

IAN COLFORD

## The Comfort of Knowing

I THINK MY OUTRAGE at the sight of my youngest sister holding hands in public with a man who is not her husband can be forgiven. Not that I am asking anyone to forgive me. Morals are morals and, when it comes right down to it, who is going to protect our children? Who is going to take a stand and say, "No more"? You're probably thinking I'm a product of a past that's dead and gone and good riddance, but I realize as well as the next person that times have changed and that we're living in a permissive culture. We all have to compromise. Anyone can see there's no sense voicing objections to scandalous behaviour because you'll only land yourself in hot water with one of those groups whose excesses are protected under that glorious Constitution of ours. After all our good works it's come down to this: government-sanctioned degeneracy masquerading as social progress. Oh, I know we've lowered our standards, but where does it say we have to put up with indecency and public lewdness?

Please understand that I don't like tromping the high moral ground, but who else is going to do it? I'm not the holier-than-thou type, but our politicians are spineless and, under fire from all sides, the church has abdicated its role as an entire generation's spiritual beacon. On a personal level, my parents are old and oblivious and, anyway, Valerie is their darling and can do no wrong in their eyes. It's not that I despise her, or even dislike her. She's my sister and I wouldn't have it any other way. I only wish I could understand why she does these things.

At times of crisis one naturally turns to one's spouse, but Gloria was in a forgiving mood and didn't seem inclined to support my view.

"It's probably nothing," she advised placidly, "but if it upsets you, try not to think about it."

She sat in front of the television knitting a sweater for one of our grandchildren. A few years ago our son Todd moved his family to Seattle so he could take a job with a computer firm. We've been meaning to travel out west for a visit, but haven't managed it yet.

"So it doesn't bother you," I remarked a bit testily, "that she's having an affair."

"Warren, do you know for sure that's what's going on?"

"Of course not. What do you expect me to do? Confront her without any proof?"

"I don't expect you to do anything. Why do you need to confront her at all? I don't know why it bothers you when it's none of your business."

"My sister's behaviour is none of my business." Even though we've discussed Valerie's improprieties before, I stated this evenly, as if it were an unfamiliar phrase I was reading off a stone tablet. "I'll have to remember that. My sister's behaviour is none of my business."

Gloria shook her head and bunched her eyebrows together.

"Why don't you pick up the phone and talk to her about it instead of sitting there stewing? You're working yourself into a state. Better yet, stay out of it. It doesn't concern you."

Then something happened on the screen and she laughed.

I noticed that my fists were clenched and that the muscles in my neck were like iron. I let out a long breath in an effort to calm myself. She was right about one thing: I'm no good to anyone when emotion gets the better of me.

"I need a drink."

I left her with the television for company and went upstairs to cool off. I took my glass of Scotch outside. The evening air was fresh and still. August was nearly gone but the warmth of a sweltering summer day continued to radiate upward from the soft turf. We live in a modest neighbourhood and our clapboard house is nothing special. The backyard is bounded on three sides by other backyards and gardens. My lifetime's attainments are nothing special either. I teach civics and social studies at a junior high school and I've been doing this for the last thirty years. It's a kind of work

I enjoy, and I know that enjoying the task that is the source of one's daily bread is a rare blessing not everyone can claim. I'm also a practising Christian and, as I grow older, I find my faith is such a great comfort to me on a daily basis that I simply cannot imagine existing without it. I realize that fervent belief in a being higher and more sophisticated than one's self is unfashionable and generally frowned upon in this secular age, and that declaring it as baldly as I have done makes people uncomfortable. Absurdly enough, there are even those who consider this way of thinking socially unacceptable, and after an unpleasant episode some years ago I am careful to omit all references to the scriptures from the lessons I deliver in the classroom. It's natural to want to spread the saving grace of God far and wide, but I'm wasting my breath when I mention it to my family. My parents, old as they are, have never embraced Jesus and are indifferent to his word. My siblings don't even pretend to listen any more. Gloria accompanies me to church and tolerates my habits, but is spiritually lax. Todd's move out west was in part motivated by his wife's indignation at my efforts to bring them into the fold. And Valerie ... well, Valerie listens to no one but herself.

Valerie is so much younger than me that I can hardly communicate with her—words form an inadequate bridge across a span of almost seventeen years. I was in my final semester at school when she was born, and in fact I shared household space with her for only a few months. We have nothing in common but the blood in our veins and the good name of the Connor family, which, it seems to me, she has set out once again to tarnish.

I should mention that we have been close as a family for as long as I can remember. We all live within a fifty-mile radius of Springhaven, and though career and other commitments make it difficult to get together as often as we'd like, when we do manage it, every couple of years or so, it is invariably an occasion that lives pleasurably in the memory. At fifty-seven I am the oldest of ten and I will list my nine siblings in order of birth: Reginald, Katherine, Donna, Cameron, Matthew, Andrew, Virginia, Bridget, Valerie.

The house where I grew up is gone now and in its place is an apartment and shopping complex. In the name of progress the neighbourhood was re-zoned and bought up, and on a grey afternoon in October the houses were ploughed under one by one.

This was only a few years ago, and by then my parents were ready for the move. After working for forty years in a stuffy office at the provincial Department of Health, my father was collecting a pension which he richly deserved, and so the sale of the house and property gave them the cushion they needed to obtain a spot in an upscale retirement home. Though in his eighties, my father plays eighteen holes at the nearby Briarwood Country Club a few times a week, and my mother has lots of people her age close by who share her interest in bridge and reading and swimming. I was glad when the opportunity came along for them to free themselves of the responsibilities of maintaining a house, and though I lamented the destruction of the old neighbourhood I could see they would be better off. Valerie, however, was opposed not only to the sale of the house, but to the re-zoning of the neighbourhood and the development project that followed. She helped organize a group that took out ads in newspapers and held vigils and demonstrations. She was interviewed on a morning radio talk show along with one of the developers, and the program turned shrill and ugly. I found her attitude impossible to fathom because she was battling forces she couldn't hope to understand and speaking out against interests that had won the entire municipal zoning board and a bevy of city councillors and aldermen over to its side. As a last resort she tried to convince our parents to renege on the sale of the house and to sue the city. I had put up with her antics to this point, but when she sought to enlist our parents into her foolhardy campaign, I had to put my foot down. Squandering her own energy on a lost cause was one thing, but she was not going to ruin the last years of two fine people who had raised all of us to follow our hearts but also to be reasonable when reason was called for.

I took the morning off work and went over to her house, I'll admit without phoning first. I didn't want to give her a chance to prepare a rebuttal to what I was going to tell her, and for this I was willing to risk that she might not be there. But she was there, along with some of her cronies in the cause. The street was lined with vehicles, and as I pulled into the last remaining spot I wondered if Valerie's husband Anders, who is Swiss and a bit of an innocent if you ask me, knew that their home had become headquarters for a bunch of ragtail radicals who had nothing better to do than disrupt a legally drafted business proposition that hundreds of well-meaning folk had bought into, including his own in-laws. I also won-

dered, since he was an architect who made a good living designing, among other things, shopping malls, what he thought of his wife's activities.

I was born even as the conflict raged in Europe, but Valerie is a child of the sixties. She protested the War Measures Act and celebrated the American withdrawal from Vietnam, bared her backside at pop concerts, mourned Joplin, Hendrix and Morrison, sampled every drug available, and (I suspect) had a hundred lovers by the time she was sixteen. I've never asked for a chronicle of her exploits, and since I wasn't living at home I'd be in no position to appreciate them anyway. But from my brothers and sisters I've learned of the night she spent in jail, the appearances in juvenile court, the secret abortion, the drunken car accident that nearly claimed the life of a mother of three, the shoplifting, the embarrassing letters to the editor, the attempts to run away from home, the time she had her head shaved and her nose pierced, the tattoos, and all the other indignities she put my parents through. All in all, I suppose she's turned out rather well, married to an architect and living in a huge house in Rockingham with a brace of poodles and three surprisingly well-adjusted children. But just the same, that gave her no excuse to carry on with a senseless crusade under the banner of historic preservation or environmentalism or whatever, and to draw my parents into the fray.

I parked and walked up to the house. It was a fine June morning, near the end of the school year. The lawn was manicured and just a few clouds hung suspended like wisps of smoke. As I was about to ring the bell, a young man with a beard and long fuzzy hair opened the door and came out. He had in his hand a placard printed with a slogan, but such was the angle that I couldn't read what it said. He held the door open for me so I went in.

The house was full of people, young and old; it fairly hummed with the echo of a hundred voices and seemed vibrant and alive with a camaraderie borne of resistance to an injustice. It was evident these people had a mission. Their faces shone with it, as if they were evangelists bringing the word to the ignorant masses. Nobody took the least notice of me as I threaded a path down the long entryway, and when I asked a young woman where Valerie was, she did not hesitate to direct me toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was plainly the seat of power. I don't mean to say that Valerie was in charge, but there seemed to be a decision-

making mechanism at work around the table. Valerie was seated along with four others, two men and two women. Again, the virtue of their cause and importance of their actions were manifest: in the upright posture of their uniformly slim bodies, in the profoundly serious expression shared by all their faces, in the weighty tone of voice with which they addressed one another. I could almost have been persuaded they were responsible citizens who had chosen to become involved in this struggle for the good of all humanity. I was almost prepared to grant that their motives were only of the highest order: altruistic and unselfish and altogether humane and decent. It suddenly seemed very mean of me to oppose them, and I realized that I didn't necessarily oppose them at all, or at least not their ultimate aims; my problem with their campaign began and ended with what my parents stood to lose. As far as principles were concerned, I suppose I would have liked to see Valerie and her friends succeed, even if they made complete and utter asses of themselves in a public forum. But my priorities were different, and I wanted my parents safely out of harm's way with enough money in the bank to come and go as they pleased.

And then I found myself swayed by another less charitable perspective on what these people were doing. What changed my mind was the jewellery. One woman raised her arm, revealing a diamond-studded bracelet, and when I looked further I counted enough rings and watches and necklaces to feed a developing nation for a year. I saw then that they were all impeccably dressed, that each and every one was highly educated and well-to-do, and my mind returned outside to the street, which was clogged with the expensive minivans and Jaguars and BMWs favoured by our fine city's leisure class: the elite ranks of lawyers, doctors, university professors and the loudmouth publicity seekers and professional yahoos who can easily afford the time that an organized crusade like this demands. Here in this house at this moment was the cream of the crop. There was not a hair out of place or a pimple among them, not a trace of smeared mascara, and not a single household income below two hundred thousand. They would gladly serve the cause, but they had to get away at some point for their massages and mud-treatments and electrolysis and pet grooming sessions, and to drive Junior from his scuba lesson to his part-time summer job shining the Premier's shoes.

Frivolity of any sort infuriates me because, God aside, I feel we were put on this earth to perform good works for the benefit of

all. The people who had gathered in Valerie's kitchen may have been admirable in other ways, but in this one respect they turned my stomach: they opposed the development project not because of a conviction that the neighbourhood they wanted to save was especially noteworthy or unique but because life at the top of the heap was boring and here was something they could sink their capped teeth into without fear of reprisal. It was a lark, a fancy way to pass the time and have a little fun and meet some nice folks and maybe even get on TV. I felt my face grow hot and I walked over to the table and plucked at the sleeve of Valerie's silk blouse.

"Warren?" She seemed confused and somewhat embarrassed by the sight of me. I admit I didn't exactly fit in, with my sandals and socks and polyester Wal-Mart pants. The others seated around the table fell silent and watched us. "What are you doing here? Is something the matter?"

"Can I have a word?"

She stared at me, concern levelling her features and erasing the smile that momentarily played across her lips.

"Yes, of course." She stood up. "This is my brother, Warren," she said to the others. "Warren, this is . . ." She dutifully went through the introductions. I don't recall any of the names.

"What's wrong?" she whispered as I led her down the hall toward the front door. There was too much noise to bother trying to have a conversation inside the house. I took her out to the steps.

"You're not using our parents in your cause. That's the end of it."

"What do you mean? They want to be involved. I asked Mom and she said I could help them."

"Mom doesn't know what you're doing and she doesn't understand what's at stake. She phoned me and asked me to explain it to her since Dad didn't seem to be able to."

"Damn it, Warren, we're going to save their home. We're going to save all kinds of homes, and the park too. Those trees are a hundred years old."

"They're not going to cut all the trees down. They said on the news that they don't have to. They'll build around them."

"And you believe that?"

I looked at her.

"If this deal doesn't go through, Mom and Dad will never get what that house is worth on the open market. Right now, they

stand to make fifty thousand over and above market value. You're shenanigans will cost them."

She folded her arms and regarded me with disgust.

"That's all it ever is with you, isn't it? Money. It always comes down to one thing."

"I'm not talking about my money," I said. "And I don't want to see the old house go any more than you do. But sentiment isn't going to pay the bills and if they're stuck in that house for another ten years it'll drain every last cent of their savings. Did you think of that for one minute?"

"We can help them take care of it—"

"And how far do you think that will go? Are you going to go over there and mow the lawn and fix the leaky roof and caulk the windows and shovel the sidewalk and then go home and do your own? Do you expect Reggy to drive in from Truro to take his turn? We've all got our own families and our own responsibilities; Val, and I wish you'd consider that for a moment before you put an end to something that will ensure they're comfortable for the rest of their lives."

She seemed to be thinking over what I'd said. She turned and her short blonde hair glittered in the sun and I was struck once again, as I always am, by how small and frail she appeared, like one of my malnourished students trying to look like a fashion model.

"Okay," she said. "I'll back off."

"I'm not asking," I said. "I'm telling you that our parents will not be playing any role in this."

"Warren, I said I'd back off." She glared at me. "Okay? Is that good enough?"

"Fine," I said.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head as if I were a child whose demands were just too preposterous to be believed. It was this gesture more than anything else that made me furious with her and I walked away before she could notice this and turn it to her advantage. On the way to my car I passed a van marked with the logo of a local TV station, but I was angry now and barely gave it a glance. I had received what I came for, Valerie's assurance that she would leave our parents out of it, and I was fully prepared to take her at her word and let it end there. But I was still fuming when I returned to school after lunch. It took a good hour of teaching and joking around with my students before I could put



the episode behind me. And I thought I had done just this. But what I didn't realize was that our conversation had been captured on videotape and was being played and replayed on the local news.

The sequence they chose to air had been carefully edited to emphasize Valerie's capitulation. She was shown in close-up looking pale and stricken, saying "I'll back off," but exactly what she was backing off from was left ambiguous because they had somehow expunged my every word from the tape. In fact, they seemed to have deliberately manipulated, or perhaps even altered, the recording to exclude me from the shot. The back of my bald head bobbed into view once or twice, but other than this the impression one had upon viewing the selected footage was of Valerie standing on her front steps speaking to reporters about the activities of her protest group and admitting to toning down the rhetoric and backing away from their declared intention to stop the development project. The effect of this was predictable and immediate. Half the members quit, those who remained fell to bickering among themselves, and in the meantime the project went forward unimpeded. On the day construction was set to begin, many former residents of the old neighbourhood came out despite the chance of rain to watch as their houses were reduced to rubble by machinery so noisy and immense it seemed to threaten the well-being of the entire planet. A few were crying while others stood about as if in a daze, like survivors of some natural disaster. The cameras were there again, whirring away. But Valerie was nowhere to be seen. As it turned out she was right about the trees. They took down every last one of them. Not even the puniest seedling was spared.

I only mention this to illustrate the kind of relationship we have. Valerie and I seem to approach apparently cut-and-dried issues from opposing directions and to expose the flaws in each other's argument. One's point of greatest clarity is the other's blind spot. It's just as well we never shared living quarters because each day would have seen new battle lines drawn and more blood on the floor. As it was, she grew up coddled and pampered, to the detriment of her character. She was permitted to do and say whatever she pleased. I suspect that by the time Valerie came along my parents had grown weary of the rigors of childrearing and were not as prepared as they might have been ten years earlier to clamp

down on the wayward tendencies of an unruly child. The rest of us seemed to toe the line without being asked. But Valerie became the proverbial handful, by turns disrespectful and mischievous, beastly to her siblings, wasteful, and wilfully destructive. For instance, she cried to take piano lessons, and once the fees for the whole year were paid she refused to go back. She wandered through the house as though it were a department store, helping herself to whatever she found, as if the very fact of its existence within arm's reach was proof enough that it belonged to her. Everyone learned to lock their things away and carry the key with them. She once carted off a small antique mantle clock that had belonged to our grandparents and tossed it into the bog, all because my mother had run out of grape jelly and she had to eat unadorned peanut butter on white bread. Her adolescence was fraught with difficulties and it's only by the grace of God that she didn't somehow kill herself and take a busload of other people with her. By the time she was fifteen she was hooked on cigarettes and amphetamines and staying out all night long more often than not. When she was seventeen she left home, for good or so she claimed, and my parents despaired that they had seen the last of her. Then one Christmas she turned up on the doorstep accompanied by her husband, a lanky young man with a European accent and the doting ways of the truly besotted. Under his tutelage she had cleaned herself up, finished her grade twelve, and gained admittance to university. Anders obviously had money, and it seems it was this and not just my prayers that had turned things around. Her transformation from a sullen delinquent to a beautiful young woman full of hope and promise seemed to me ample evidence of God's hand at work. But when I mentioned this possibility to her during a private moment, with the holiday festivities in full swing, she laughed and said affectionately, "Oh Warren, you're so full of shit." Within the week they had taken off, bound for Geneva to spend New Year's with his family.

I used to peddle God's word door-to-door, much to the horror of my wife and neighbours. I wanted to be of value to the church and to ease somewhat the burden that people carry with them by helping them discover the inner strength that genuine belief provides. I failed miserably. I didn't deliver any souls from the fires of hell or save anyone from the dark chasm of iniquity.

One day I carried all the pamphlets to school and tossed them into the recycling barrel. I packed it in because I know a losing battle when I see one and you can only watch the door slam in your face so often without wanting to put a bullet through your brain. Maybe I planted a seed that took root later on, but I'll never know for sure. In any event, I follow a more subtle model now—the soft sell—offering edification by example. I do this in the classroom where I never raise my voice, never humiliate a student, and never let them see that I've lost my temper. The impression I'm aiming for is that I'm being guided by forces mightier than all of us put together, but it's every bit as likely they think I'm on prozac. Just the same, I've managed to get a few kids to sign up for after-hours Bible classes, and without so much as uttering a single word that could be directly linked to the Good Book. So my efforts have not been entirely in vain.

Kids are one thing but adults are something else, and my faith has never made much of an impression on my family. So when Gloria suggested I phone Valerie to talk over what I'd witnessed, I instantly dismissed the notion as naïve, not to mention utterly pointless. Valerie would laugh in my face, deny everything, and then ask who the hell gave me the right, and on and on. I could see it happening in exactly this way, and when it was over I would be the villain and she would take every opportunity to inform family and friends about the silly accusations her Bible-thumping brother was throwing at her. Before I said anything I wanted to be sure, and as I drained my Scotch, got ready for bed, and then tried to sleep, I went over in my mind the events that had so unsettled me.

I had driven over to the Sears mall to buy a trellis or some wooden lattice for the garden because there's always a need to expand the setting so the grapevines and Virginia creepers can continue their progress along the back wall. I wandered into the Christian bookshop while I was there and had idled away a few minutes glancing through a new volume on spiritual guidance when I looked up and saw Valerie walking in the direction of Sears, which was where I was going. I left the store, meaning to catch up with her and say hello. I had thought she was alone, but when I spotted her again through the meandering crowds, I could see she was with someone, a man, and that their hands were linked in the manner of teenage lovers. Instantly I began denying to myself every aspect of what I was looking at, at first questioning if it was Valerie

at all, and when I had established that it was, conjecturing that the angle of my view made it impossible for me to tell if they were holding hands or just walking closely beside one another. Of course, I was able to verify quite easily that my married sister was holding hands with a man I had never seen before, and the effect of this on my disposition was crushing and left me peevish and indignant. I try, oh I do try, not to get worked up about things, but in this case I could not help it. I crept along behind them, with no particular purpose in mind, and observed them wander into the jewellery department of Sears and gaze with longing into a display case full of necklaces and bracelets and the like. I don't claim to know what they were up to or why their quest for jewellery had taken them to Sears of all places, but once I had seen them I could not let them alone. From the Sears jewellery counter, where they made no purchase, I followed them back down the full length of the pink marble mall, through swarms of people and past all the showy lights to the food court, where they seated themselves and conferred for a moment before he stood and went over to the coffee and donut stand. I took this opportunity to observe them during their brief moment of separation. Valerie sat sidelong to me, her hands folded innocently on the table. She was wearing a pink top and black knee-length skirt and high-heeled pumps and looked like she had just stepped out from behind a desk in an office, though she has no job that I know of. Her hair was swept back in a stylish fashion from her face, which she appeared to have decorated with all manner of cosmetics, no doubt in an attempt to conceal, or at least play down, her forty years. She had no purse, a fact that struck me as very odd once I'd noticed, for it seemed to indicate that whatever was going on here had been embarked upon rashly and in haste, without forethought or planning. When her friend returned with two coffees and a donut for himself, I could see that he was much younger than her, perhaps still in his twenties. He was muscular, possibly a day labourer or weightlifter. His biceps bulged beneath the sleeves of his red checked shirt and his denim trousers were taut with a full load of buttock and thigh. When they joined hands again across the table I decided I'd seen enough and left them to their sordid longings. My next stop was a phone booth, where I looked up the number of Anders' architecture firm. When I asked for Anders Eckland I was informed that he was out of town for the week. Did I wish to leave a message? No, I said, and hung up.

One regret of mine is that I don't know Anders well enough to be able to claim him as anything more than a passing acquaintance, even though he's been married to my sister for going on twenty years. I like their children, but hardly ever see them. So why did I feel this driving urge to expose my sister's blatant infidelity for what it was? Why did I want to see her on the block, chastened and miserable and in tears, with all fingers aimed in her direction and a chorus of voices demanding the flogging she had earned for herself? I think I understand this much at least. Valerie has accused me of strait-laced and heartless self-righteousness on numerous occasions. It's true that I have recently tended to be more judgemental in my thinking than in the past, and maybe it's beginning to show in ways I'm blind to. But, generally speaking, I think she's dead wrong about me. And though I often find her permissive attitudes repugnant, especially where they pertain to herself, I've kept my mouth shut. However, I have never heard her utter a single word of apology for her youthful transgressions or for treating her entire family like a doormat, for causing her parents untold anxiety and for burdening them with expenses they should never have had to bear—like bail, lawyer fees, and exorbitant fines for vandalism, speeding and reckless driving. She's lived her life as though it were a party with her as the guest of honour and never once has she been called upon to answer for anything she's said or done. When I saw her in the mall and understood that she had strayed further than I ever dreamed she could, I knew it was my duty to bring her to account.

I did not mention Valerie's behaviour to Gloria again and let the whole matter appear to drop. What I was going to do had to be done in secret and I knew Gloria would only try to talk me out of it. I had never hired a private investigator before and I suppose like any ordinary citizen who has never felt the need to consort with members of this profession, I had no idea where to start. But it was much easier than I thought it would be, and when I looked in the phone book I found a whole range of services listed under the broad heading of "Investigators." Some had paid for ostentatious advertisements, promoting themselves as the answer to "all your security needs." Others were listed as "So-and-so, Investigator Services Limited." But the one that caught my eye was the economical and straightforward listing for D. Turk, Investigator. This

was late August, and my mornings were taken up with in-service meetings in preparation for the regular fall session, which would begin within three weeks, and I used a pay phone at the school to make the call. I spoke to a man who asked, casually and in business-like tones, what kind of work I wanted him to do. I could tell he was writing everything down.

"I want you to follow my sister," I said, keeping my voice low though I was deep in the shadows at the end of the hall and nobody was in sight.

I expected him to ask *Why?* But what he said next was, "What am I looking for?"

I told him I suspected she was having an affair and that I wanted to confirm my suspicions before revealing anything to her husband. I expect this was all very mundane to D. Turk, who, during a lengthy silence, seemed to yawn at the other end of the line. I pictured him in a grimy smoke-filled office with the shades drawn, wearing a fedora and dark glasses, sitting back with his feet propped on the desk. Why he would have drawn the shades when he already had on dark glasses, I couldn't imagine.

"Do you require documentary evidence of this affair?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "If possible. That would be very useful."

I thought he snorted, but I may have imagined it.

"I'll tell you what I need," he said, and went on to enumerate the items that would help him complete the job: two unobstructed photographs of the "target," a photograph of her husband, and any addresses where he could expect to "make initial contact." I was to mail these to the post office box number he gave me. Upon payment of his bill, he would mail the photographs he had taken, along with the negatives, to me at any address that was convenient for my purposes. He would also return the materials I had sent to him. I could phone him at any time if I had questions or if I simply wanted to check on his progress. He charged two hundred dollars a day and he said that in his experience a job like this took between three and five days and yielded about twenty to thirty good-quality photographs. Did I want to think about it?

"No," I said, hoping to sound decisive. "I'll send you the envelope this afternoon."

I hung up, feeling like I had made a pact with the devil. The fact that there were men and, presumably, women out there willing to engage in this type of work left a rancid taste in my mouth

and it almost seemed like God was asking me to fraternize with one kind of evil in order to expose and eliminate another. Would it be worth it I wondered, as I headed back down the hall to the meeting room. The money was a small matter; I would skim a bit off the top of our savings and send him the cash. It was the ethical price I was paying that troubled me. I believed I had lowered myself, and I could almost feel my downhill progress quickened by a layer of slime on the bottom of my shoes. However, I drew a small measure of comfort from the knowledge that I was in full control of this transaction and that whatever intelligence he uncovered would remain with me until such time that I chose to make use of it.

I had no problem locating suitable photographs of Valerie and Anders. The family album that Gloria maintained was full of cheery shots taken at recent gatherings. I sealed a few of these up in an envelope together with her home address and mailed it that afternoon. He had not asked for names, and so I provided none, not even my own, though I had written my return address on the envelope I mailed. Anonymity seemed to be the best policy.

If I suffered any doubts they stayed well below the surface of my conscious life. I hardly imagined myself a one-man crusade to elevate the moral sensibilities of a nation. My efforts were entirely local, and to some extent selfish, and over the following ten days I occupied myself with other matters and gave very little thought to D. Turk and what he was up to. I understood that Anders would be home soon after the surveillance began, and that Valerie and her lover might cool things for a bit. But I also knew enough about human nature to expect that in very short order they would grow impatient for each other and that D. Turk would be there to track their movements.

I went to the bank to get the cash, but otherwise the intervening days passed without incident.

The following Tuesday a plain brown envelope appeared in the mail. It looked like a solicitation, and so Gloria paid it no heed and left it with the bills and other junk that I would eventually get to. I waited until after supper and took the day's mail and a glass of Scotch into the study. Gloria was watching television. Inside the envelope was a single folded sheet of white paper with the figure \$1200 written on the crease in black pen. This had to be the ulti-

mate in discretion. The amount was slightly more than I'd planned to pay, which meant I would have to return to the bank to make another withdrawal, but I did not foresee a problem. Of course, I couldn't help but wonder about the manner in which D. Turk conducted his business: no face-to-face contact, no names, unmarked envelopes travelling back and forth in the mail, numbers scrawled on paper, photographs held hostage until the money had changed hands—all the secrecy and intrigue seemed laughable, but I was saddened too to think there was so little trust in this world. I sat there for a moment, as if mourning my lost innocence, thinking of Valerie and Anders and what a mess she'd been and how she'd turned herself around. In many ways she'd lived an exemplary life since then; the very fact that she was still with us today was a testimony to the power of the human spirit over a multitude of temptations. All the more reason, a voice within me argued, why at this late stage she should not be permitted to squander everything she'd built for herself. But who was I to set myself up as her saviour? Maybe I had common decency on my side, but shouldn't she be permitted to follow the dictates of her heart? If she wanted to destroy her marriage, wasn't it up to her? My thoughts seemed all in a knot, tangled in a dozen lines of reasoning, none of which seemed unerring, and from none of which I could easily free myself. I couldn't even figure out who was right and who was wrong. I went into the kitchen and poured myself another Scotch and drank it down rather more quickly than I should have. I pleaded with God for guidance and instruction, but my conflicting emotions had stirred up such a storm in my vitals that all at once an involuntary chuckle escaped from my throat. The guttural reverberation that emerged seemed coarse and obscene to my ears. I felt my stomach lurch, and before I could question what it was I'd become involved in, I drained the glass and staggered off to bed.

I don't like keeping secrets. I'm no good at it because it usually comes down to telling lies, and I never lie, to my wife or anyone else. So I was hoping against all logic that when the package containing the photographs arrived I would be alone in the house and could safely retrieve it without her ever having to learn of its existence. Of course, as luck would have it, on the day it came Gloria happened to be arranging some flowers on the table in the porch, and when the postman strolled up the walk he deliv-



ered the mail directly into her hand. She brought it into the study, flipping the envelope over and examining it.

"What do you suppose this is?" she said, giving it a shake.

There was nothing scheduled at the school that morning so I'd spent my time in the study with my lesson plans and the textbook I'd been assigned. Up until a moment ago I'd been reading, but now I was only pretending to read. Gloria dropped the rest of the mail on the desk.

"Shall I open it?"

She seemed eager.

"Let me see," I said.

She handed it over and I felt the stiffness and heft of it. It felt exactly like a stack of twenty or so eight-by-ten photographs.

"It's probably that seed catalogue I ordered." I let it fall to the desk.

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed. "I thought it might be something interesting."

"Well, who's to say the seed catalogue won't be interesting?"

She seemed reluctant to leave the matter be and took it up again into her hands. In answer to this, I started going through the other mail. There was a credit card offer, a magazine renewal notice, and one of those envelopes of coupons that everyone throws away. I tossed it all back on the desk.

"I'll be at the hospital this afternoon," Gloria said, fingering the envelope as if trying blindly to ascertain its contents. I could hear whatever was inside sliding around. "Julia's mother's had her hip replaced and Abby wants to see her. She's coming by at one to pick me up. I shouldn't be more than a few hours."

I nodded. I was trying to avert my ogling stare away from the envelope.

"When do you want lunch?"

I remembered then that I was supposed to attend a meeting at St. Thomas's today. Father Ramley was planning a retreat and I was on the committee making the arrangements with the monastery in Ingonish.

"Oh, soon I guess." I looked at my watch. It was already eleven thirty.

We struggled through lunch, our conversation insipid and strained. Gloria seemed to have something on her mind, but I was in no state to ask her what it was. At one o'clock Abby came to get her and they left and I returned to the study. The envelope seemed

to jump out at me but I approached it warily, as if it might explode if carelessly jostled. It occurred to me that I had no idea what I was going to do with it. I hadn't given any thought to the fact that in order to determine the nature of Valerie's sin, I would have to look at photographs of her in compromising situations, quite probably naked and aroused and engaged in sexual intercourse, and I began to wonder which was worse, her sin or mine. Could I really carry through with a scheme to embarrass or humiliate her into admitting her guilt? Did I want her to do this publicly, or was I prepared to let her suffer behind closed doors and retain some fragments of dignity? I couldn't help but wonder why God had placed me in such an impossible position, and though His ways are mysterious it seemed to me that inflicting this sort of pain on someone I loved was not what the mystery was all about.

I decided I would destroy the envelope without opening it, or maybe hide it somewhere safely out of the way. Or was this just weakness on my part? Was I backing down from a position of moral authority that nobody else seemed willing to assume?

I slipped the envelope into the top drawer of the desk and went off to my meeting. Afterward, when the discussions were over and the others had left, and I was helping Father Ramley clean up and put the tea things away, I posed a question.

"Father," I said, "If you know someone has been sinning and keeping it a secret, is it your duty to expose the sinner and see that they suffer the consequences of what they've done?"

He didn't even pause to take a breath.

"Warren, it's not your duty to see the sinner is punished. Only God can do this. But you can let the sinner know that God is there to hear his confession." With these words, he calmly handed me a wet saucer, which I began to dry. Then he asked, "What is the purpose of confession?"

"Uh, to cleanse the soul and bring you nearer to a holy state."

He nodded. "Close enough. And what do you do after you've confessed?"

"Me? Well, personally, I say my Hail Marys and go home and try not to sin any more. It's not easy."

He nodded again and handed me another saucer.

"Would God want it to be different for someone else just because their sin might be more—" during a lengthy pause he

regarded me solemnly from beneath bushy eyebrows— “or less grievous than yours?”

I nodded as he handed me the last saucer. It was his business to answer tricky questions and iron out moral dilemmas, and he had made his point and made it well. But even though wisdom seeped from his pores, I still wasn't sure what to do with the photographs.

Indecision takes many forms and in my case it looked very much like the brown envelope in the top drawer of my desk. I knew its contents would cause me no end of distress, but neither was I willing to throw it away. From one perspective it seemed I'd acted imprudently by commissioning D. Turk to take these pictures, but when I thought of the money I'd spent, it almost appeared like an investment or an insurance policy. If Valerie stepped out of line, I had in my possession the means to ensure her quick return to a normal, decent way of life.

What I needed was an opportunity to let her know the secret was out, that I (or someone) had the goods on her, so to speak.

In a family as large as ours there is always a birthday coming up, but the one we would celebrate in November was a true milestone: my mother's eightieth. The plan was to throw an elaborate party with every available member of the family and to give her a present that she wasn't likely to forget. We'd done this for my father's eightieth, rented space in a hall and given him a set of golf clubs that cost close to two thousand dollars and a lifetime membership at Briarwood.

Planning an event this large was going to take some doing; a group was going to have to meet at intervals throughout the autumn to check on progress and make sure all the details were covered by the middle of November. Gloria made some phone calls and came up with a list of five people who were willing to take charge of organizing the party. When I found out that Valcric was on this list I made sure to join up myself.

Autumn is my favourite time of year. When I can smell the crisp pungency of backyard bonfires, hear dogs barking at twilight, and listen to the distant thunder of a hundred lawnmowers as if it

were music, I am happy to be alive. Late in the day the fading light takes on a bittersweet quality and there's something in the air other than the change of season. An autumn night is the perfect time for taking risks, for driving too fast, for falling in love. There seems to be an increase in social activity too, as neighbours return from cottages and emerge from their summer lethargy as if awakening after a period of hibernation. I was still wondering what to do about the photographs, but each day brought with it the distraction of teaching while trying to learn the names of a new crop of students and, after I got home, of meeting people I hadn't seen for months who came to visit or were out walking along the street. I had no leisure to think, and one evening I took the car and set out for nowhere in particular. I drove over the bridge and got on the highway for the airport. But I passed the airport and kept going. The sky was clear, and as I passed the Elmsdale exit the glowing sapphire blue began deepening toward dusk. A short while later stars appeared. Sometimes I look at the night sky and all I can see is the presence of the heavenly host, but other times it presents a disturbing enigma with nothing behind it but the random and haphazard forces of nature. I'm seized by doubt and begin to wonder if the path I've followed is an illusion and if one day I'll find myself at the edge of the abyss with no option but to step into a vast and terrible unknown. It's appalling to have your faith shaken by something as ordinary as the stars in the sky, and though it doesn't happen often, when it does the ordeal leaves me jittery and depressed.

I turned off the highway and on the secondary road there was a diner. I didn't know where I was, but I was getting hungry and thought a piece of pie might do the trick. I pulled into the gravel lot, found a place to park, and got out. My legs wobbled beneath me, and when I looked up I thought I might actually topple over. But the stars were still in their place, nothing had changed, and seeing this was almost like a confirmation of something. I gathered my strength and went inside, where the air smelled of home cooking and where a noisy community of the young and the old seemed to have gathered for no other purpose than to mingle and talk and listen to country music. The sentiments of country music always seem to function on a primeval or subconscious level, and as I took a seat and listened to a girl singing about finding herself "safe in the arms of love," I too seemed swept to safety by an unseen hand.

Presently a young woman with long hair and wearing a tag that said "Hi I'm Cheryl" came over and wiped down the table and asked, "What can I get for you, mister?"

But when I looked up she drew back in alarm.

"Whoa, you look like you've see a ghost! Are you all right? Do you want some water?"

"Water would be good," I said in a voice I hardly recognized as my own.

She brought a glass of water and I ordered some coffee and a slice of apple pie. There was something elemental about the place, and about her concern, that was comforting and which aroused in me an urge to curl up and go to sleep, as if I'd found my way back home after a long and perilous journey. The glowing clock above the jukebox told me it was nine thirty, but I didn't care. The pie came and it was just fine, and the other people in the diner—the couples, the groups of older men and women—continued with their conversations and seemed to welcome me as if I were one of their own. Someone fed the jukebox and the music went on and on, and after a while I reluctantly stood up to leave. Cheryl was at my side in an instant and I was able to place the money into her hand and say, "Thanks."

"You're mighty welcome," she said as she began clearing the table. "You'll come again, won't you?"

"I will," I said, somehow feeling that I might.

Outside, night had advanced, but the sky was still vividly clear, and away from the city and its harsh oppressive lighting, I was able to see the stars with unaccustomed lucidity and even pick out a few constellations. For a long time I stood absolutely still and watched the sky, thinking that the diner was like a sacred and inviolate realm, a shrine to everything virtuous and honourable in human nature. Even the music and conversation seemed to have a cleansing effect as it drifted across the parking lot and wrapped itself around me. On the road a man was walking a dog, and their trust in one another seemed profound and inexhaustible. All around the world, it seemed to me, people were finding the strength carry on and the courage to face the unpleasant facts of life, and it was clear I was not to be spared. Without even knowing I'd reached a decision, I got back in the car and drove home.

The group organizing the party met a few nights later at Valerie's house. Present were Gloria and myself, Valerie, my brother Andrew and his wife Margaret, and a peculiar little woman named Enid Sirk who played cards with my mother at the retirement home. Valerie's three children—Tommy, Elizabeth, and Tamara—all three of them well-spoken and polite though the eldest, Tommy, was only twelve—came and said good-night before heading upstairs to watch TV or go to bed. Talk was general and people tossed ideas around until we settled on a plan of renting the hall at St. Thomas's and hiring a caterer. Gloria and I were to be in charge of the hall and the invitations, Andrew and Margaret would take on the job of collecting the money and coming up with a list of possible presents. Valerie would handle the food. Mrs. Sirk smiled and seemed to think that everything was taking place exactly as God had ordained. Though I was curious I kept quiet, but eventually someone else asked after Anders, and Valerie explained that he was in London consulting with a contractor on a job that was to begin sometime in the new year. After that he was off to Minneapolis. Mrs. Sirk asked innocently if Valerie did not find it difficult, having a husband who travelled so often and so far away.

"Oh no," she said without pausing. "I have plenty to keep me busy and Anders likes to travel. It's never been a problem." She bestowed on Mrs. Sirk a lavish smile. "More tea?"

The evening ended pleasantly and we said our goodbyes and left.

Valerie had been welcoming and charming and everything she served us was wonderful, but she'd also exhibited a trace of smugness in her manner that left a tingling sensation at the back of my throat. She didn't seem like a woman whose beloved was six thousand miles away conducting business with strangers. She was altogether too content and sure of herself for my liking, as if she'd been given the secret of eternal youth and was keeping it to herself. Anders was away and she was unashamedly happy, and I was the only one who knew why.

That night after Gloria had gone to bed I returned to the study with a glass of Scotch. I opened the desk drawer and withdrew the envelope, took a pair of scissors and made a cut along the edge. Inside, I found the photographs I had mailed, which I would return to Gloria's album at the first opportunity, and the photographs D. Turk had taken, wrapped in plain brown paper fastened at the seams with plastic tape. I didn't want to look at any

of them, so I switched off the desk lamp and worked in darkness. I unwrapped the photos. Then I opened another drawer and, feeling my way along, took a new envelope from the sheaf I'd purchased just that day. I slid two photos out of the stack, shuffled them into the new envelope, licked it shut and sealed it, slipped the stack of photos back into their original envelope and returned this to the drawer. Then I switched the light on. Before me on the desk were Gloria's family shots, a single brown envelope containing two photos, and the paper in which D. Turk had wrapped his parcel. I placed the paper in my briefcase so I could dispose of it later. Then, using my left hand, I carefully wrote Valerie's name and address on the new envelope and affixed two stamps to it. The writing looked as if a child had done it. I put this in my briefcase, closed and locked it, drained my glass, and went off to bed.

The next morning on the way to school I dropped the envelope into a mailbox far from my home.

I wasn't expecting to hear anything, and I didn't. The next meeting of our party committee was to take place late the following week at Andrew and Margaret's home in Spryfield. Gloria and I picked up Mrs. Sirk on the way and arrived a few minutes late, but it wasn't until after we'd been discussing our progress for at least ten minutes that Valerie arrived. The change was shocking and everyone remarked upon it. Valerie appeared dishevelled and exhausted, as if only minutes before she'd raised herself from her sickbed. Her clothes were wrinkled, her skin was pasty white, she wore no makeup, and her hair was plastered to one side of her head and stood up on the other. After apologizing for her tardiness and brusquely deflecting the remarks of concern that came her way, she sat back in her chair and said almost nothing, only opening her mouth when asked about the catering firm she had approached. Her mind was clearly elsewhere, and I remember thinking that if this was what it felt like to hold the power of life and death in one's hands, then I wanted no part of it.

Valerie ate nothing and excused herself early, and on the way home Gloria commented that she thought "the poor girl" looked ill.

"Maybe one of her children is sick," I ventured. Then I added, "Do we know if Anders is back yet?"

Gloria didn't know, but she said she would make some inquiries the next day and try to find out what was going on.

That night I waited until Gloria was asleep before returning to the study to repeat the procedure of placing a photograph in a blank envelope and writing Valerie's name and address on the outside. In order to do this I had to fortify myself with a liberal dose of Scotch. I knew I was doing the right thing, but I had also reached the conclusion that I was a weak individual, and I suspected that without the bracing effects of alcohol I would cave in to a compassionate impulse and let my sister off the hook. I knew she had to suffer to be saved and that I would be doing her a disservice if I destroyed the photographs or sent her the entire batch, including the negatives, in one delivery.

The next Sunday at church I prayed for Valerie's deliverance from temptation and, for myself, the strength of character to move onward with a painful task. I had hoped for a sign that I was indeed God's emissary in this matter, but Father Ramley's sermon was long-winded and filled with coarse sentiment, the woman in front of me kept sneezing into her hand, and near the end of the mass one of the acolytes tripped on a twisted edge of carpet and took a headlong tumble into the seating reserved for the choir. I drove home feeling lucky to have made it out of the building alive and shivering with the chill in my bones of someone who's been left out in the cold.

Nevertheless I continued to mail the photographs one at a time, carefully avoiding any pattern of activity that would make it possible to trace them back to me. I also blinded myself to Valerie's suffering. When we sat across from each other at our meetings, I remained impervious to her skin bleached of colour and the trembling of her hands, and saw instead the pink glow of illicit gaiety she'd exuded that day at the mall. In this way I was able to maintain an elevated level of moral indignation long enough to get the next photograph into the mail.

Gloria came to me one evening as I was reading the newspaper and, assuming an air of great solemnity, said, "Warren, you're drinking a lot more these days. Is anything the matter?"

It hadn't occurred to me that I was drinking much more than usual, certainly not enough to be noticed. But because she was an observant, good-hearted human being, she had noticed. I'd never intended my burden to become her burden, but now I could see there was no way around it. And though I would soon be able to



lay her concerns to rest, that day would not arrive for a few weeks yet, and so I told her I enjoyed a good stiff drink from time to time and was there anything wrong with that?

"No, nothing." She went away. I may have spoken more harshly than I'd intended because the sound of weeping was soon drifting downstairs from behind the bedroom door. But we were all beginning to show the strain of the ceaseless anxiety brought on by Valerie's troubles, which touched the entire family.

Inevitably there was talk. I heard Gloria speculating on the phone to one of my sisters-in-law that Valerie had been diagnosed with cancer and was braving it out in silence. My mother was naturally concerned, but went no further than to admonish Valerie for allowing herself to get so thin. The last time I saw my youngest sister was that November at my mother's eightieth birthday party, which was held on a Friday evening in the hall behind the Catholic Church of St. Thomas Aquinas. As planned, it was an elaborate affair with more than one hundred family members in attendance, ranging in age from less than one year to over ninety. I was chosen to unveil the present, an immense digital television with a forty-inch screen and stereo speakers and an endless list of advanced features my parents would never make use of, and two tickets for a three-week Caribbean cruise. I'd had nothing to drink all day and I felt fine, but I swayed on my feet, my speech was garbled and my voice was gravelly and indistinct, like someone who has suffered a stroke. It worried me that in such a very short time I had developed the tottering gait, mumbled locution, and pugnacious mannerisms of the incorrigible alcoholic, and I resolved to make a visit to my doctor very soon. After this, while a DJ played swing and soft jazz, I watched Valerie from my position at the table with my parents, who both dozed intermittently and awoke with irrelevant comments on their lips. Valerie seemed to flit from one cluster of people to the next in quick succession, somewhat like a visiting dignitary, shaking hands and tilting her head inquiringly and making earnest small talk. She had pulled herself together for today's event, and looked radiant if fatigued in a black gown and high-heeled pumps, and I had to admit that the food was magnificent. Gloria was barely speaking to me by this time, and at one point I noticed her engaged in a lengthy discussion with Valerie and Anders. They nodded a great deal, evidently in agreement with what she

was saying. I noticed also that Valerie and Anders held each other's hands tightly, like lovers who have made up after a quarrel.

The next day was Saturday, and I was deliberating what to do with the last two photographs and the negatives when I overheard Gloria on the phone and in this way learned that Anders and Valerie had sold their house and were moving to Switzerland. Everyone else seemed to know already, but I had been kept in the dark, and when I asked Gloria why this was the case, she said quite simply, "You're so disagreeable and you're drunk all the time, why would anyone tell you anything?"

She seemed unable to look at me after saying this, but eventually she raised her tear-filled eyes from her knitting and confronted me with a defiant expression. It was this moment that made my decision for me. I withdrew to the kitchen and emptied the bottles of Scotch I had accumulated into the sink. Then I went to the study and removed the remaining photographs and the negatives from the drawer. Without looking at them I tore the photographs into quarters, trusting this would convey a clear message, stuffed the pieces and the negatives into an envelope, wrote out Valerie's name and address on the front, pasted on two stamps, and took it down the street and let it drop into the mailbox. At this stage I didn't care if Valerie had redeemed herself in the eyes of the Lord because I suspected she had redeemed herself in the eyes of her husband, and that was good enough for me. And at the very least I owed her the comfort of knowing she'd seen the last of the incriminating material. When I got back to the house Gloria was at the front door and I truly believe that if she had asked what I'd just been doing, I would have told her. But all she did was hold the door open for me as I went inside.

I begged off the farewell party for Valerie and her family that was held at the home of one of Anders' colleagues a couple of weeks later, claiming a headache and stomach cramps. All the arrangements for their departure had been made, the house sold, their belongings packed in boxes and waiting to be shipped out. Gloria reported that Valerie had asked after me and seemed saddened by my absence, but I didn't bother to tell Gloria that Valerie had called that evening and insisted, in a piteously beseeching manner most unlike her, that I call her back, which of course I never did.

I know the ways of God are mysterious and I don't claim to understand any of what He does, but we have to look for meaning somewhere and the world we're living in is as good a place as any. I was not about to stop attending church, but I was certainly not as rigorous in my devotions as I'd been in the past. So one warm Sunday morning in early December I told Gloria we were going for a drive, and I took her over the bridge and headed out the highway toward the airport. The trees still held a few of their leaves, burnished brown and gold, and my spirits were buoyed by the knowledge that at the age of fifty-seven I could act on impulse and not call my sanity into question. We passed the Elmsdale exit and when I glanced over at Gloria she seemed relaxed by the rhythm of the moving car and content to simply watch the landscape slip by. Her trust in me was implicit; she didn't ask where we were going and said nothing when I left the highway at the next exit. It looked familiar and I found the diner without a problem. However, I hadn't come prepared for the possibility that it might be closed, and from the look of things it had been closed for some time. The windows were dark and a wooden plank was nailed across the door. A strip of brown siding had slipped from its moorings and sagged to the ground. The large front window bore the starburst imprint where a stone had struck it. The building looked sad and neglected and nothing like the social hub of a community that had welcomed me warmly into its midst only a few months before. I sat there as close to tears as I've ever been and wondered what had become of Cheryl. Without a place to meet, where would all those men and women and young people spend their evenings? How would the community keep in touch with itself, now that its soul had given up the ghost?

"A trip down memory lane?"

"What?"

Gloria was smiling at me.

"Is this where you used to meet your old girlfriends?"

"I came out here once," I said, but I didn't know how to continue because no explanation I could devise made any sense. If I told her I'd stopped here because I was lost and needed directions, or because I couldn't come to terms with the stars in the sky, or because I wanted to spend some time with a bunch of strangers, or because I'd had a craving for apple pie and country music, she'd think I was mad after all. As I looked at the crumbling building I felt that heaviness of heart that comes when we see the old giving

way to the new, and I was moved as if by the desecration of a monument. And I realized that in a short time many valuable things had passed out of my life.

“Or I guess it was here,” I said as I put the car into gear and turned back toward the road. “But I could be wrong.”