow shake of his head, "Well. I'll be jiggered."

Now at Doris's table, Frank ran his old fingers over the purple fireweed that Paul had brought him from the farm. Frank said, "Fireweed. Saw a lot of that out west in BC. Only grows where there's been a fire. Seeds have really tough shells and it takes a hot fire to crack the shell enough for them to sprout. They can lie in the soil, dormant, for years, centuries and then all of a sudden they're woke by a blast of heat and fire. That there fire was probly started by one of them teenagers, cottagers, that used to come fool around in the hay. Sometimes I saw them in there doin' whatnot but I didn't pay 'em no mind."

"How come you never rebuilt?" said Paul.

“Too old,” said Frank, “and what woulda been the sense of rebuilding it when some little shit from the city would just, more ’n likely, burn it down again?” Frank had moved over to Doris’s house not long after the fire. The arthritis bothered him too much to keep on farming. And after a time he had ended up here in the Home where a man couldn’t spit without someone running after him to clean it up. He squinted at Paul and said for the third time, “You’re Ellie Naylor’s boy, aren’t you?”

The summer that Frank’s barn burned was the last summer that Paul spent at the lake. Paul wasn’t supposed to be spending his summer with his parents. He was supposed to be working at the Dairy Queen in Pointe Claire, the one between the Chemin St. Marie service road and the inbound Trans-Canada.

Not that it was a great job. Everyone had asked him why his dad hadn’t gotten him a job at the college. A job like helping in the soil science lab, or doing fieldwork in the plant breeding plots, or even cutting the grass around the Raptor Centre. But Paul had been looking forward to a summer at the Dairy Queen, where no one knew him or his father. He liked the soothing blandness, the whoosh of the highway behind him, the noise of the soft ice-cream machine. He had even been looking forward to serving parents with their whiny kids and lines of teenagers in their pastel long collars and big hair. They were real losers. Worse than him. He liked to play the game of smiling inanely at them while he called them obscene loser names inside his head, his long hair well hidden under his perky DQ hat.

Having the house to himself while his parents were gone would have been an added plus. His older brother was never there much either because he worked in some bookstore downtown and lived with his girlfriend by the Forum most of the time. Paul had been looking forward to hot afternoons before going on shift, spent in the cool basement of his parents’ split-level, drinking Pepsi, smoking dope, and watching soaps.

He’d planned on watching old black-and-white movies on an afternoon show called *Pippa’s Showcase*. Pippa, a thin woman with a sixties bouffant hairstyle, sometimes dressed in a chiffon baby-doll peignoir set, sometimes in a trim black sheath, introduced movies that starred people like Doris Day and Audrey



Hepburn. Paul liked the way Pippa pouted her lips at the camera and said, "Enjoy the show."

Instead, the manager of the Dairy Queen had decided that Paul was the prime suspect in the disappearance of several pounds of chocolate sprinkles and \$25 from the till, and Paul had been fired after his third day. His parents, after expressing their "profound disappointment"—God, he wished they'd just hit him and get it over with—had hauled him off to the cottage where they could keep an eye on him.

He hadn't wanted to go, hadn't wanted to be cooped up in the sticks with the two of them. He didn't think he could take another minute of his mother's sullen silences, but those silences were nothing compared with his father's overbearing fake cheeriness. Why his mother and father thought eight weeks together at the cottage would somehow make it okay between the two of them was a mystery. Maybe his mother had read about a similar situation in the "Can This Marriage Be Saved" column of *The Ladies Home Journal*, or something. And now they had to drag him into it. Man, he wished they'd both just go for a long walk off a short pier.

Paul was swinging in a hammock he had just hauled out of the shed and hung between the two big fir trees at the edge of their lot, wondering if anyone ever died of boredom. His father would say that he knew a cure for boredom—work. And his mother would say that boredom was a sign of a lack of inner resources. Paul thought boredom might just kill a person. It could lead to anything, like hitchhiking with a serial killer, overdosing on beer and barbiturates, or jumping off a cliff just for the taste of air rushing by you and the roller-coaster feel of your stomach falling into your knees. At least that would feel like something. Speed and fear instead of some dull ache you couldn't figure out.

"Paul," said his father from the end of the dock, "make yourself useful and get me a beer." His father, in floppy cut-offs and flip-flops, was fiddling with the tripod of his telescope, trying to get it level. Paul looked at the hair on his father's broad brown back.

"What'd your last slave die of?" he called back. It was what he, his brother, and his father—the guys in the family—always said when asked for a favour. The joking family retort that had the serious aim of making sure no one was taken advantage of. That no one did more than was strictly his share. Paul's mother once



said that she could never bring herself to say, "What did your last slave die of?" because the irony would be too much for her. His father had looked pissed then and gone out to finish waterproofing his expedition tent.

"My last slave," said Paul's father happily, peering into the lens as he turned an adjustment, "died of a good swift kick in his smart little butt." He sat back on his heels and turned to Paul. His sunglasses sat on his black curly hair and he was smiling. "Get me a beer and I'll let you have a taste," he wheedled.

"Ohhh. What a treat." Paul's voice came out wrong, sounding sarcastic and mean even to him. Part of Paul wanted to play along like when he was still just a kid. Part of him wanted to run into the house, get a cold Molson from the fridge, bring it out to his dad, and sit beside him on the dock. He wanted to dangle his feet in the water and talk about the peregrine falcons that nested on the cliff across the lake. He wanted to see his father's conspiratorial grin as he motioned to Paul to crouch beside him, where Mom couldn't see, and handed him the cool, cool bottle with its beads of condensation, giving him one sip for every five swigs of his own.

Paul almost got up to go to the cottage for the beer but then he saw the look on his father's face. It was a look of disappointment and anger. He was mad at Paul because Paul hadn't answered in the old sure-daddy-right-away-daddy way. Paul had seen the same look when his father had turned from the phone after talking to the manager of the Dairy Queen. Paul felt something cold in his stomach; he wasn't sure what, but whatever it was seemed to call for motion: for escape and deflection.

"Go get your own fucking beer," he snarled as he rolled himself out of the hammock, landing on his feet.

His father shouted after him, "What did you say? What did you say? Paul. Come back here." Paul walked quickly up the porch steps.

"What did you say to your father?" asked Paul's mother from the chaise lounge on the porch where she was reading a fat paperback. Paul thought, *why do they emphasize "your father" as if somehow the words are going to force you to instantly respect him, make him something other than he is—just another guy who can't seem to keep his pants zipped.* "Paul. What is the matter with you?" Paul heard the accusation in her tone, as if whatever was the matter with him was his fault, curable if he'd only try.

"Nothing is the matter with me," he yelled as he slammed the door and stomped through the cottage. "Why can't you just

leave me alone?" To Paul's surprise and shame he heard tears in his own voice. He grabbed his sneakers and his shirt on the way out the front door. Without missing a step he mounted his bicycle and set it in motion. The momentum of his actions pleased him, made him feel vindicated.

He pedalled up the grassy lane to the dirt road that followed the curve of the lake. Then he took the first road to the right that led away from the water and up to the farm. He hadn't been up to the farm yet this summer. His father would have said he was enjoying being miserable too much to go and maybe he had been. He felt better as he stood on his pedals to make it up the hill.

"What's yer old man lookin' at through that thing he's got set up on your dock?" asked Frank. "Hand me that wrench. No. No. The littler one." Frank had made a work table out of a heavy piece of slab wood laid across two sawhorses and was taking apart a large greasy chainsaw on his sloping, rotting front porch. A large yellow dog sat under the makeshift work table and scratched his fleas; his enthusiastic thumping made the whole porch shake. The porch was crowded with pieces of chainsaw, empty discarded oil cans, a bench seat from a scrapped car, discarded truck tires, gears, an axle. Stovewood was stacked by the kitchen door and an axe stuck in a chopping block. An old wooden rocker with the cane seat busted out moved in the strong breeze that was blowing.

"Birds," said Paul. He leaned carefully against the porch railing, testing its wholeness before putting his full weight against it.

"Kinda birds?" asked Frank. Frank's hands were broad and liver spotted. The hair on the back of them white. The wrench he carefully turned looked like a child's toy. Paul avoided looking in his face. It still gave him the creeps to see the stumps of Frank's sparse brown teeth.

"I dunno," said Paul. He did know, but it was supposed to be a secret. Two summers ago one of his father's colleagues, a bird specialist, had come for a weekend at the cottage. The specialist had identified the small hawk-like birds that wheeled above the cliff face as peregrine falcons. He'd said not to tell anyone. He'd said that if word got out there were peregrines on the rock face, they'd have the place crawling with the curious—scientists, tourists, poachers—who would disturb the one breeding pair. According to him, if they were disturbed, the falcons would abandon their

nest and their young would die. Peregrines were in danger of extinction, he'd said. He'd asked Paul's father to keep an eye on them and take notes.

Paul knew that his father had been more than a little miffed, embarrassed that in all the years he had been coming to this lake, first as Eleanor Naylor's boyfriend visiting her family's cottage and then as her husband bringing his own family, he had never identified the peregrines for what they were. His mother had said, "Lord, Brad. You don't have to be first at everything. Relax. Your specialty is marine life. Who cares if some near-extinct bird was flying right above your head?" She could be mean, thought Paul, but his father left himself wide open by being such a know-it-all.

At first Paul's father had grumbled, saying he figured that the peregrines were only a secret until the bird specialist managed to get his upcoming paper on them published. It wasn't long until he'd become obsessed with them himself. He'd bought a telescope and an expensive pair of field binoculars. He watched them daily when he was there and often hiked to the top of the cliff to get a closer look. He made endless notes and talked as if he'd been the one who'd made the big discovery, as if no one else had ever noticed the falcons and their fascinating lives.

"Don't suppose he's lookin' at the hawks?" Frank commented absently. "I see him out there when I go fishin' in the mornin'." He reached for an oil can. "There's been a pair of them hawks on the cliff as long as I can remember. Sometimes two pairs. No more than two. We call them cliff hawks. Testy little guys. You climb near their nest and they'll try and take a chunk outta yer scalp."

Paul was comfortably quiet. That's one of the things he liked about Frank. Frank could talk on and never seem to care if you talked too. He never looked you in the eye and demanded the truth. He asked the occasional question but didn't seem to mind if you didn't feel like answering. He respected silence even though he always seemed to be busy filling it in.

"Fly. Mister man, those little bastards can sure fly. I seen 'em dive from up near the top of the cliff—and mind you, that cliff is near eight hundred feet high—and nail a swallow down near the water. Hell, they must be movin' at close to a hundred mile an hour when they stoop. Some bird. I seen one once take a hunk a feathers outta the backside of a golden eagle. Eagle must a been four, five times its size. Feisty."



“Peregrines. They’re called peregrine falcons.” Paul suddenly wanted to show Frank that he knew something about these birds too. “They’re on the endangered list. And they’re really rare in Eastern Canada.” He thought of his father at a dinner party with a lot of fellow biologists, expounding on these rare birds and how the local population was totally unaware of them.

“You don’t say?” Frank whistled. “I read about them somewhere. There’s beer in the fridge. Help yourself. It’s Sunday after all.” Paul headed into the house. If his mother knew that he drank beer at Frank’s house, had been drinking beer here since he was about ten, she never said. She wasn’t crazy about Paul spending so much time at Frank’s farm but Paul’s father would say, “Lighten up, Eleanor. Let the boy get out and see how *real* people live. Right Paul? Frank is the salt of the earth. Heart of gold.”

Paul’s mother would just narrow her eyes at his father and say, “Fine. Fine.” She grew up here. She knew Frank’s easy ways—the alcohol, the cigarettes, the muddy boots no one made you take off, the swearing that was tolerated, the guarantee of sanctuary should you need it in the form of a mattress on the floor—and that these things made Frank’s house a boys’ paradise. Summer boys from the city, local farmers’ boys, Frank’s own boys who came and went between their father’s house and the various homes of their mothers. Frank could always get the boys to work, stacking hay bales, splitting firewood, with a quick word of praise and a beer. He even turned a blind eye to boys smoking pot in his kitchen.

Paul was sure his mother was onto all of the attractions of Frank’s farm but she never said so to his father. Not in so many words. She liked to keep things for her own, as if she was a farmwife secreting away egg money from her husband instead of details from her past.

“You want one too, Frank?” he asked.

“I could use one, right about now,” said Frank, hauling on his suspenders. He pushed his hat back on his head and scratched his brow.

Doris was in the kitchen washing dishes. Paul was never sure as to the exact relationship between Doris and Frank. Doris cooked and cleaned for Frank and mostly treated him like her husband, but she had her own home and three or four grown-up children and several grandchildren that Paul knew of. Sometimes

when Paul dropped by in the early morning, she was there cooking up pancakes, and yet, often he wouldn't see her for days. Frank would only say, "She's to home," when asked.

Doris was a tall, sunken-chested woman with a large purple mark that covered the left side of her face. Her hair was black, streaked vividly with white, and she was as quiet as Frank was talkative. Not unfriendly, just silent, as if words were not to be wasted anymore than you would waste a used tea bag or an old flour sack. Paul nodded at her as he opened the fridge.

"Angie's here," she said over the clank of dishes in the sink.

Paul put two beer bottles on the counter and reached for the bottle opener that hung from a string attached to a cupboard pull knob. He felt his face go red as he pried off the tops.

Angie was Doris's fifteen-year-old granddaughter. One night last year, at a bonfire set by a group of teenagers on the narrow pebbly beach of the campground, Angie had let Paul and another guy feel her up. Paul remembered the touch of her nipples, his surprise at their size in contrast to the small mounds of her breasts. He remembered brushing against the other boy's hand under her shirt. When he had tried to put his hand down the front of her jeans, she had laughed as if he were tickling her and squirmed away.

Over the winter he'd fooled around with a few girls, nothing much, a little tongue, a little feel, but the thought of Angie, her bold stare, the flip of her long brown hair over her skinny shoulders, her direct talk, seemed just what he wanted right now—not the posturing of the town girls with their pale lipstick and layered hair.

"Where's she at?" Paul fell into the speech pattern of the house. A pattern that made his mother wince when he used it at home—wince and correct him; *not I saw him over to home, but I saw him at home; not spun, it's spoon; and for God's sake there is no such word as ain't.*

"In the upper garden," replied Doris. She wiped her hands on her apron and reached out for a beer bottle. She took a small sip and handed it back. "Picking Frank's peas."

"You got another pail? I'll go help her after I take Frank his beer."

Doris reached out a long thin hand and caressed his hair. "Well, bless your heart. There's a couple of pails out there." Paul's throat constricted and he blushed. Doris always caught him off guard with her small endearments, endearments that, ever since he

could remember, she had been doling out to the boys that were drawn to Frank's house. *Bless your heart*, she would say over any small favour a boy did for her. She always made Paul feel as if he had just given her something precious.

Unlike his parents, who treated his help as if it were something they had a right to.

Angie was in between two rows of tall pea fence. He could hear her singing, loudly and off-key, so he was pretty sure she hadn't seen him. He tried to sneak up on her, grab her hand as she reached through the wire to pick a pod on the other side, but she saw him just before he reached.

"Jesus. Don't scare me like that." She jumped and laughed. "You come to help?"

Paul got a pail and began to pick across from her. From time to time he let his hand brush against hers. Sometimes they reached for the same pod and then they would pretend their fingers were miniature people, fighting. It was almost as if he'd been seeing Angie every day of his life instead of only one or two weeks every summer. The flirting was part of it. Angie flirted in a relaxed way, like it was no big deal, no different than picking peas.

Angie, who spent a few weeks each summer with her grandmother, didn't often play, even here at Frank's. She always had chores of some sort to finish, although in the evening she would take Frank's boat out on the lake to go fishing. Sometimes she hung out with Paul at his cottage, but she never stayed long. Paul could tell that his father, with his I-admire-you-country-folk-so-much attitude, made Angie uncomfortable. His mother hardly spoke to her.

The sun was hot. Bees worked in the pea vines, their bodies and the white pea blossoms trembling together like lovers. Paul felt each firm smooth pea pod before he picked it, guessing at the size of the peas inside.

"Want to go for a swim when we're done?" he asked Angie.

"Maybe." He looked at the soft skin of her underarm as she reached up to test a pod above her.

"Are you staying long?" asked Paul.

"Long as I can. 'Til Dad comes and drags me home, I guess. I thought you weren't coming this summer. I thought you were going to get a job." She said *job* as if it were something you bought and then had to look after, like an exotic pet. He knew she was



implying that he was spoiled and didn't really know what a job was.

"I thought you were going to run away and join the circus," he countered. She made a face at him through the peas.

"Is your father here for the whole summer this year?" she said.

"I guess. He's not going on any field trips up north this summer. Maybe he'll go in the fall. Something about funding."

"Be kind of weird to have him around all the time."

"Yeah. Kinda." Paul's father spending the whole summer at the lake was another reason Paul hadn't wanted to. His father used to come for the first two weeks of July, after which he usually went off on some research project, returning for the last two weeks in August. In the four weeks that his father was away, Paul and his mother would fall into a pleasant routine of sloth and calm, blissfully unaware, until his father came back, just how much space the man took up, with his voice, his plans, his busyness, his impatience, and his barely contained temper. For someone who professed to love the country life, it seemed to Paul that his father often acted like a bear on a leash when he was here, but then maybe that wasn't because of the country. Maybe it was because of his family.

Yesterday, while out bicycling, Paul had seen his father in the phone booth by the general store. His father had turned his back to the road, as if his back was some sort of disguise, and he was talking animatedly, his free hand slashing at the air in front of him. Paul had pedalled as close as he could to the phone booth, slapping it with his hand as he passed. He'd heard his father yell behind him, a startled "Hey!" but Paul wasn't sure his father had seen it was him on the bike, and his father hadn't said anything about it since.

The man was such a jerk, as if they didn't have a phone at the cottage, as if Paul, or anybody, wouldn't know what he was up to.

His mother had insisted on a phone for the cottage. She'd said, "I will not be stranded out here without a way to call for help. I know what can happen."

"Oh come on Eleanor," his father had said. "Up north in the bush I go for weeks with just my toothbrush and a handkerchief to wave at passing planes." A typical bit of an exaggeration.

"You know your wild things, I know mine," she'd said.

Near the end of July the electricity went off. A bunch of them were sitting around Frank Perkins' kitchen table just before dark one Saturday night, when it cut out. There was no storm, no wind, no lightning, no warning, just the sudden silence as the fridge clanked to a halt and the florescent kitchen light stopped hissing.

"Friggin' hell," said Frank. He pulled himself up and went to the cellarway where he retrieved a metal hurricane lantern that hung there on a peg.

"Shit. I knew this was going to fuckin' happen," said Marvin, one of Frank's sons. "I wouldn't put it past those strikin' bastards to cut the lines themselves."

"Jesus. Hope this don't last long. The old man don't have no fuckin' generator, and I'm not too partial to milkin' them fuckin' cows by hand," said one of the others.

"They have to get the attention of the government some way," said Paul. "They've been without a contract for months."

Workboots shifted on the worn linoleum and someone snorted. Frank laid a big hand on Paul's shoulder as he walked past. He reached by him to put the lantern in the centre of the table. "Well now, professor. Just as long as they don't leave us without lights fer months."

"Fuckin' unions," said Marvin. Paul picked at the greasy dirt in the chrome trim around the edge of the table. Paul was drinking with Frank, Marvin, and three other local boys Paul's age. These boys had large biceps and dirty baseball caps and thighs straining at the fabric of their jeans. They threw "Jesus H. Christ" and "fucking this" and "fucking that" into their sentences so liberally that it took them twice as long to say anything as it should have. They were young men who had intimate knowledge of cars, rifles, and alcohol. With practised agility they would hook a bottle neck between two fingers as they fished a Molson out of its case while grunting "beer?" in Paul's direction.

These boys all drove—mostly farm pickups—and talked about "the old man" when they mentioned their fathers. They sometimes came and stayed with Frank when they had a fight with their "old men," showed up for a week or two to help with the sugaring or firewood or the potato digging. They "bached it" with Frank, worked for him, took him off to the strip clubs at the border, drank his whisky, and sat with their workboots propped on the open oven door of his wood cookstove. They stayed until they patched it up

at home, or if Doris wasn't there, until they got sick of Frank's diet of eggs and fried potatoes. Or if it was winter, they got sick of having to thaw out the pipes with a propane torch every morning to get water to make coffee. They drank beer as casually as Paul drank Coke and never turned down a joint if they were offered one.

Paul drank the beer quickly, gulping it down as he watched Frank's hands lighting the lantern. He could hear Doris and Angie in the front room. They had been watching *Hee Haw* when the lights went out and were now looking for candles and matches. He heard Doris say, "Dear heart" to Angie and it made him feel melancholy and envious. Angie and Doris were deciding on which decks of cards to use for canasta.

Paul drank another beer and was halfway through the third when Frank pulled out a bottle of Canadian Club. The flame from the lantern flickered, reflected in the amber liquid. He lined up six juice glasses on the table, clear white glasses with the designs of hearts and spades on them. You could buy these glasses filled with cream cheese and pimento spread. "Can't stand the Christly spread," said Frank, "but the glasses make a nice set." He filled each glass half full and distributed them around the table.

"Shot of CC, Doris?" Frank called into the living-room.

"Not now, sweetheart," she replied.

"Down that," he said to the boys, "chase it with the rest of your beer. Put hair on your chest."

The others tossed back the hard stuff, making wry, manly faces. Paul downed the shot quickly, choking a little. Frank pounded him on the back, too hard, as if he were intent on saving Paul's life.

"That's it. Make a man out of you," said Frank.

Paul felt warm and happy. "I want to live here forever," he said.

"You sound like your mother," said Frank. "She used to say, *I wish I could live here forever or I wish the summer would last forever.*" Frank's hand fluttered up to touch his hair in an exact imitation of one of Paul's mother's gestures. "Shit. She grew up just down the road aways. Between Galt and Brooke Island. Remember her, Marvin?" Frank's son nodded.

Frank leaned forward and fixed Paul with his bleary eyes. "Your grandfather was a good man," he said, as if he was daring Paul to contradict him. "Bought that property by the lake for taxes. Boy, he was some worker. Not many farmers had time for camps by the lake, but he always said he wanted his kids to know a little



fun. Maybe they'd stick around when they grew up. But only your mother stayed around—and she's only here in the summer. But what can you do?" Paul's mother had two brothers and one sister, and they had all gone to Alberta after they'd finished high school. His grandparents had sold the family farm to Jean-Marie Lizotte and moved to Calgary. Grandpa had given Paul's mother the cottage, saying that she was the only one who had never asked him for anything. His mother's siblings were still mad about that.

"I used to be sweet on your mother, you know," said Frank. Paul sniggered. "You laugh," said Frank. "You laugh but I was a big man with the ladies once upon a time and that Ellie Naylor, she and me...." He entwined two fingers and leered at Paul. "She did put on airs some, but she sure was pretty."

Paul didn't, wouldn't, believe what Frank was suggesting. His mother would have been half Frank's age back then, and Paul was sure that even when she was a teenager she would have avoided Frank, would have considered herself too refined to keep his sort of company. She only spoke to Frank now if she had to and always with a condescending sort of smile.

Paul shook his head at Frank, grinning as if to say, *Good joke*. Frank's eyes narrowed and he reached for the bottle of whisky.

Frank called to Doris in the front room, "Doris, remember the time Ellie Naylor came runnin' into your place when you and George lived by the mill—whoopin' and hollerin'? Said she'd heard some woman gettin' murdered." Frank made his voice shrill, "*Oh come quick, she said, I heard this terrible scream in the woods. It was a woman. Oh. It was awful!*"

Doris appeared in the doorway and leaned against the door-jamb, a fan of cards in one hand. She said, "Now Frank, she didn't know."

"I thought she was going to piss herself." Frank thumped the table. He made his voice go high, "*Why are you just sitting here? Oh, she got real mad then. Real mad. Why aren't you going to see about it?*" Frank was laughing so hard tears were squeezing out of the corners of his eyes. Paul looked from one face to another. Everyone but him seemed to get the joke or else they didn't dare admit they didn't, but the other boys weren't really laughing, just grinning sheepishly into their shirt collars.

"Your grandfather might have been a hard worker," said Frank, suddenly solemn, leaning across the table at Paul, "but he never taught his kids Jack-shit."

“What did she hear?” said Paul, trying to ignore Frank’s insult.

“What did she hear? Jesus H. Christ! A mountain lion. A cougar. When a female cougar’s in heat she screams—just like a woman that’s real scared. Scream is kinda cut off at the end like the woman has just got strangled. Makes yer goddamn hair stand on end,” hollered Frank, hitting the table every few words for emphasis.

Paul knew his face was flushed and, where a few minutes ago he had felt like one of the gang, as if he belonged here, now he felt intensely uncomfortable. He didn’t know these people at all. Maybe he should leave. “My father says that Eastern Cougars have been extinct since early in this century. There aren’t any big cats around here anymore. They’ve been hunted out.”

“Your father,” said Frank, “doesn’t know Jack-shit either. Sits around all day lookin’ at the cliff hawks, callin’ them peregrines, like he was the only one who ever looked at them.” Paul’s face smouldered and his eyes smarted. Paul knew Frank could get mean when he drank, but that didn’t make Paul feel any better.

Frank said, “Christ, Ellie was mad. *What are you sitting there for? Get your guns.* Oh she stamped her little foot.” Paul felt sick.

“Poor girl,” said Doris.

“Poor little rich farmer’s daughter,” sneered Frank. Paul looked at Doris to say something more about his mother, but she was looking at the cards in her hand. Angie was beside her staring at Frank.

“Got downright Hi-sterical.” Frank shouted on. Paul looked at his fingers. “Doris had to call old man Naylor to come take her home. Ellie called us all a *bunch of fuckin’ hillbillies.*” Again Frank made his voice go high to imitate Paul’s mother. He was deadly accurate.

Angie went to the sink to get a drink of water. She said, “Did you ever set her straight? About the cougar or whatever?”

“Not me, not this hillbilly,” said Frank, “I never.” He paused as he watched Angie turn the tap. No water came out. “Are you stupid or something, girl? You can’t get a drink. The pump don’t work if there is no electricity.”

“No stupider than you,” Angie shot back.

“Don’t get mouthy,” Frank touched the belt buckle under his paunch. He was suddenly all menace. He glared around at the others in defiance. “Don’t make me take off my belt.”

“Why? Afraid your pants’ll fall off?” Angie asked coolly. Paul held his breath. He thought of the time Frank lost his temper while

loading heifers on a cattle truck. One cow had balked at the ramp. Frank had yelled, hit the cow across the brow with a fence post, and it had dropped dead on the spot. And once Paul had seen bruises, the shape of large thumbs, on Doris's neck.

Frank had turned the shade of raw veal. All the boys were looking at their beer bottles. Doris said, "Frank" quietly. His hands moved to his sides. Frank took a breath, stared at Doris, and then slumped back in his chair. He grinned around at the others as if embarrassed by his own lack of manliness, backing down for his old girlfriend.

As if a signal had passed through the room, the other boys shifted in their chairs and began reaching for their thin denim jackets.

"Better get movin'," said one.

"Need a lift?" said another to Paul, and shrugged good-naturedly when Paul said tensely that he would rather walk.

"Where you fellas headin' off to?" protested Frank. "Party's just started. You just got here." Frank was far drunker than anyone else.

"Other fish to fry, Frank," said Marvin.

"She got big tits?" said Frank, leering as his son tried to step around him to the door.

"Big all right," said Marvin, looking at Paul and winking as if nothing had happened.

"See you tomorrow, Frank," said one of the boys. "You make sure you're up when I get here. I don't want to be cuttin' hay by myself."

"When you goin' home, Angie?" said Marvin to Angie, trying to sound friendly. She just stared at Frank and then walked deliberately into the living-room.

Paul stood alone on Frank's front porch. He looked across the field and down to the lake below and listened. The silence, the absence of electrical hum in the wires, in the air around him, was complete. He'd never thought before how that hum was the background sound of everyday life. The night sky was cloudy and the stars were hidden. There was no moon. In the distance near the lake, he could see a few faint lights, kerosene lamps and candles in the windows of the cottages. It was very dark.

He thought, *this was what it was once like*. Night, dark and quiet, lying, softly breathing, like a heavy, furred beast, owner of the hills and valleys. Then, the ability to drive a car, to mow a



lawn, to turn on a light, would not have mattered. It wouldn't have been so long ago really. This wasn't an old country, not like England or Spain or someplace with history, with houses and laws, going back and back.

*Here, he thought, we live on the surface, the peel of the apple.* Slip back only a little way in time and you'd find yourself in virgin timber; listening to the scream of a cougar that sounds like the terror of a woman being murdered; looking up at the looming cliffs where the peregrines savagely guard their nest; watching the distant campfire flicker of men whose culture is so foreign to yours that you might as well have woken up on Mars.

Paul began to walk. He walked past the barn, its bulk hulking up beside him. He could hear Frank's pigs snuffling in the stable.

The road cut through a section of forest that spilled northward from the large wooded tracts of crown land. In the woods it was so dark that he couldn't tell exactly where he was on the gravel road. He felt through the soles of his sneakers for the difference between gravel and the roadside grass, trying not to walk in the middle of the road or to fall into the ditch. He smelled the trees bunched around him on either side of the road, and he could hear his own breath coming jagged and loud.

As he neared the centre of this part of the woods, it became so dark that he had the uncomfortable feeling of walking into a void—as if at any minute he might walk off the edge of the world into thin air. He stopped, trying to still his breath, trying to make his eyes adjust to the blackness, willing them to see something. His hands, seemingly on their own, reached out in front of him. He felt grass, not gravel, under his feet and felt suddenly lost. He wondered if he had turned around, if he was even going in the right direction anymore. Afraid of falling, he took a few tentative steps. His hand brushed against tree bark and he steadied himself against its solidness. He felt dizzy, drunk, but, at the same time, exhilarated.

Then he heard breathing that was not his own.

When he thought of it afterward, he wondered why it hadn't frightened him, why he had reached out toward the sound without thinking. His hand felt a thin shoulder, his nose smelled something female. He reached out with the other hand and pulled to him whoever, whatever, it was. A mouth came up to meet his. Arms went around him. It was so dark he couldn't even see the face he kissed. It felt like kissing in zero gravity and it didn't matter who belonged to the mouth.

He pulled away enough to say, "Who is this?" and heard Angie murmur back. Her hands rubbed at his crotch and his hands cupped her buttocks. They groped, looking for the first feeling—the one of kissing an unknown, an incubus in the dark. Finally she broke free and without a word slipped out of his grasp. As soon as she stepped away it was as if she had never been there. Paul strained to hear her.

He whispered, "Where are you?" and heard the faint shuffle of her feet somewhere behind him, heading, he thought, back to the farm.

The Hydroelectric technicians' strike lasted nearly three weeks, and people soon fell into a rhythm that living without power required. Every morning Paul and his mother made the trek to the roadside spring near the campground to fill their jugs with enough drinking water for the day. They used lake water for everything else, and it was up to Paul to haul buckets of water up from the lake for flushing the toilet.

The blackout was extensive and the nearest town with a laundromat and electricity was Sherbrooke, a forty-five minute drive. Paul's mother said she would rather do the wash by hand than waste gas, so she waded out to a large rock offshore to beat their clothes clean. Scrubbing socks in her bathing suit, her hair pulled back in an elastic and hanging loose down her back, she looked young, like a teenager. Watching her from the shore Paul considered asking her about Frank, if she'd ever "dated" him—if "date" was the word—but he didn't.

Paul's father seemed to be in his element. He took over the cooking entirely. They had a small Hibachi, but he preferred to cook over an open fire and only used the charcoal burner on the porch if it rained. He got up early to start a small fire in the firepit and made coffee before anyone else was up. He cooked huge dinners of skillet-fried trout and potatoes in foil and even showed Paul how to make bread in a Dutch oven placed at the edge of the fire. His father spent his days gathering firewood and fishing with only brief times spent watching the falcons.

Every night he would make a bonfire. People from neighbouring camps would drop in, sink into the Adirondack chairs around the blaze, pass bottles of wine and bags of cheese doodles. Sometimes Paul would go to other bonfires at other cottages while

his parents entertained people they had met that day at the spring. They played Scrabble and Monopoly at the picnic table pulled up to the fire. Paul wondered at the easy way in which people made friends in the dark, how they exchanged stories about coping without electricity, sang silly songs and played games they had almost forgotten they knew. These were the same people they had been passing by with barely a nod every summer for years.

Paul's mother and father seemed to have declared some sort of truce, like people at the site of a disaster might. Paul watched his mother curled into a lawn chair, laughing open-mouthed in the firelight at something his father had said. It reminded him of when he was five and his brother seven, and the cottage still belonged to his grandparents—when all the cousins, aunts and uncles had made his mother seem like the relaxed centre of things instead of the tight, tense containing rim she was now.

Angie would slip out of the dark and into the group that surrounded the fire. She would find Paul, touch him on the shoulder, and they would easily fade into the trees, unnoticed by parents or friends, who would look up after an hour and dreamily say, "Have you seen Paul?"

In the dark Angie and Paul progressed rapidly from groping to real sex, which they tried everywhere: in boathouses, in the woods, in Frank's barn, but always, always after dark. During the day, if Paul saw Angie as he cycled by to the store, neither of them did more than wave. Paul never helped Angie pick peas again and, after the first night of the blackout, Paul avoided Frank's house. They didn't talk about it, but Paul knew that Angie didn't want anyone to know their secret.

One night Frank came across them. The electricity was still out but the sky was clear and the moon close to full. There was a brightness everywhere. Long shadows lay across the fields, and birds, confused by the brightness, twittered sleepily in the trees. Frank had come with his flashlight to check on his pigs in the stable below them. Paul thought he must have stood under them for a while listening.

Then quietly Frank had climbed the ladder to the haymow floor. In the moonlight that shone through the cracks in the big bay doors, Frank had watched their white limbs—their breasts and asses and thrusts. Paul always pictured Frank watching, toothless and



gristled, a hand on his own penis. When they finished and were panting into each other's hair, Frank said, in a low voice, not ten feet from them, "Mind you don't smoke in here. Place'd go up like a firecracker. You want to smoke, you go outside by the spring." Paul looked at Frank, a moonlit disembodied head sticking up through the trap door.

"Sure Frank," Paul said. Angie looked into the hay and belatedly pulled a shirt over herself. Frank disappeared below.

"Mind though," he said as he descended the ladder.

"Horny old coot," said Paul. He ducked his head, moving the shirt away to suck briefly and fiercely on her nipple. Angie pushed him aside and began to root around looking for her clothes. Paul placed a hand firmly on the small mound of her belly. "He's got about eight kids by three or four different women," he crooned, as if the older man's prowess, his proclivity, removed barriers between them. He tried to hold her there as she squirmed into her underwear.

"Frank? Jesus, he hasn't got any teeth," she hissed in a whisper.

"He's got one or two, might make it interesting."

"Jesus. Don't be gross." He grabbed her around the waist as she tried to get up so she could pull on her jeans. "Cut it out. I've got to go." Paul slipped his hand between her legs preventing her from pulling the jeans up any further.

"Just think of him down there with the pigs. I bet he's got that big old prick out now."

"Shut up. Don't talk like that. Let me go." She pushed at his head.

"Maybe he's going to try it on one of those sows."

"Jesus," she yelled suddenly at Paul, "Just shut up." She backhanded him hard across the ear and he let go. "You just don't fucking get it. He knows now. What do you think is going to happen to me?"

"Frank's not going to tell anyone. He never rats. And what if he did? Doris isn't exactly a saint either." Paul was all at once ashamed of the way he had just talked about Frank and the pigs, how he'd sounded crude and disloyal. He could see that Angie was shaking.

"You just don't fucking get it. Boys are one thing but girls, girls are most definitely something else. You all think of Frank as some kind of angel or something. It makes me sick." Angie pulled

her shirt over her head. She headed for the opening between the two large bay doors, still pulling on her shoes.

"But he's not your grandfather. It's got nothing to do with him," said Paul.

"It's not him I'm afraid of."

Once, when they were ten or eleven, Angie had ripped her blouse on a tree she and Paul were climbing. Paul thought of that now; how she had been inconsolable, how she had cried even harder when he had offered to have his mother fix it, how she had shown up the next day with long red welts on her legs.

"Come to my house," he said. "You could stay with us until you see what's up. My parents would be cool with that."

She turned before she slipped out and said, "Fuck you and your wonderful parents. Just fuck you."

Paul walked back to the cottage and lay on the dock, wishing he could just fall asleep looking up at the stars. The water of the lake was still, like ice, and the reflection of the moon lay across it, fire on the ice. Sounds from other cottages drifted across the water. Quiet conversations around bonfires, a screen door slamming, children playing in the dark, their voices thrilled and barely restrained as they called *Alley Alley Ump Frum Free*. From somewhere around the shore came the sound of someone playing a guitar.

Inside the cottage, Paul's parents had left a lamp burning on the kitchen table. The door to their bedroom was closed. He saw the cottage upside down like a reflection in a lake. The shut door was a sign they were not to be disturbed. Paul tried to imagine them having sex. He pictured his father heavy on his mother and her face turned away. He couldn't imagine wildness, passion. He couldn't really imagine it at all.

The door opened and his father appeared in the uncurtained kitchen. He was naked, barrel-chested. Paul saw him take his cigarettes from the kitchen table and step out onto the porch.

They saw each other and something passed between them, something sad and resigned. His father said, "Looks like a perfect night for skinny-dipping." As if that's what he'd come out for. The moon was high, and Paul could see the sweat on his father's chest hairs as he walked purposefully across the grass, tossing his cigarette and striding down the dock. His penis was long, limp, and it

swayed in his damp, sticky pubic hair. Paul couldn't look away without admitting that it embarrassed him, so he didn't—even as his father stepped over him to the end of the dock where he dove into the lake in one quick shallow movement. His father turned on his back, shaking the water out of his hair.

"Come on," he said; "the water is fine." Paul sat up. His father floated on his back. Paul looked back at the cottage, but his mother was still in her room.

He stripped quickly, then eased himself over the edge of the dock and gasped as the cold water touched his genitals. Shivering and hugging his thin arms to his shoulders, he turned toward his father. His father suddenly flipped his feet down and with a sweep of his big arm splashed Paul, drenching him.

"No use doing it slowly. You got to get all wet right away or you'll never do it." His father laughed as he turned away toward the centre of the lake. He dove back under and swam. Paul swam after him, trying to catch him, but he knew he couldn't. When he surfaced, he saw his mother standing on the dock, wrapped in her bathrobe. His father was calling to her. His mother's face looked like a small moon, white above her dark robe. She was unsmiling, absorbed and absorbing.

"Eleanor," shouted his father, "Come on in. Jump."

She waved at him. Paul heard her say, "Not now. Not yet."

Paul's parents broke up that fall, and Paul moved with his mother to Calgary. They lived with Grampa and Gramma Naylor for the first few months. Paul slept in Grandpa's basement family room where he watched a lot of television. His grandparents were a lot older and frailer than he remembered. Grampa Naylor walked with the rolling stiff-legged gait of a man who had spent a lifetime on his knees milking cows. When Grandpa heard that the Parti Québécois had taken power back in his home province he said that he knew it was bound to happen, that he was sure glad he'd gotten out when he did, and they should watch for the rest of the rats to abandon ship. Gramma just sighed.

Paul got used to the big sky, but he missed the red and gold of the maples back home. On Thanksgiving Sunday, when all the Calgary cousins came over, he couldn't stop thinking of the lake.

Thanksgiving weekend was the weekend they always closed the cottage. When Paul was little, before his grandparents and the



rest had moved away, all the family, the cousins, uncles and aunts, would gather on that weekend to hike to the top of the cliffs and look out over the lake to the brilliant hills and the rolling farmland, to the low mountains.

In the last few years it had been only the four of them, his mother, his father, his brother, and himself, who climbed. They would stand in the wind and point out Elephantis, Owl's Head, Orford, Jay Peak, and, if it was a clear day, the kids would pretend that they could see Mount Washington far away in the Presidential Range in New Hampshire. His father would say Mount Washington was way too far to see and his mother would say, *it could be possible, who knows how far you can really see?*

He wondered if his father was at the cottage now and if the peregrines had left on their migration to South America.

Paul's father remarried within the year, and his mother had to sell the cottage so she could support herself while she went back to school. They moved out of Grandpa's into their own place, and Paul finished school, went to college, got a job in computer technology just when it started to take off, got married. Over the years, he and the cousins stopped talking about returning to Québec to farm. They talked about Québec as if it were a foreign country they were fond of.

Paul hadn't been back until now. His father lived in Toronto, and everyone he grew up with had moved away. Paul's own wife had left him a few months ago, taking the kids to Vancouver. While attending a conference in Montreal, Paul had decided to drive down to the lake. Just for a look. He wondered if Angie was still there.

The hills, the cliffs, the water were all the same but everything else seemed to have changed. There were streetlights and pavement. There were signs everywhere. Most of the little camps that he remembered had been transformed into year-round homes with basements, vinyl siding, skylights, and motion detector floodlights. Cabins that were once named "Ayers' Acres" and "Camp Fun-4-All" were now suburban houses with names like "Val Jolie" and "Domain du Soleil." French was spoken everywhere.

Paul drove around looking at mailboxes for familiar names. He looked at the faces of children playing outside the dépanneur that had been built near the campground. At the farm he got out of

the car and walked into the fireweed that swayed where the barn used to be.

His mother was standing on the dock, wrapped in her bathrobe, watching Paul and his father skinny-dipping in the moonlight, when Paul heard the far-off siren. He could hear it coming closer and saw his mother turn to look at the skyline above the trees. There was a reddish glow in the direction of Frank's farm.

His father swam to shore. Paul watched him take the towel his mother gave him.

"They'll handle it, Brad," she said. "They'll only resent you if you interfere."

His father motioned to Paul who had swum closer to shore. "Come on, Paul. Let's go see where the fire is." To Paul's mother, he said, "How can I be interfering if I live here?"

"That's just it. You don't."

"Right. How could I forget that? Growing up in a place doesn't automatically make you belong, Ellie."

By the time they got to the fire, the gravel road was lined with cars. People were walking up the roads with their little kids, stopping to talk with their neighbours. The barn was engulfed in flames and Paul could see the beams through the half-consumed boards of the walls. The lower storey was sheathed in cedar shingles and burning shingles were beginning to fly off in the updraft. Marvin was there and was holding his father by the shoulders to keep Frank from running into the stable. "Now come on, Dad," Paul heard him say. "Them pigs is gone already." Men pulled hoses over the lawn toward the house. The firemen seemed to have given up on the barn the moment they saw it. The light from the fire flickered on their faces.

Someone yelled, "Get out the marshmallows." People stood around at a safe distance watching the blaze and the working men.

Paul saw Angie stomping out the small fires that were starting up here and there in the grass of the nearby field. The horses in the night pasture were neighing and running around in wide circles. Their eyes bulged in fright, the whites showing. Frank's cows stood placidly near the fence and watched the burning barn.

Paul ran toward Angie. When she saw him she stopped and waited for him to reach her. Raising her voice over the roar of the

fire she said, "I knew you weren't in there. I knew you had gone. I wasn't looking to hurt you."

Paul hadn't even thought about that. He didn't know how to answer her. "I just wanted to do something, you know," Angie said. "I imagined it—the fire licking up the straw, climbing up the beams. I imagined how Frank and Doris would feel and then I did it. I wanted something big to happen and it did."

Her eyes looked like the horses' eyes, the whites showing all around and glowing red in the firelight. She looked toward Doris, who was tracking a shingle as it flew over her head, waiting for it to land so she could beat out the fire.

"I'm leaving. I'm never coming back. Nothing ever happens in this place. Nothing." The roof of the barn collapsed with a sound like thunder and the crowd of spectators responded with a shout.

Angie ran off to chase another burning shingle that drifted by. The piece of wood looked harmless and delicate. Paul stared after Angie. The skin on her bare arms reflected the blaze. She looked as if she was shining from within, as if her own blood was on fire.

Paul turned back to the crowd that had formed around Frank. He looked for his mother.

Frank spotted him. "I told you not to smoke in there," he yelled at Paul. His face was sooty, streaked with tears, and he was coughing.

"I wasn't. I wouldn't," Paul cried out over the sound of the blaze. Paul's mother was watching him, hugging herself despite the heat. Paul's father was helping unroll a firehose out to the pond where Frank watered his cattle.

Frank thrust his face up close to Paul's. "I didn't do that, Frank. Honest. I didn't." More than anything else at that moment, Paul wanted Frank to believe him.

Frank's eyes flickered to the left where Angie was moving in a pool of red reflected on the grass. Then he turned his head to look at Paul's mother. Ellie Naylor and Frank Perkins exchanged a long look. Then Frank said, "All right then. I guess you wouldn't."

The last time he had seen Angie, she was in the grocery store about three days after the fire. He'd told her he was leaving the next day. Now that the electricity was on, his mother seemed to be in some kind of hurry to get back to the city and do the



school shopping. Angie wouldn't look at him, wouldn't talk to him.

Paul asked Doris about Angie. She was out in Colorado. "Married again," Doris said, as if Paul knew that she had been married before, or for that matter how many times she had been married.

When Paul got up to leave, Frank hadn't spoken for a long while. Instead, he had been staring with alarm at Paul. Doris said that he did that. She said that sometimes he knew where he was and sometimes he didn't. She said that it frightened her when he looked at her like that because he looked so angry. Like he didn't know her and thought she was a thief or something.

Paul gave Doris a hug and shook Frank's hand. Paul said, "You are so lucky to have lived your life in a place like this. It is so beautiful. I've often thought of you here."

"Christly cold house," said Frank, looking around him confusedly. Paul knew he thought he was back in the farmhouse, "Lot of hard work. Lot of hard work."

Then Frank looked at Paul and his eyes suddenly cleared. "I know you," he said. "Don't think I don't remember you." His face became animated as he smiled and shook a finger at Paul. "Your father still watchin' those birds? You know, folks climb all over the front of that cliff now. Rock-face climbing they call it. Don't bother those birds at all. Fact, I think the climbers got more to worry about than those falcons do. Those peregrines would think nothin' about takin' a hunk outta the hide of one of them fools. Your father was just wastin' his time. Those birds don't need no protecting. Hell, I read they even nest in the middle of the city. On the skyscrapers. Eat pigeon meat all day."

"Ever hear anymore about the Eastern Cougars?" said Paul. Paul didn't try to tell Frank that his father had retired long ago and that, once the cottage had been sold, his father had lost all interest in the peregrines. Frank seemed to be floating freely between the past and the present. Paul prompted, "Didn't you once tell me a story about the cougars?"

"The cougars? What'd Marvin tell us the other day?" Frank reached for Doris's hand. "Some guy said he saw one out near the old Sawyer farm, out near where the Naylor's used to live. He called the Wildlife fellers."

"They found a hair and some scat and a clear footprint of a big cat," said Doris. Her free hand moved from her teacup to the vase of fireweed and back again.

"Proof positive the cougars never went extinct. That they've just been hiding for the last hundred years or so. I dunno." Frank shook his head. His skin was transparent and Paul could see the blue lines of his veins running thick beneath the wrinkles. Frank said, "Didn't Angie once say she heard one screaming? She was all upset about it."

"That was Ellie," Doris said. "Ellie Naylor. Paul's mother."

"Ellie. That's right. Ellie." Frank seemed to be drifting away again.

"What do you think?" said Paul. He wanted Frank back. He wanted it all back. "Do you think they found traces of a real Eastern Cougar?"

"Dunno. Could be one of them. Could be some big cat. A panther or something, escaped from somewhere. Some fools keep 'em as pets, you know. Don't make much difference where the cat come from. It's still a wild, unpredictable thing."

