

REGINE HAENSEL

IN BEAUTY AND BY FEAR

SHE WATCHES HER SON mow the lawn, his shoulders slightly hunched, head ducked, elbows akimbo: a posture that reminds her of the pelicans on the river across the street, gawky and ungainly, so that one marvels that they actually manage to fly. Together she and her son have worked out the bus route to his new high school and though she's offered to drive him the first day, since she's teaching at a nearby elementary school, he says he'll be fine. She doesn't quite believe it. At the age of thirteen he still seems vulnerable to her, and is beautiful, though she doesn't tell him that. Mother love can be awkward, particularly when mixed with guilt.

At least he's outdoors today; he'd been staying in his room reading most of the time since they'd moved. Reading is good, but she doesn't want him to use it to hide from life. A little nagging, a few hints that she needed help in the yard. Dominic, she'd said, I'm not sure I can start that old gas mower alone. Not exactly a lie.

He'll be all right, she tells herself. We'll both be all right. We'll settle in, make new friends. There's a boy down the street about his age. She has chatted briefly with the mother, but it's probably a little soon to try and arrange a meeting between the boys. One can't force friendship.

When she comes home from work on registration day he's waiting for her, practically at the door, his face alight. It's such a contrast with how he's been looking lately that she blames herself for not having done more to help him feel better.

"Remember Ben?" he says. "From that fantasy game expo? He's going to this school, too."

Not 'my school' the way he used to say 'my day care,' but give it time. She listens with half an ear to him rattle on about his classes and all the possible extracurricular activities. She remembers Ben only vaguely, maybe she should invite him for supper soon. Dom is looking a little scruffy; he needs new shoes, jeans and a couple of shirts. Maybe this time when she takes him to the mall, she'll give him money and let him shop on his own; he's old enough for that.

The word 'football' registers. "What?" she says.

He grins. "Ben's idea. We're going to try out for the team."

She wants to ask, why football? It's never been one of his interests and he doesn't really have the right body shape, though he can run. Maybe he wants to be that guy who runs with the ball and gets the touchdown; she doesn't even know what he's called. Thinks, this is a man thing, he should talk to his father, but she can't get out the words. She'll have to get over this block. She wants him to have a good relationship with his dad, even though they're in different cities, three hours apart by road.

Perhaps they shouldn't have moved, because in some ways it would have been easier to stay, but then she thinks of all the memories they made together in that other city. All those places: the park where they heard Bruce Cockburn play, the bridge where they first kissed, the theatre where they saw Geneviève Bujold and Donald Sutherland in *Act of the Heart*, the playground where they used to go when Dom was a toddler and he took his first steps, the apartments and houses they lived in. These are things she can't talk about to a teenage boy.

Her son breaks into her thoughts, asks if she minds driving him and Ben to the school. There's a pep rally. Ben's dad will pick them up after and drive them home.

She waits up for him of course, though he has a key. In a few years he'll have his driver's license, be able to come and go on his own, part of the natural order. She doesn't want him to be a momma's boy. While she's waiting the whistle of a train stabs through the night, a lonely sound even when you're in a city. She's musing over why the sound should be lonely rather than something else, like enticing leading one to think of travel and adventure, when the house starts to shake from the train going over the nearby bridge. She hadn't noticed that it was this bad before, maybe was asleep or busy, and hopes it hasn't been keeping Dominic awake. He needs his sleep. Though she herself hasn't slept well for a while, wakes once or twice most nights, not used to the house yet. It reminds her of when he was small, first a baby and cried in the night to be fed, later a toddler she had to listen for when he got up to go to the bathroom, half-asleep and not too clear which door was the right one. He's long past any of that now, wakes without much trouble in the morning—his own alarm clock—and gets ready on his own. She was glad to avoid the nagging that some of her friends had to put up with, their kids having to be pushed every step of the way. Not that he doesn't need the odd nudge now and then.

“Hey,” he says. “You didn’t have to wait up.”

She shrugs as he grins; she can see by his face he knows it’s a mother thing, and forgives her.

“It was good,” he continues. “Packed, but Ben knows lots of guys and we met some girls.”

She raises her eyebrows. He blushes, ducks his head, moves toward his room. Turns just before closing the door.

“It’ll be okay, Mom,” he says.

The next day she comes home from work and finds him sitting on the floor in his room, papers spread all around, drawing a map for one of the role-playing games he likes. In the other city there was a group of friends that used to meet on Saturdays to play. She asks if he’s found some new players. He shakes his head. She asks how the football practice went. He shrugs, not meeting her eyes. She sees that his hands tremble slightly, and leans against the doorjamb, waiting. He grimaces at a piece of paper, crumples it and picks up a clean sheet, then glances at her. She’s not moving.

“We watched for a while,” he says, reluctantly. “But decided not to try out.” Then the words come in a rush like he needs to get it over with. “All the guys were a lot taller and bulkier than us, lots of bodies crashing together—didn’t look like that much fun.”

She doesn’t know whether to be glad he came to his senses or sad that something he wanted didn’t work out. Wants to offer words of comfort, but thinks that might be the wrong thing right now. Decides to change the subject.

“I thought we might go clothes shopping on the weekend. You need a few things.”

He mumbles, “Whatever.”

That night she lies awake, listening for the train, waiting for it, anticipating the clear piercing whistle; she wants the noise, the shaking, embraces the feeling that disaster is about to overtake her, walls crumbling, roof smashing down. It’s an old house, small, perhaps a little rickety. This might be the night and she is ready for it this time, has a plan. She’ll leap out of bed at the first sign, grab shoes, clothes from the chair, push open the door of Dominic’s room, shake him out of bed, point to his clothes, grab keys from the hook by the back door, then out and into the car. Sometimes, though, disaster doesn’t come with obvious signs, rather creeps round corners, catches you by surprise, unprepared.

She keeps an eye on her son all week, trying not to be too obvious about it. He doesn’t mention Ben, spends evenings hunched over homework,

reading or drawing endless maps as if they will help him find his way. It's problem-solving, she doesn't want to discourage that, yet at the same time she thinks that he needs to get out with kids his own age. She considers calling his father, they used to talk over things like this and come to some agreement about how best to help. But in her mind her ex-husband's face has a closed look about it. They haven't talked in a long time without one of them lashing out in anger. Best not to try. Anyway, maybe it's better if Dom finds his feet, his own way, this time. He'd walked so easily, just stood up one day and did it; crawling around in last year's dead leaves one minute, then somehow deciding or realizing there was another way to move. It occurs to her that her son may want to live with his dad. They didn't give Dom a chance to make his own choice. She doesn't want him to leave, is afraid of losing him in some way that she doesn't want to face.

On Saturday Dom sleeps in and she lets him, though she is thinking about how busy the stores will be in the afternoon and the traffic. Still, a little extra sleep won't hurt. Just before noon she knocks on his door.

"Yah."

She pokes her head in. He is sitting up in bed, hair tousled, but wide awake. By the spread of books, papers and coloured pencils surrounding him she can tell that he's been up for a while.

"Almost ready to go shopping?"

"Not really."

"What about some breakfast? French toast with cinnamon, yogurt and maple syrup?"

It's one of his favourites, though he's been picking at his food lately, so she's glad to see the smile. It will take a while to make and eat, but she's already decided that shopping can be put off for a few days. It's not as if he's wearing rags. Maybe there's something else they can do today that will get them out spending time together. Have some fun, get relaxed. Then she can broach the subject of school and how he's feeling about things. He's the one who makes the suggestion as they're clearing the table.

"Want to go for a walk by the river?"

Deep green leaves of early autumn, a few have already started to turn. Soon they'll be falling, leaving branches bare. She shivers despite the warmth of the sun and her light jacket. Dominic is pointing at the Canada geese floating on the water just above the weir. The current takes them back, back, so close to the edge and then they flap wings, lift off and coast down to a safer spot. Geese mate for life, humans don't. She had it all planned out, but

life can't be controlled, she can't control her son's life, can't guarantee him happiness or lack of fearful events. Caution and risk, two opposites, and she needs to find a place between. Thinks, it's about paying attention, learning the risks, assessing and then using knowledge and experience. She doesn't know how to help her son right now, though, except to love him, supporting him the way water holds the geese, the way the wind lifts them, invisible. But a goose does have to flap its wings now and then.

Dominic has walked on, is pointing at the railway trestle that crosses the river. There are people walking up there, a metal stairway leads to the top. She follows him slowly. Has never liked high places, particularly ones that are so open. Surely Dominic won't want to go there. Courage, she thinks, and confidence to face life.

"Come on Mom," Dominic says. "It'll be okay once you get used to it."

She follows him slowly up the metal stairs, one flight after another, concentrates on looking straight ahead: neither up where clouds reel in the sky—feels them even when not looking—nor down past her feet where the ground is getting further and further away. Dominic wants to stop part way up and take a look, but she shakes her head slightly and keeps going. Her knees are wobbly, she's not sure whether from all the stairs or nervousness, but she keeps going. Thankfully her son is following close behind, for when she suddenly reaches the top the change to wood under her feet is a surprise, and she stumbles. Dominic's hand on her arm steadies her.

"Come on," he says. Then, as she follows, "Wow! Look at it."

A quick glance will be okay she thinks. Ignoring the down, she looks out, hands clenched on the railing. Water and so much sky, the buildings of the city insignificant. She has always liked the sky before, blue with cloud shapes, or darkness with a mass of stars at night, but now it curves over them, a wide open mouth. She is afraid of being swallowed, sinking without a trace, nothing to hold on to.

Danger charges at them, shaking the world. Red engine, a train on the bridge, it's there suddenly, filling her eyes, a mechanical monster, faceless. She can't see any people in the high windows. Squeal of metal on metal as the brakes go on; thump thump bang bang of the wheels. Noise rushes toward her, the railing trembles, the boards beneath her feet vibrate, causing her legs to quiver. Any minute now something is going to collapse.

"Let's go," she says, and grabs Dominic's hand.

He doesn't resist, holds on tightly, runs quickly with her down the metal stairway. At the bottom they let go, don't look at each other. She is

ashamed of her fear. What kind of an example is this for her son; how will she teach him that life can't be all about fear. When you're inside a passenger train the sound of the clack, clack is comforting, out here it's terrifying, the cars going by above—dark, rusty, ominous barrels.

Below, the surface of the river is dappled with small wavelets that catch and reflect sunlight. Beautiful, benign, but underneath are currents that will grab hold, pull you under, hold fast until you drown. She had dreams once that have sunk with barely a ripple. Was going to backpack through Europe, improve her French, learn German and Italian. Become a translator, maybe work at the UN, not teach elementary school. It doesn't do to dwell on the past, her mother used to say. She's done what she had to do, coped with life as best she can. At the moment that's no comfort. She glances at her son, one of the major events of her life. She can't face Dominic right now, can't be alone with him.

"Why don't you call Ben?" she says. "Maybe he'd like to stay for supper."

Happily Ben is free. While the boys are delving into books, spreading papers around the living room, and discussing the merits of some kind of point system, she heads for the backyard. There are perennials to trim, a few weeds to pull, the vegetable garden to dig. She can lose herself in the physical labour; think about what she wants to do here next spring.

The woman from down the street ambles along the back alley, stops to chat. Her husband has a rototiller that he'd be glad to bring over, save all the digging by hand. It's okay, she responds, not much more to do, and she doesn't mind doing it this way. The neighbour smiles, says your choice. Then mentions that she saw them on the riverbank earlier. Warns about the dangers. Launches into the story of a woman last year, was swimming off one of the sandbars further down, caught by the undertow, drowned in full sight of her family and several other people. No one could do a thing. When the neighbour has left, she stands leaning on her shovel, thinks maybe they should find another house or apartment; this might not be such a good place to live, what with the river, the railway trestle and the nosy neighbour. But another move, another upheaval, will that be good for Dominic? And she'd have to find time to look.

Dominic and Ben talk nonstop during supper. She's glad, but doesn't pay much attention, busy with her own thoughts, trying to sort through her options. Ben mentions the downtown library, says they used to have a role-

playing group, but it stopped for lack of a dungeon master. He and Dominic discuss how they could run a group together; they could approach one of the librarians. She's glad they have plans, doesn't say anything to discourage them, though she has her doubts that it'll work out, is feeling pessimistic in general.

Ben invites Dominic for a sleepover and it seems a good thing for him to get away from her for a while. She's not feeling very competent as a parent at the moment. Once they're gone the house feels particularly empty. She rattles round cleaning up, though there's not much to do since the boys helped her with the dishes and put away their papers and books. Probably just piled them on the floor in Dominic's room; she doesn't open the door to check, it would just make her feel forsaken. She decides to take a couple of aspirin to help get to sleep, a rare thing for her, but tonight she doesn't want to hear the train, doesn't want to feel the house shake or lie awake for hours reviewing her life and its mountain of mistakes. It's an unstable heap that threatens to slide down, knock her over. When Dominic was small and just starting to walk, he would fall, pick himself up and start again. He didn't cry, just kept going and got better. What is it about getting older, she wonders, just as sleep pulls her down, that makes us suddenly want to be perfect the first time?

By the time Dominic gets back the next day, she has dusted, vacuumed all the rooms except his, washed the kitchen floor, defrosted the fridge, which didn't really need it, and is thinking about washing the windows. The leap of her heart as he comes in the door stuns her so that she is unable to speak. A mixture of joy and pain, gratitude and fear—he is with her now, but he won't be here forever.

“Hey, Mom,” he grins.

“Hi,” she croaks. Clears her throat. “Had a good time?”

“Yah.”

She thinks about floating the idea of a move, but decides to wait. Dominic gives her a quick one-armed hug as he goes by, heading for the kitchen. He's as tall as she now, just over five feet, not all that big, but he's got growing left to do, and he definitely isn't her little boy any more. She puts away the cleaning stuff while he heaps a plate with an odd mixture of leftovers—cold pizza, a hardboiled egg, a slice of bread spread with peanut butter, a couple of carrots. He sees her looking, grins sheepishly.

“Ben's mom did feed us,” he says.

“It’s okay,” she responds, attempts a smile, which feels more like a grimace, though Dominic doesn’t notice.

“Mom, I was thinking,” he says around a mouthful of bread.

Her heart lurches, this is it, he’s going to tell her he wants to live with his father. She can’t stop him, can’t let him see how it makes her heart sink; she needs to be strong one more time. “Okay,” she says. “Whatever you want, I’ll support you whatever it is, I promise.”

He swallows, squints at her. “You’re agreeing before I even tell you?”

“If you want to move, go to a different school ...” she can’t finish.

“Why would I want to do that?” He frowns. “I’m just getting to know a few people.”

“Oh. Well. Good.” She is light-headed, relieved and embarrassed all at the same time. Thank goodness she didn’t blurt out the whole thing.

“No, I was wondering about getting a paper route. Ben has one.”

“What?” It’s her turn to be confused.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. You said you’d support me.” He grins.

This time she can really smile back. “Can’t go back on my word, can I? But let’s talk about the details later. I’ve been indoors all day. How about a walk along the river?”

They’ll stand by the lookout at the weir, she thinks, nothing alarming. Enjoy the warmth of the day while they can. There are probably not going to be that many more nice days. Watch the pelicans fish and the geese paddle, walk up and down or sit on a bench. Rivers are only dangerous if you take foolish chances.

The pelicans have moved near the opposite shore, maybe the fishing’s better there, and most of the geese are sitting on an island in the middle. It’s a bit boring. A few other people are meandering along or leaning on the railing. They smile and nod.

“Look,” Dominic says. “There’s a goose playing that game of chicken with the weir.”

They watch the goose, a small one, as it lets the water take it back and back. Wait for it to lift off. It’s cutting things fine, must be a bit more daring than the others were, or maybe inexperienced. It’s on the edge.

“Oh no!”

The gasp is a chorus as the goose slips over, is swept under by the current. It’s gone, has had it, she thinks, drowned. Several people stand at the rail, waiting, hoping against hope. The interpretive plaques nearby have

diagrams of the circular nature of the undertow down there, warnings to boaters and swimmers. Unfortunately geese don't read.

A faint cheer. Dominic grabs her arm. The goose has popped up, still alive, struggling on the surface. Why doesn't it fly now? she wonders. Wet wings maybe, and exhaustion. It fights against the current, manages finally to reach the edge and the concrete apron. Crawls out, bedraggled. Scattered clapping from the people watching. The goose shakes itself, spreads its wings for a moment and settles for a rest. It has survived.

As everyone is smiling, she hears the whistle of a train. Glances up to see it just approaching the end of the trestle. Looks at Dominic at the same moment as his eyes find hers. Neither of them says a word. A sideways nod at the goose, chins raised to the trestle, their faces say it all. They clasp hands and run.

Up the metal staircase, gasping toward the end, on to the wooden planks, a few steps further. The train is clanking along beside them, so close. The trestle vibrates; they can feel it moving upward from their feet, downward from the railing that is pressed against their backs, a minor earthquake. Suddenly both of them are yelling and whooping, she doesn't know how it happened or who started, heads thrown back, voices drowned in the noise of the train, mouths stretched wide. Above, a pelican glides on the wind.